

Work in Progress

How is the classical music field doing when it comes to women composers? To be sure, there is reason for optimism in the past few years, but what do the composers themselves think? We decided to go straight to the source by asking a small sampling of the many composers active in the field to share their personal perspectives and experiences.

by Jennifer Gersten

When New York classical music station WQXR hosted a 24-hour marathon of music by more than 60 women composers in celebration of International Women's Day on March 8, 2019, it was welcome news. Still, said the station's creative director, Clemency Burton-Hill, "What I would love is to never hear the phrase 'woman composer' ever again. I'd love for us to just talk about composers, but we need to take the steps to get there by making a conscious decision to elevate accomplished composers who happen to be women." We may not be at that point yet, but there is heightened attention being paid to the problem. And there's no denying a sharp increase in announcements of upcoming programs featuring music by women composers at orchestras in the U.S. and internationally.

Which is why we think it's a good moment to ask a sampling of today's composers to share their thoughts about their own experiences, and the context of these changes at orchestras and what they might mean more generally.

We asked each composer a few questions:

- **Do you feel optimistic about the amount of music being programmed at orchestras by women composers, and the pace of change? Why or why not?**
- **What programs or individuals or orchestras have been helpful to you as a composer? Has being a woman composer positively or negatively affected your career so far? Have you had important mentors?**

Here are their responses.

KATHERINE BALCH

I think a lot of orchestras are working really hard to bridge the gender equality gap. It's attractive for orchestras to program women right now, and it's low-risk. I only see trends towards greater inclusivity. For example, the Philadelphia Orchestra responded immediately to the criticism it received, intensely and rightly so.

I don't advocate for tokenism. I advocate for the music I love. If the music happens to be by a woman, that's great! I'm about writing and hearing the best music, and one way to get to know the best music today is to look and listen for voices who have things to say other than the usual suspects. Maybe that takes programmers and curators a little more time and effort, but the reward is bringing art into the world that can offer new perspectives and possibilities to their audiences. Isn't that what art is supposed to do anyway? When I get asked to recommend music to orchestras and I make a list of composers, I think about what the gender balance is. I also think about who hasn't yet gotten a chance to write for orchestras, as getting that first step is really important.

David Alan Miller, the music director of the Albany Symphony, plus the Minnesota Orchestra composer readings, the American Composers Orchestra's Underwood and Earshot readings, Young Concert Artists, the California Symphony, every single one of my teachers, and my colleagues. There are people who have helped me that I don't even know about. That's how this world keeps itself going—we help each other.

VICTORIA BOND

There's such a glaring lack of women and people of color in orchestras around the country. That so much attention has been given to it this year has caused orchestras to really reevaluate the situation, but whether this is just a blip on the screen remains to be seen. Those who lived through women's liberation remember that this used to be a hot topic, but then it was back to business as usual. There were all these suspicions that



women got jobs because they were a token, or they slept with somebody. For my part, I'm very glad that I was able to let negative things roll off my back. My role model has always been Bugs Bunny. He doesn't take authority that seriously. To people who said you'll never get into Juilliard, you'll never be a conductor, I just said, "What's up, doc?"

The teacher who really changed my mind [on going from singing to conducting] was Leonard Slatkin. He was a great teacher, and after him I said, wow—a composer-conductor sounds even better than a composer-singer. So I got switched around. I'm grateful to Juilliard, where I did my master's and my doctorate; I got the best training I could have gotten anywhere. USC, where I did my undergrad, gave me a great grounding.

VALERIE COLEMAN

Women composers and their male allies are starting to become more vocal than ever before, and also much more proactive in taking things into their own hands. These people are gaining a voice in how major symphony orchestras handle programming, and some orchestras are becoming really excited about the prospect of commissioning women and people of color. I hate to say that it's a trend. I think it's way deeper than that. It's a recognition that music is being explored by all of these different people, and that those people are going to inform the future of classical music in the world.

One of my role models is Tania León, a force of nature who has inspired not only me but so many women composers and composers of color. She's charged me with the responsibility of recognizing past composers who have paved the way while paying it forward, and making sure that the next generation of composers knows that their success comes from the support of others. She's really been this sage—kind of a Mr. Miyagi in a way.

