

PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER IN CONDUCTING

The two most prominent artistic roles in the world of classical music are the composer and the conductor.

Our musical canon, those great pieces, our very definition of high artistic quality, and what we base most of our education on, are all pieces written by male, white composers.

The history of conducting, the fantastic performers of the canon, whom we admire and cherish, the artists who shaped our profession, are also all white men.

From Toscanini, to Furtwängler, Kleiber, Solti, Abbado, Bernstein, Mengelberg, Janssons....

This is our tradition.

This is what we relate to through recordings, history books, symphonic concert programs,- and also to a large part; in our minds.

How do we picture the image of a perfect conductor in our mind?

What personal qualities, what style and appearance does that conductor have? What kind of leadership?

Think about it for a while.

That image is most probably coloured by our tradition.

The compositional forms of our tradition with the symphony on top as the ultimate form are basically developed by male composers.

Could it be that our very definition of a great composition is also coloured by the patriarchal tradition?

Norwegian composer Synne Skouen wrote in one of her essays about her profound love for our musical tradition from Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mahler to Schoenberg, Stockhausen and Berio, and at the same time there was a feeling of alienation, of not being invited in, of standing outside the door.

I have remembered this part of her essay ever since reading it several years ago.

It is a personal artistic experience to the extreme gender imbalance of our tradition and history writing.

But there have actually been prominent women composers throughout music history. Even though they had the most difficult climate for artistic development, there are quite a few remarkable female artists that impacted the cultural scene. Some of them were also conductors, like Nadia Boulanger, Ethel Smyth and Clara Schumann (when she occasionally substituted for her husband). But we don't know many of these prominent figures, they are definitely not part of the canon.

They have been omitted from music history.

But change is happening in several parts of our tradition, at different speed, and with big geographical differences.

I will in this essay, write about some aspects of gender balance in conducting and I have also decided to include some parts about composing, since the two professions are so thoroughly connected.

You will find video interviews with artistic leader of the Borealis Festival for Experimental Music- Peter Meanwell and artistic leader of the BIT20 ensemble for contemporary music- Trond Madsen.

I have interviewed Alexander Taylor, head of artistic planning at the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, who has shared his thoughts on the subject and I have talked to Sten Cranner, managing and artistic director of the Gothenburg Philharmonic Orchestra.

You will also find a link to the tv-program series "She Composes like a man" a massive and inspiring documentary work on women composers from the past up to the present made by Norwegian conductor Cathrine Winnes and director Anders Lindstad.

Role Models and diversity

When I started conducting in the early 90s there were very few women conductors in the classical orchestral scene. I say orchestral, because there has traditionally been more gender balance in choir conducting.

As a young artist you are looking for your identity and direction forward, and in my experience with 99 % male role models there was a feeling of having to create my own way and identity as a conductor from scratch. From what to wear, to more substantial matters such as: how do I find a natural power, both physically and in presence in front of the orchestra, how does my natural body language correspond with the conducting technique I was learning.

These matters are important to all conductors regardless of gender. But in essence, how we communicate through body language, words and presence is also linked to our gender and to who we are.

Role models are crucially important to young artists and generally play a significant role in education and recruitment.

And in our profession with the long patriarchal tradition, the increase in prominent female role models are essential:

Just for a young girl to come up with this idea to become a conductor!

To think that it is possible, make that leap, to have the courage and to take the chance.

When I studied conducting in the early 2000, we were two women in the conducting class.

We thought that there was a revolution going on.., we were **two!**

But the revolution did not happen, not yet.

Years went by with the same status quo.

Just very recently, the last 5-6 years or so there seems to have been a radical shift.

The number of female role models on an international level has increased drastically and several chief positions in world leading orchestras have recently been appointed by women conductors.

This has a big impact on the classical music field.

For inspiration I will mention some of these great women conductors that are important role models today.

This can hopefully be an inspiration and widen our perspectives of conducting.

I urge you to check them all out!

Maryn Alsop has had an international conducting career since the 80s and she has been a great inspiration for women conductors all over the world. For a long time she was the only woman having an international career.

She has encouraged women conductors in many ways, taught courses for women only and created a network for women conductors to share their experiences and thoughts on the profession.

