

It's About Time



Gemma New, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's principal guest conductor, leads the DSO at Meyerson Symphony Center.

The good news: more women are getting high-profile jobs conducting orchestras. The bad news: it's not yet time to retire the phrase “glass ceiling” for once and for all. Will we get there, and if so, when?

by Jennifer Melick

In 2016, a ten-year-old violinist named Madeline de Geest went to a St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra concert led by Gemma New, who had just been appointed the St. Louis Symphony's resident conductor. De Geest, enthralled, came backstage after the performance to ask for an autograph, and New gave the young musician her conducting baton. In 2017, New invited De Geest to a St. Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra rehearsal, and De Geest brought her violin and music folder. New commented at the time in the

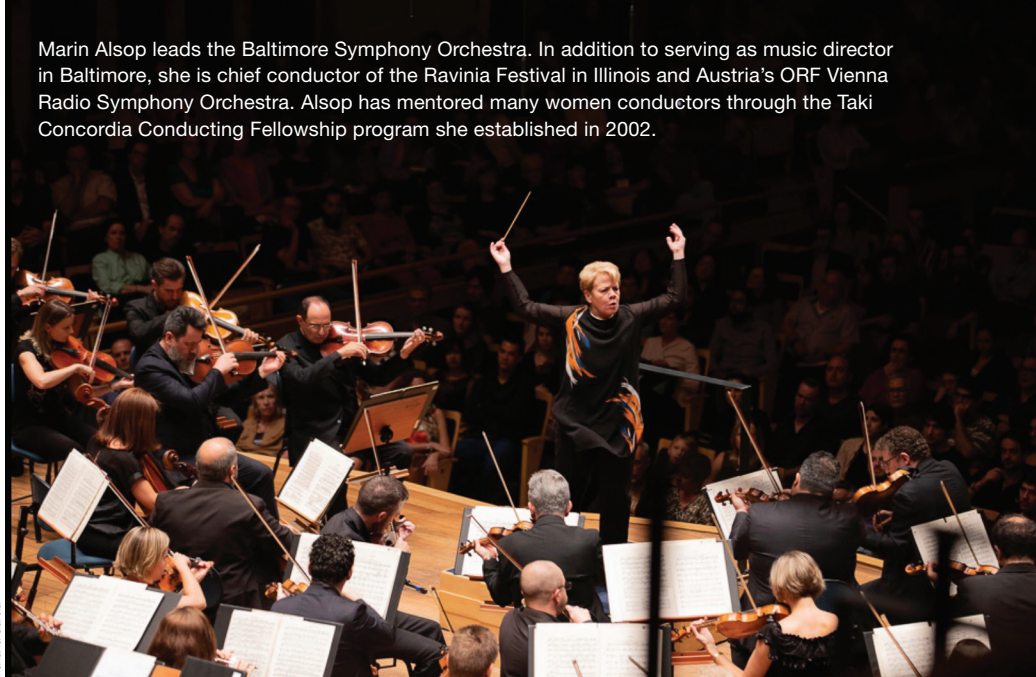
St. Louis Symphony's blog, "She has so much energy and potential. She reminded me of myself when I was that age." Since then, De Geest joined the SLSYO as one of its youngest musicians, and New's profile has continued to rise. In addition to her St. Louis position, which concluded in May, New is now principal guest conductor at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the first woman to hold that title there; serves as music director of Canada's Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra; and has a full slate of guest conducting engagements.

"Fifty years ago, it was very rare that you would have a female conductor," New told me recently. "So to get the experience, to be at a level where it's comfortable, that is going to take time. You don't want to push anyone into a situation, but you want to make sure that the opportunity—depending on the level—is equal. In St. Louis, there is a boy, Logan, I think he must be eleven or ten. He said he was really inspired by a St. Louis Symphony Orchestra concert and wanted to become a conductor. He comes to so many of the rehearsals, he has scores, he always asks questions. He's been conducting at a high school now. I'm really proud of Madeline and Logan. It's very inspiring. I like to welcome everyone to the table. When I relate to someone and have a strong relationship with them, it's because we have a kindred personality—it's not because of their gender."