CHAYA CZERNOWIN

We are in the middle of a sea change. It's an evolution and a revolution, and it's very important that it continues. Already now there are so many amazing women com-



posers that are impossible to ignore. It will not be possible to hold the dam because the flow of the water is by far too strong. But things will not happen if we are not going to speak about them and make them happen.

When, for example, we have a festival dedicated all to women composers' music, I think in a way that that is counterproductive. I think we need to be accepted as part of mainstream music—we shouldn't make a parallel women composer genre. There needs to be a normalization. There needs to be a situation where, when Kaija Saariaho comes to have her music played by the Metropolitan Opera, she can talk about her music and not have to answer the 50 percent of questions that get asked pertaining to her being a female composer. She shouldn't have to pay for her gender by having to talk about it.

The LA Philharmonic is really trying to open things up. I went to their Fluxus marathon in November, and I was actually really taken and surprised by the vitality of that scene. They've done a lot for progressive causes, not just for women. The same goes for the Seattle Symphony, for which I'll be writing a piece next year. The New York Philharmonic is also really trying to move things along.

MELODY EÖTVÖS

There is a big absence of orchestral music by women in global programming by professional orchestras. But we now have everyone watching, and that is largely keeping most organizations accountable for that programming. I feel very optimistic about the pace of change. After my involvement in the Philadelphia Orchestra readings through the American Composers Orchestra last year, I'm feeling more involved in that change and very much look forward to contributing more music to the repertoire.

For the first decade I was completely oblivious to the fact that I was a female composer. I was never treated any differently or made to feel that I was missing out on opportunities. When I first received an award for women alone, the Toulmin Foundation commission*, I knew that it



was going to give my profile in the American music scene a huge boost, which it did. It led to further opportunities, including the one I now have with Philadelphia. So I've only ever experienced the positive in all of this. I haven't actually had any female mentors yet, but that is luckily getting amended this year as I work with Australian composer Mary Finsterer while writing a piece for the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. And I think, without a doubt, that every single workshop, school, and festival has contributed to my knowledge and career as a composer.

GABRIELA LENA FRANK

I am optimistic. Yet, I'm concerned that many women's initiatives still focus on the voices of white women, and not women of color. Gender and race have a complicated history.



When women received the vote in my native country of the U.S., for instance, this right was extended only to white women, separating people of color even more from opportunity. Progress shouldn't be privileged, and I'd be happy to see orchestras think generously on this point.

Fortunately, I have had wonderful composer mentors even though none were women or people of color. This demographic just wasn't around, and I'm sure this fact was part of the motivation for me to start [the Gabriela Lena Frank Academy of Music], where I offer a readings-to-premieres mentorship and residency program in both chamber and orchestra mediums, partnering with world-class performers and organizations. I'm happy to say that the words of my mentors—primarily [William] Bolcom and [Leslie] Bassett—infuse everything I pass along.

David Alan Miller at the Albany Symphony has long been a champion of emerging composers, and he commissioned my first professional symphonic work—which is still frequently performed, twenty years later. Frances Richard, formerly of ASCAP, has long been a fervent champion of composers and she, along with Susan Feder, formerly of G. Schirmer, had a significant impact on moving forward my symphonic life. I've also benefited from my symphonic career being stewarded by Katy Tucker, a brilliant former agent at G.

Schirmer, and now currently by the equally brilliant Rachel Sokolow. Currently, I'm thankful to the last three orchestras where I served as composer-in-residence, because I grew enormously from those projects: the Detroit Symphony, the Houston Symphony, and now the Philadelphia Orchestra. I'm very blessed and grateful.

VIVIAN FUNG

This summer, I will be speaking at a panel at the Association of California Symphony Orchestras Conference about making programming more relevant. I'm also a board member with the American Composers Forum, which is working hard to incorporate DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) more fully into all its endeavors. In December 2018, I wrote "Motherhood and the Creative Process," an article about my experiences juggling parenthood with composing. Change can be healthy when we include as many different and talented voices as possible at the table and listen to what is possible.



Charles Boudreau

I didn't really have a lot of female mentors. When I was a teenager in Canada, I studied with Violet Archer and then had a few encounters with other female composers. However, what really helped me was meeting musicians who were like-minded. Violinist Kristin Lee was one of my students at Juilliard. I brought along Andrew Cyr, director of Metropolis Ensemble in New York, to one of her concerts, and we were blown away by her playing. I subsequently wrote a violin concerto for her and Metropolis Ensemble that led to a Juno Award, which really set my career in motion. Meeting those musicians was really key.