With the tradition of «el sistema» from Venezuela, there has come great conductors from the Latin world which in itself is an important enrichment to the classical music scene.

The mexican conductor **Alondra de la Parra** has had a rising career in the last decades. She has contributed greatly in bringing the latin repertoire to the orchestral world thus challenging our canon, as well as the conducting tradition by being a woman and a Mexican. She says in a filmed documentary: «A conductor is no longer a white man from germany"»

There is the charismatic lithuanian conductor

Mirga Gražinyte-Tyla now chief conductor of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

The finnish conductor **Susanna Mälki** has had a long career already with a very broad repertoire. She has done important work in the contemporary music scene and is since 2016 chief conductor of the Helsinki Philharmonic.

Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra has recently appointed the brilliant interpreter **Karina Canellakis** as their new chief conductor.

With these and other appointments and with more consciousness about the topic, there will be a shift in the perspective. One could say that there has already been a climate change so to speak in the attitude towards women conductors.

Alexander Taylor, head of planning at the Oslo Philharmonic presses the importance of these new appointments because these are orchestras that the Classical music field is looking to.

He even claims: "We are now at a point where we barely speak of gender when it comes to conductors, we just speak of conductors."

But even if there is development, the starting point was totally black and white, so inequality is still the status quo as we speak.

Further, in order to attain full inclusiveness and diversity in the conducting field we also need role models of people with other cultural backgrounds, and colour, as well as transgender and gay.

With full diversity in role models, the space for artistic expression will widen, the generation after will have a totally different reference and our tradition will change.

Quota

Quota is a tool to change inequality faster.

It's being used in companies, organisations and now also to a certain extent in music and arts to secure a certain balance and inclusiveness.

The correct meaning and use of so called "moderat quota" is:

In the case of severe imbalance, selecting the minority representative when there are two candidates with **equal qualifications**.

This is the only legal use of quota in Norway.

I have been to international conferences on gender topics where women, prominent musicians, talk about the dreadful feeling of being selected based on their gender.

But that feeling implies that the selection is not based on equal qualifications, but mostly on gender. If that's actually the case, that is so called "radical quota", which is not legal in Norway at least.

There is also a possibility that the feeling comes from our preconceptions of how quota is being executed.

So quota executed the correct way is fully legal, it can not be an insult and it can not lower the quality.

It has become somewhat popular to be a woman conductor, and many male conductors feel threatened by this. -"It's not anymore enough to be a good conductor in order to make a career, you must also be a woman!"

But from the other side, there has been gender imbalance in the favour of men in the whole history of Classical music, so that can also be looked upon as quota the other way around.

One positive effect of quota is that there will be more competition with gender balance. More talents to choose from and more women in the profession will mean more conductors.

More competition in our profession can only heighten the overall professional quality.

But why use such a strong tool to create change? There is already a development towards more gender balance in high profile professions as conducting and composition, and there are now in some conservatories more women than men studying to become classical musicians.

In time, the conducting scene will even out, gender balance will come naturally without forcing anything.

Why should we force this natural change to happen faster?

People of all genders, women, men, transgender and gay have certain differences in how we experience living in and percieving this world, also how we communicate and express ourselves.

The presence of women in conducting and composition will enrich the artistic palette.

It will give us new perspectives on how art is created and performed.

Our perspectives of power and authority might be challenged.

It can also potentially influence or change the communication between conductor and orchestra and even the conducting technique.

These possibilities have the potential to profoundly change the classical music scene as we know it.

Another benefit from quota is that it will force us to see the very mechanisms and structures behind the discrimination. Structures from a very long patriarchal tradition that we can find in all areas of our classical music field. For progress to happen they must be addressed. By just following the way things have always been done, there will be slow progress, on the other hand to make a real change, everyone in a position of power must be extremely conscious about the topic.

Our audience is a good mix of genders, nationalities and hopefully also age groups. If we want to reach them all, inclusiveness and diversity in programming and musical leadership is vital.

There are geographical differences in how far the work towards equality has come.

Sweden is a country that is forthcoming in gender balance and inclusiveness in their cultural life.

Classical music institutions in Sweden have used quota as a specific tool to create better balance for years.