Courtesy San Francisco Conservatory of Music

New may modestly downplay being a role model for young female conductors, but seeing this 33-year-old New Zealand native in action on the podium makes a powerful statement on its own. She is not flamboyant. She speaks quietly. But she has an authority that is instantly communicated to the musicians and the audience; watching her clear beat, even in complex new works, is like seeing the architecture of a score turned inside out. All her energy goes into getting the sound she wants from the musicians—who return the favor by playing their hearts out for her. Not everyone gets to see the example of a Gemma New on the podium when they are growing up. Another conductor on the rise, Tianyi Lu, 30, has said that when she first contemplated a conducting career, "I had never seen a woman conduct a professional orchestra before." Despite that, she is making a name for herself: currently she's an



Marina Garcia

assistant conductor at Australia's Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, principal conductor of the St. Woolos Sinfonia in Wales, and the first woman to serve as

Conductor Nicole Paiement:
"I never thought of myself as a woman conductor. I was attracted to conducting because of my deep love of music."

conductor in residence with the Welsh National Opera. But it's easy to imagine there might be a lot more like Tianyi Lu, if there were more role models.

The growing list of women holding assistant, associate, resident, and principal guest conductor positions is encouraging. But the number of women music directors at larger-budget orchestras seems to inch up ever so slowly. "When I started conducting," Baltimore Symphony Orchestra Music Director Marin Alsop quipped in *Billboard* in December, "I assumed there were going to be a lot of women doing it pretty soon. Five years went by, and then ten, and I was like, 'Where is everybody?'"

Brainstorming Solutions, Pondering Numbers

Alsop is not the only one frustrated by the pace of change when it comes to women holding top posts in the classical field. Last November, Kim Noltemy, the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's president and CEO, decided to address the situation by hosting the DSO's inaugural Women in Classical Music Symposium. At that three-day event, women from all over the U.S.—and some men—gathered to brainstorm ways to get more women into leadership roles. "Orchestras in general are a little slower keeping up with the pace of change in society. That is something that we all think about, and try to find the right way to address," Noltemy said in opening remarks at the



Antony Polts

Tianyi Lu is assistant conductor of Australia's Melbourne Symphony Orchestra; in Wales, she is principal conductor of the St. Woolos Sinfonia and conductor in residence with the Welsh National Opera.

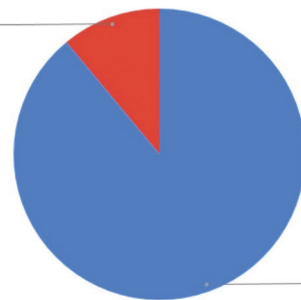
Jeri Lynne Johnson conducts the Philadelphia-based Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, which she founded in 2008.

Courtesy Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra



Conductors 2019-2020

Women Conductors
11.0%



Male Conductors
89.0%

In May 2019, the nonprofit Women's Philharmonic Advocacy surveyed 21 U.S. orchestras' 2019-20 season announcements. Of those 21 orchestras, there was a total of 142 conductors (including guest conductors), sixteen of whom were women.

Women's Philharmonic Advocacy

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Themes that came up over and over at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra symposium included the importance of having

be very common in women in the classical field, judging from the number of people who brought it up in Dallas. "I suffer from extreme perfectionism," Noltemy admitted when we spoke last fall. "I follow up on everything. If I say I'll do something, I do it. I always apologize for not doing things fast enough. I believe words matter, and committing to do things matters." By hosting the symposium, says Noltemy, "We're kind of just reorganizing people's priorities. You need to spend your time on the things that matter the most. At symphony orchestras, we need to focus on what our real priorities are."



Anna Abbogina

Conductor and composer Victoria Bond, who in 1977 became the first woman to receive a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Orchestral Conducting from the Juilliard School, says when she was studying conducting there were very few female role models.