STACY GARROP

We are certainly living through an exciting time within the music field, with more and more focus being given to non-traditional composers (women, composers of color, LG-BTQ+, and composers of different nationalities). I am cautiously optimistic that we have started a meaningful process of change within orchestral organizations,



but we will need to wait and see if organizations can effectively transform what is happening at this moment into long-term programming strategies.

Shulamit Ran was the first and only female composer I studied with throughout my college years. It was a rarity in the 1980s and 1990s to find women serving on composition faculty. Having a female mentor during those years, particularly as Shulamit was in residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Lyric Opera of Chicago during this time, helped me see a future that would hold more and more possibilities for women composers in the field; this vision gave me lots of impetus to keep going on my intended path. Two organizations that have been very beneficial for me and other female composers are the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Elaine Lebenbom competition for female composers, which gave me my first orchestral commission in 2006, and the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation*, which gave me a commission with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

JENNIFER HIGDON

It's starting to change and I feel hopeful that this change will become permanent. It feels slow, although I can see that some orchestras are making a serious attempt.



Some orchestras are better than others—the LA Phil's upcoming season has a lot of women, as does the Philadelphia Orchestra's. Oftentimes I'm the only woman on the program in an entire season, which can be discouraging because there are a lot of women composers out there. Audiences notice when half the population isn't reflected. I received an email from a grade-school teacher who said her students are depressed because composers are always dead. They learned about me and were super excited. That shows young people that composing is a relevant, living art, and it can be their art too.

Joan Tower and Libby Larsen were being recognized when I was coming up, which made me hopeful that I might get something on an orchestra concert. The Philadelphia Orchestra and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra both gave me commissions that helped to develop my voice.

Robert Spano, whom I knew in undergrad, also started putting my work on programs when he was looking to do more American music.

ROBIN HOLCOMB

I am pleased that composers who are women are at long last getting their works programmed and featured by orchestras. Call me old-fashioned, but I will be very happy when we can get past the “women composers” label and reinvigorate the job description of “composer” to actually include the entire population and equal opportunities to work. Orchestras are stepping up and programming works by a considerably wider pool of composers of all sorts, which is long overdue. Doing right by women feels like a first step in a landscape where many first steps are needed.



While I feel that my gender has rarely if ever been a direct hindrance to me professionally, it has, by the same token, rarely felt particularly beneficial. I know that I am fortunate that this has been my experience. The longer, larger history of inequity and inequality is another matter altogether.

The American Composers Orchestra and League of American Orchestras continue to be enormously supportive, remarkably so. Both focus not only on extending and expanding professional opportunities but also on building a community of composers. That my first piece for orchestra has led so quickly to two readings by major orchestras and two commissions is crazy. I feel very fortunate. These two organizations have everything to do with that.

LAURA KAMINSKY

I was the dean of the music conservatory at SUNY Purchase and resigned to become the artistic director of Symphony Space in New York City, but I remained head of the composition department. In the almost fifteen years I've been at Purchase, there were from zero to two women at most out of about fifteen to eighteen composers in the program. This year, over 50 percent of the applicants were women. There's a sense



now that they can just write music and that's okay. I think also as somebody who's produces a lot of concerts that in the past I was conscious of making them all-women's, but what's happens now is that when people program great music it will consist of woman composers.

People who have provided me with support and collegiality include composers Tania León and Sheila Silver. I've also felt an enormous amount of support from Paul Dunkel—before him, I'd never written for orchestra before. Also, Ursula Oppens, for whom I wrote my piano concerto, and the members of the Cassatt Quartet. You don't ever do any of this in isolation.

JESSIE MONTGOMERY

I am noticing that there's much more awareness of the need for female composers. With all these articles that have come out outing major orchestras for the lack of female composers in their seasons, it seems that there's been a pretty thoughtful response in some cases. Everyone's trying to be aware of the environment for the first time and how we can improve the future of orchestral life. There are so many obstacles facing orchestras, and balancing the scale of female and male composers at a time when they're facing many other challenges is very bold and also visionary.