Sten Cranner, managing and artistic director of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, tells me that gender balance, equality and inclusiveness is a hot topic in media and political life in Sweden and it has been so for many years. To be a country of inclusiveness, equality and openness has become part of their identity and pride as a nation so that naturally influences the artistic institutions.

Cranner talks about a strong sense of duty and commitment to mirror the society in their programming.

There also seems to be a strong connection between political directions (and owners) and the artistic institution when it comes to these matters.

Editions and recordings

When it comes to editions of works by women composers of the past, it follows the same patterns as the music history writing and the statistics. It hasn't been considered important to make critical editions of these women's works or even perform them, so the printed material is very often in a very poor condition with lots of mistakes and errors.

Imagine the difference in experience for the musicians, the conductor and eventually the audience when the parts and score is full of errors and inconsistencies...It makes the rehearsal process stressful and gives an impression that the composer is "less professional" When the rehearsal time is used to correct mistakes, there is obviously less time to make music and to present the work in the best way possible.

I have personally experienced this with the outstanding orchestral music of the french composer Lili Boulanger.

Alex Taylor from the Oslo Phil can also tell about big problems with just getting hold of the music. It's not out there through the same platforms as the other sheet music. So there is a whole promoting issue as well.

And he points out: since these pieces have not been performed many times, there has also been little opportunity to revise and correct the material through practical experiences.

So we have an important work ahead when it comes to the printed editions of women composers from music history.

Critical editions on compositions by women is an important contribution to the work of gender balance in classical music programming.

In Sweden there is an ongoing project by the Swedish Musical Heritage Society www.levandemusikarv.se to create critical editions by all Swedish composers, both women and men. Since the women are included in this work, the result is that one can find beautiful critical editions by Swedish women composers, easily accessible to musicians and orchestras.

Taylor also points out that there are very few recordings of pieces by women composers from the past. Leading orchestras and performers need to record these pieces so we can have excellent reference recordings of these women's works.

Gothenburg Philharmonic with conductor Johannes Gustavsson will soon release a recording featuring music by only Swedish female composers from history.

Programming

When it comes to repertoire, the inequality is significant and the gap is bigger than in the conducting scene.

The amount of played orchestral music composed by women is a very small percentage of the total music.

Some statistics to show the frequency:

In Denmark 3,6 % of the music performed during the seasons 2014/15, 15/16 and 16/17 was composed by women.

In Norway the number was 5 % (based on the average of the seasons 2015/16, 16/17, 17/18 and 18/19).

In Sweden 6,22 % of the music performed during the seasons 2015/16, 16/17 and 17/18 was composed by women.

One can definitely say that women, men and all genders are equally creative.

Since the classical music scene has been dominated by white men for centuries, it means that women's creativity has found other channels to materialize.

This could be other genres, other fora or instrumentations than the traditional symphony orchestra.

If one wants to include those female voices in the orchestral world of today, the research process will be different and more demanding.

One might have to look other places than the most conventional ones to find the women and one would potentially have to adjust the conventional platforms to meet this art and music.

Equality matters in repertoire is linked to how we relate to music history and to who has the power to define the context and form of the artistic works. A keyword in this process will be how inviting and open the institutions are to alternative artistic ideas and means of expression.

Variety in expressions and extension across genres seems to be a value in itself for several festival and ensemble leaders in the contemporary scene. That was very clear from my interviews with Peter Meanwell from Borealis Festival and Trond Madsen from Bit20. They both talk about the artistic variety they get from a good gender balance as something that makes the programs better and more interesting.

In my talk with Taylor I asked him where he thought we will be in repertoire planning for Symphony Orchestras genderwise 20 years from now. He hoped we would have 60 % men and 40% women composers in the programs, but he feared that this was a too positive expectation.

Since the old tradition is such an important part of the classical music scene, the inequality of the past might still join us in the future.

Unless we play more contemporary music on the big stages. In that case we must trust our audience and give the most attention to how we present contemporary music to them.

We also need to look outside the traditional constellations of composition to make variation in creative expressions possible.

We must keep a strong focus on recruitment of new female voices in the composition field. And finally play the pieces actually written by the women composers throughout history.