The DSO symposium included panel discussions on topics including "Changing the Script of Women in Classical Music," "Pathways for Change," and "Practical Next Steps"; an hourlong "speed-dating" session for mentors and mentees; and achievement and career-advancement awards for vocalists Dawn Upshaw and Lucy Dhegrae, who gave inspiring, frank talks about the challenges they have faced during their careers. Other discussions at the Dal-

Dallas Symphony Orchestra President and CEO Kim Noltemy speaks at the organization's 2019 Women in Classical Music Symposium, designed to help get more women into leadership positions, including on the podium.

Sylvia Etzalon



Opera's annual Hart Institute for Women Conductors, which includes master classes, seminars, one-on-one meetings with prominent opera and classical-mu-

sium included the importance of having mentors, male or female, who provide support in the right ways, and not always aiming for absolute perfection, which seems to

JoAnn Falletta is the Buffalo Philharmonic's longtime music director. She concludes her 27-year tenure as music director of the Virginia Symphony Orchestra in June 2020.





Chicago Sinfonietta Music Director Mei-Ann Chen

Rosalie O'Connor

las symposium centered around building and maintaining relationships throughout careers; and pushing the field to become more open to risk. In informal chats, people spoke candidly about the career frustrations and successes they have experienced. In her talk, Dawn Upshaw spoke about the moment she discovered she was being paid far less as a vocal pedagogue than an equivalent position held by a male colleague at the same university. During a panel discussion called “Employability and Career Pathway Development for Musicians and Administrators,” Katie Wyatt, president and CEO of El Sistema USA, shared a similar story about pay disparities in one of her previous jobs. During coffee breaks, inadequate family leave policies

were hotly debated. It was clear that there was a hunger for people to tell their stories, to be listened to, and to learn from others.

When it comes to women conductors, the big barrier is the “glass ceiling,” namely the small percentage of women music directors at large-budget orchestras. Last spring, the Women’s Philharmonic Advocacy—a

nonprofit that advocates for performances of music written by women and collects data about women composers and conductors—surveyed 21 U.S. orchestras’ 2019-20 season announcements. Of those 21 orchestras, there was a total of 142 conductors (including guest conductors), sixteen of whom were women. That comes to just over 11 percent. Those numbers are in great contrast to the pool of musicians at professional U.S. orchestras, where the introduction of blind auditions in the 1970s is credited with helping increase the number of women orchestra musicians to where it is today, at close to parity with male musicians. But there is no such thing as a blind conducting audition, and you need podium time and mentorship to get better at it,

which means you need a large number of women conducting orchestras of all sizes in order to increase the pool of women who can advance to the next level.

There are, in fact, many women music directors at mid-size and smaller orchestras. A very partial list would include the Chicago Sinfonietta (Mei-Ann Chen), Chattanooga Symphony Orchestra (Kayoko Dan), Symphony Tacoma (Sarah Ioannides), Reno Philharmonic (Laura Jackson), Hartford Symphony Orchestra (Carolyn Kuan), and Allentown Symphony Orchestra (Diane Wittry). But attention generally focuses on the larger orchestras: Marin Alsop at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and JoAnn Falletta at the Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony are, for many people, the two names on the radar. Alsop and Falletta have earned that recognition and have accomplished great things, but it would be nice to see media and critical attention spread out more widely in the field.

Over the past five to ten years, there have been real reasons for optimism, one of them being the many women hired for assistant, associate, resident, or principal guest conductor positions like the ones Gemma New has held in St. Louis and Dallas. These positions provide the necessary experience, training, and visibility to be considered for bigger posts. On U.S. podiums, some names include Susanna Mälkki, the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s principal guest conductor;



Lina Gonzalez-Granados has held conducting fellowships at the Philadelphia Orchestra, Seattle Symphony, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In 2014, she founded Unitas Ensemble, which focuses on music by Latin American composers.



Allentown Symphony Orchestra Music Director Diane Wittry



Lidiya Yankovskaya is among an increasing number of conductors forming their own orchestras while balancing guest-conducting and staff positions at other orchestras. Below, Yankovskaya conducts the Nashville Symphony at the League of American Orchestras’ 2018 Bruno Walter National Conductor Preview.