I was the American Composers Orchestra's Van Lier Fellow in 2011, in which they gave me a small stipend and some staff support to put on my first concert of all of my music. From there, things really started to open up for me. I really feel that that was kind of a shift and a turning point in my outlook as a composer in terms of what I thought was possible. Michael Geller, the ACO's former executive director, and Derek Bermel, who had just begun his artistic partnership there, were in particular very supportive in figuring out what would be the best thing for me to present.

ANDREIA PINTO CORREIA

I am delighted that more women have the opportunity to get their pieces performed by orchestras, and I hope this will be even more common in the years to come. When I hear a great work, I hear it inde-

pendently of gender, race, age, or nationality. I was born in Portugal during a dictatorship. Growing up after the revolution, during the transition from fascism to democracy, there was hardly any contemporary music performed. So, when I arrived in the U.S., in my mid-twenties, this was the land of opportunity.



I've lived through situations that were very uncomfortable—unfortunately, I think this happens to a lot of women composers. My main concern has been always to improve myself both as a composer and a person, and to let my music speak for itself. When I was a student, I was fortunate to have mentors as well as programs that were crucial in molding my craft and in making me a better musician. Among them were composers Bob Brookmeyer, Michael Gandolfi, John Harbison, and Steven Stucky. Some programs were great stepping-stones—the EarShot program, Minnesota Orchestra's Composer Institute, and the League of American Orchestras—that led to major commissions with the Gulbenkian, Berkeley, São Paulo, and Columbus symphony orchestras, and the American Composers Orchestra, among others.

AUGUSTA READ THOMAS

I have to confess—I am not a sociologist nor a musicologist nor an ethnomusicologist, and have not made surveys or studies. Rather, I spend every day at my desk writing orchestral music. I'm so engaged in creativity, composing extremely nuanced, clean, intentional scores, which require an enormous amount of time and focus. I devote all my energy to the music itself, which is what music demands and deserves. I'm an extremely positive composer. I have nothing negative to say—it's just not my way. I'm working 365 days a year, 16 hours a day writing music and significantly supporting other composers with their life's works—and couldn't possibly be working harder. I have created a large body of published compositions that are recorded and performed regularly.



For ten years I was the composer-in-

residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which is the longest residency a composer has held with the CSO to date. I worked very closely with Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez, symphony musicians and staff, philanthropists, and I was instrumental in creating the MusicNow series, which I programmed, curated, and emceed from the stage for nine years. It was a terrific decade. I'm indebted to the Chicago Symphony for including so much of my music and me in a meaningful, inspired, collaborative, and eloquent manner.

ANNA THORVALDSDOTTIR

I definitely feel that things are getting better, and I am really hopeful that it will continue to improve. We are already continuously getting more visibility for women composers,



and programming of music by women will become more frequent still. We are of course not able to change history, which has been very male-dominated when it comes to celebrating and encouraging composers, so we will probably never be able to even things out with older music. But as we look to more recent history and to the future, I'm optimistic that there will very soon be equal programming of men and women in contemporary orchestral music for orchestra. This may seem rather optimistic, but I sincerely believe that we are heading there.

I might mention the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the International Contemporary Ensemble, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Collin Rae [CEO of the record label Sono Luminus]. I could mention many more, but I wouldn't know where to stop. I want to mention that I am currently composer-in-residence with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, where we have an absolutely fantastic program, Yrkja, geared towards young composers who have recently graduated. They can apply to write a piece for the orchestra under my guidance and have their pieces performed. It's really encouraging the creation of new orchestral repertoire.

JOAN TOWER

When I started out—I'm 80 now—all I cared about was whether my piece was strong enough to survive. It took me a

while to see the history, and what a weak history it was. That awareness made me more confident and willing to be an advocate for my peers. Music is always the last art to come along. It's very stubborn. I've been thinking that for a long time. People hold onto dead European males like their treasures. I get that—they are treasures. I've even been influenced by one of them all my life: Beethoven, you might of heard of him. What I don't get is why is there so much resistance to newer music and living composers, who have so much to offer. But things have improved, and living composers—including many outstanding women—are coming forward now.