Kathleen Murnighan



Kayoko Dan, music director of the Chattanooga Symphony and Opera since 2011, is the first woman to hold that title at the orchestra.

Erina Yashima, assistant conductor at the Philadelphia Orchestra; Anna Rakatina, assistant conductor at the Boston Symphony Orchestra; Katharina Wincor and Ruth Reinhardt as assistant conductors at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra; and at the Minnesota Orchestra, Sarah Hicks as principal conductor of the Live at Orchestra Hall series and Akiko Fujimoto as associate conductor. In recent years, participants in the League of American Orchestras' long-running Bruno Walter Conducting Preview have been pretty evenly split between men and women, which was not always the case in earlier decades.



Symphony Tacoma Music Director Sarah Ioannides

Mentors, Misconceptions

Marin Alsop has mentored many women conductors through her Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship program, established in 2002, and the list of alumnae is impressive, with many serving as music directors at U.S. orchestras. Another active mentor for the next generation of conductors is Nicole Paiment, Dallas Opera's principal guest conductor and founder/artistic director of San Francisco's Opera Parallèle, who since 2015 has given master classes at the Dallas Opera's annual Hart Institute for Women Conductors.

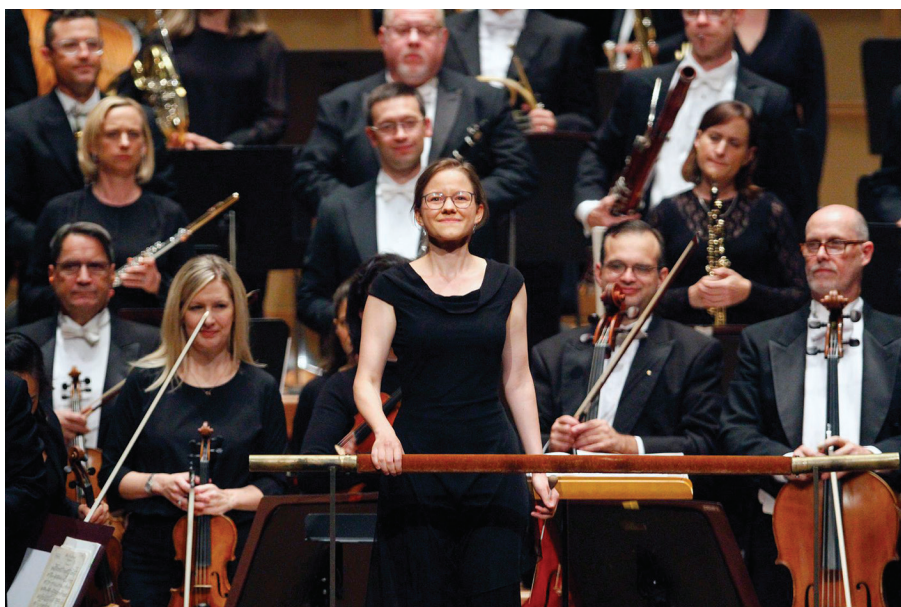
"There are a lot of women conductors out there who are going to make a difference," Paiment points out. In Dallas, Paiment says, "As I work with women conductors, I look at who they are and try to empower who they are." Sometimes, Paiment says she sees "extremely talented women who might not have the confidence that sometimes a man would

have, and maybe that's from their upbringing." Her advice: "Focus on the score. If you're prepared, if you know what you want, there's a reason why you're on the podium. It's because you have something to say with that score. Musicians will re-



Sylvia Elarton

Ruth Reinhardt, with an active guest conducting career in the U.S. and Europe, got her start with assistant conductor and fellowship positions at multiple U.S. orchestras, often considered stepping stones to a full-time music directorship.



Ben Torres

Dallas Symphony Orchestra Assistant Conductor Katharina Wincor leads the orchestra's 30th-anniversary concert at Meyerson Symphony Center, September 4, 2019.

spect you, because they realize that you're adding to the process." For her own part, she says, "I never thought of myself as a woman conductor. I was attracted to conducting because of my deep love of music. Conducting came to me easily. In basic conducting classes, I was told by faculty, you should pursue this. Even at that age my male professors did not say, 'Oh well, you're a woman.' I think that was a key to my success. I'm always extremely aware of the privilege of being on that podium. I need to have something to say, otherwise there's no reason why I'm here."

One persistent problem, like a mosquito that just won't go away: even in the modern age, there are prominent classical

musicians who openly question whether women belong on the podium at all. Not that long ago, we read that “musicians react better when they have a man in front of them” (conductor Vasily Petrenko), “the majority of female students would simply not be interested in the career of conductor, which is incompatible with family life and requires a lot of physical effort” (Bruno Mantovani, then director of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris), and “the essence of the conductor’s profession is strength—the essence of a woman is weakness” (conductor Yuri Temirkanov). These statements were not made a century ago—they are from 2013.

Temirkanov’s “strength” comment reveals that there are some people who still regard women as being less physically able



Dmitry Maslov

“In classical music, we don’t instinctively give a chance to people who are different, new. But that is beginning to change,” says artist manager and documentary filmmaker Anastasia Boudanoque.

to do the job of a conductor. Compared with Americans, Russians tend to speak more bluntly and with less regard for political correctness, which makes you wonder how much more prevalent these attitudes are in more politically correct places, where they might go unspoken. Conductor and composer Victoria Bond, the first woman to be awarded a doctorate in orchestral conducting from the Juilliard School, in 1977, says the only real female role models when she was doing postgraduate work at Juilliard were Eve Queler and Sarah Caldwell. Bond got her professional conducting start as music director of the Pittsburgh Youth Orchestra in 1977. “I was told over and over when somebody came backstage to shake my hand or congratulate me after a performance, ‘Oh, you’re so small. We thought you were tall,’” Bond recalls. “On that podium, you look tall no matter what,” Bond says. “Let’s talk about men who are iconic conductors, like Herbert von Karajan, like Leonard Bernstein, like Seiji Ozawa. They’re all short men. I didn’t realize that at first about von Karajan be-



Courtesy Hartford Symphony

cause in his posters he looked about seven feet tall. When Yannick Nézet-Séguin gets up on stage with these enormous opera singers, it’s a comical picture, but it’s not your size that determines your strength.”

She says in Pittsburgh back in the 1970s, “people did not feel obliged to be politically correct. I’ve kept all of those articles, those demeaning, patronizing articles. I think they will be

of great historical interest at some point when people say, ‘Women were always treated equally well.’ It ain’t necessarily so.”

This winter and spring brought a flurry of high-profile music director announce-

ments. In December, Simone Young was named chief conductor of Australia’s Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The same month, Eun Sun Kim was appointed music director of the San Francisco Opera. In February, Mélisse Brunet was tapped as music director of the Northeastern Pennsylvania Philharmonic. In April, the Richmond Symphony selected Italy’s Valentina Peleggi as its next music director, and American conductor Karina Canelakis was announced as the London Philharmonia’s next principal guest conductor; Canellakis was also recently named chief conductor of the Netherlands Philharmonic. This is not a comprehensive list.

The “Mirga Effect” and the “Xian Effect”

There are two music directors—Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla and Xian Zhang—who for several years have been attracting the

Susanna Mälkki conducts the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Ravinia Festival. Mälkki is principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and chief conductor of Finland’s Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra.