Leonard Slatkin was my biggest champion in the orchestral world. When he asked me to be a composer-in-residence [with the Orchestra of St. Luke's], I said, I don't think that's a good idea—I feel very inadequate. And he said, well, we're going to help you feel more adequate. That was a risk. He has been like that all his life, actively seeking composers he liked and standing by them. David Alan Miller of the Albany Symphony is like that too. There are others who have been doing it more and more: Esa-Pekka Salonen, Giancarlo Guerrero in Nashville, Marin Alsop, Ludovic Morlot in Seattle, and Jaap van Zweden in New York.

MELINDA WAGNER

I am optimistic, although I suspect that the practice of commissioning/presenting the music of groups of women will settle down with the passage of time. I think it's important for programmers to look deeply into the work of all composers before choosing one over the other.



The only experience I know is that of being a female, and of being a composer. Who knows what my professional life would have been like had I been born a male? I'd like to think that it doesn't matter. Certainly it is true that I've always been outnumbered, and that has made me pretty tough!

I've had important mentors for whom I am grateful (Shulamit Ran, Richard

Wernick, Jay Reise). And I am forever indebted to Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for giving me my first big "break," and for continuing to support my music by commissioning me twice more. I am so very grateful to the New York Philharmonic, not only for this recent commission, but also for giving me the opportunity to compose for Principal Trombone Joseph Alessi and the entire orchestra some years ago. This was among the most thrilling experiences of my life as a composer.

CHEN YI

I'm optimistic on this subject. Nowadays, there's so much more freedom and many more voices out there, and more and more women composers are standing up in the field.



I belong to many organizations, some of which I work for, that I think are really helping to support women in the long run. I think helping others is all of our responsibility. With the Women's Philharmonic, I entered data on work by women composers, and I offered that information to organizations that came to ask for recommendations for programming women's work. This is not just one person's task—it's our whole culture's. Until we bring out many, many voices, we are not there.

I've had so much support from several major orchestras in the States, including the Cleveland Orchestra, Pacific Symphony, Seattle Symphony, and many university and youth orchestras. I'm also so grateful for Meet the Composer, ASCAP, and JoAnn Falletta, who conducted my first work in the States with the Women's Philharmonic. (With that group, I wrote my second symphony—and *Symphony Magazine* reported on it!). We have to work harder for more and more people to be included so that our society's diversity can be seen.

NINA C. YOUNG

It appears that there are more orchestral opportunities afforded to composers of my generation than there were to those even a decade older. My peers have had the opportunity



to experiment with the orchestra in a way that was previously off limits to most. But if you look at the demographics, until only very recently these opportunities were awarded to predominantly white male voices. Given our socio-political climate, a conscious effort to diversify is happening across many fields. Institutions are feeling the pressure that is duly awarded, and the orchestra is following suit.

The American Composers Orchestra has really helped give me a voice. Ed Yim is just fantastic—he really wants to empower artists. Because of that institution and his efforts, I received a commission for the Philadelphia Orchestra, and I also have a commission for the New York Philharmonic’s Project 19, which I don’t think would have been possible without exposure from this institution. Another individual is my dear childhood friend Tito Muñoz, the director of the Phoenix Symphony. He took a bold risk in the last two seasons and put my work on subscription concerts. This was an incredible opportunity and learning experience, and now he has even taken my orchestra music abroad. Conductor Jeffrey Milarsky has been another strong advocate of my work, and I consider myself very fortunate to have the opportunity to work with him regularly.

ELLEN TAAFFE ZWILICH



I think the door is opening ever wider, and that’s very good. I have not felt in any way that I was excluded from something because I was female. Nobody ever told me that girls can’t do this. There’s always somebody who’s going to say—you want to be a composer? But for every one of those, there were many others who were very supportive. My feeling is this: I don’t want to be left out of something because I’m female. On the other hand, I don’t want to be included because I’m female. I want it to be about the music. All I want is for the door to be open.

My relationships with the soloists I’ve written for have been illuminating to me—I always learn enormous things from them—and I’ve had very good relationships with conductors. I have this idea that the whole world ought to work like chamber music. I listen to you and you listen to

me, and together we make something bigger. I’ve also had very nice relationships with universities and conservatories, including the Juilliard School and Florida State University. **S**

JENNIFER GERSTEN is a writer and violinist from Queens, New York.

* The League of American Orchestras’ Women Composers Readings and Commissions program is administered with American Composers Orchestra and supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation.

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