Patrick Gipeon



Jiyang Chen



Reno Philharmonic Music Director
Laura Jackson



At the Aldeburgh Festival in 2017, Mirga Gražinyte-Tyla conducts the U.K.'s City of Birmingham Orchestra, of which she is music director. Gražinyte-Tyla held assistant and associate conductor positions at the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 2014 to 2017.

kind of substantial media attention and critical praise that could alter broader perceptions about women on the podium. Gražinytė-Tyla, a native of Lithuania who held assistant and associate conductor positions at the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 2014 to 2017, has made a rapid artistic rise. In 2016, she was named music director of the U.K.'s City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. These days, people refer to her as just "Mirga," putting her in the company of podium superstars Bernstein ("Lenny") and Dudamel ("Gustavo"). Observers describe "the Mirga effect" for the electricity she brings to performances. The high-energy Zhang, a native of China, also has been rapturously received since being named music director of the

New Jersey Symphony Orchestra in 2015, and now people talk about "the Xian effect." Multifaceted musicians like Canada's Barbara Hannigan, who maintains active careers as a soprano and as a conductor, are creating less traditional podium paths for themselves. Maybe part of the "effect" of these conductors will be to shape our views of who belongs on the podium—and what the role of a conductor is in the first place.

Some women are not waiting to get hired for big appointments to make things happen, taking a more entrepreneurial approach. Russian-American

conductor Lidiya Yankovskaya serves as Chicago Opera Theater's music director and does a lot of guest conducting. In 2016 she founded the New York City-based Refugee Orchestra Project, whose musicians are instrumentalists and singers whose families fled to the United States to escape violence and persecution. Lina Gonzalez-Granados—who has served as a conducting fellow at the Philadelphia Orchestra and Seattle Symphony and as Sir George Solti Conducting Apprentice of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—in 2014 founded Unitas Ensemble, which focuses on music by Latin American composers. Jeri Lynne Johnson in 2007 formed the Philadelphia-based Black Pearl Chamber Orchestra, a professional orchestra of diverse musicians with a mission of attracting new audiences to classical music with high-quality performances, innovative programming, and partnerships with Philadelphia's cultural and educational institutions. After the finals of one unsuccessful conducting audition, she told me several years ago, Johnson was informed



In April 2020, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra posted a video of its virtual performance of *The Firebird* on its YouTube page, with Music Director JoAnn Falletta (center) leading the ensemble.

Xian Zhang leads the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, where she was named music director in 2015.



Fried Stucker

we don't instinctively give a chance to people who are different, new. But that is beginning to change," said artist manager and documentary filmmaker Anastasia Boudanoque at the Dallas Symphony's symposium last fall. Perhaps things have changed since 2013, when violinist Hilary Hahn said she could "probably count on one hand the number of female conductors I've worked with, and that's over 20 years of performing with orchestras." This November, Hahn will be one of three women honored at the Dallas Symphony's second

Women in Classical Music symposium, where composer Katherine Balch and Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the New York Philharmonic, will also receive awards, and session topics will include "Motherhood and Music," "Music and Wellness," and "Breaking Barriers."

As League of American Orchestras President and CEO Jesse Rosen pointed out at the Dallas symposium last November, more women on the podium is not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do: "Bringing women into leadership roles on podiums, onstage, in the board room, on staff, along with many other underrepresented populations in our country—this needs to be at the center of the work of people in orchestras. We need everybody at that table. We cannot be as good as we can be without women, without African Americans, without every kind of person who lives in this country. We need them." **S**

JENNIFER MELICK is managing editor of *Symphony*.

point blank that she "didn't look like what their audiences expected a conductor to look like."

One note: the interviews in this article took place before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. It seems likely that during this period, certain trends already underway in the classical field will be accelerated. One of these is the increasing use of tech, without which we would not all be watching "concerts" at all at the moment: Mahler and Copland and Bach and even newly commissioned works, live-streamed and performed from musicians' homes. This time must be profoundly disorienting for conductors, normally the most visible faces on the orchestra stage, when they cannot perform one of the most important parts of their regular job. When public concerts resume, will our expectations of who belongs on the podium change, after a period of reliance on video screens and close-up views? Will that throw into clearer focus the gender gap on the podium?


Many people in the classical-music field hope a new wave of female music director appointments will usher in broader changes to bring the male-to-female ratio closer to 50/50. "In classical music,

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– Rex Reed, The New York Observer

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