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## Women Conductors: Has the Train Left the Station?

by

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### ***Women Conductors: Has the Train Left the Station?***

**A**s we planned and organized contributions on the topic of women in leadership positions in symphony orchestra organizations, we knew there were relatively few women music directors and conductors. We were pleased, therefore, to discover Marietta Nien-hwa Cheng, who is not only an orchestra music director and conductor, but also a teacher, writer, and speaker about these roles.

From the title of the essay alone, readers may correctly conclude that Cheng is an intelligent and witty observer of the orchestral conducting scene. Read the opening sentences of this essay and you'll be hooked to read straight through.

#### **History, Obstacles, and Advantages**

Following a stage-setting statistical review of women as orchestra members and conductors, Cheng offers a brief history of women conductors. She offers an insightful review of the obstacles women conductors face—from issues of authority to bias against the “home grown.” A thoughtful discussion of the advantages of women conductors follows.

The essay then becomes personal, as Cheng shares her own experiences—the road that took her from being a member of the only Chinese family in a southern Ohio town to the podium. With great candor, she enumerates ways in which she has had to change to succeed in her chosen career.

Marietta Cheng is an optimist. She believes that orchestras will survive, but they will need to change. And as part of that adaptation, she is convinced that the doors are open for women conductors.

## Women Conductors: Has the Train Left the Station?

Sometimes people are confused by what I do. Once, when I said I was a conductor, someone exclaimed, “Oh, I love trains!” That was an unusual response, if only because the number of women driving trains seems about as small as the number driving orchestras. Even in our modern West, music still lives in a male-dominated world. Changes have been slow. For example, one of the premier orchestras of the world, the Vienna Philharmonic, has only one woman member. The statistic for women orchestral musicians should of course match the number of female orchestral musicians graduating from conservatories or graduate schools in music—close to 50 percent. But in Austria and Germany, the figure for women in orchestras is only 16 percent; in the U.S., it ranges from about 30 percent in the largest orchestras to about 50 percent in the smallest.<sup>1</sup> And this is to become one of the 100 players in the orchestra. (The figure for the Orchestra of the Southern Finger Lakes, of which I am music director, is 42 percent.)

As a woman, to be the leader of these 100 is much bleaker. Among approximately 425 professional orchestras listed in the 1997 directory of the American Symphony Orchestra League, only 29 indicate women as music directors or principal conductors. That’s only 7 percent of all music directors, or musical CEOs. Amazingly, there is still no woman music director in any of the best orchestras, the top 25 or so. We are still setting records. The first woman music director/conductor of a fully professional orchestra; the first woman to conduct a full subscription concert of a major orchestra: these firsts happened recently. We are on the forefront of change and acceptance. There are still battles to be won before a professional woman conductor is considered nothing unusual.<sup>2</sup>

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### A Brief History of Women Conductors

If the orchestra is a relatively recent phenomenon, having been around only

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since 1750, conducting has an even shorter history of about 175 years. Stepping for just a moment into more distant time, we can date the earliest “conducting” to around 2800 BC; Egyptian and Sumerian reliefs depict people giving hand signals to harp and flute players, a form of conducting called chironomy. Chironomy continued into Greek antiquity with hand and foot motions, and flowered in Gregorian chant. Now we know that these hand signals indicated melodic motion, and were basically mnemonic devices.

By the middle of the 15th century, the leader might motion upward and downward to show a beat, keeping everyone together. By the 17th century, the keyboard player—the organist or harpsichordist—used his hand, a rolled-up sheet of paper, or a wooden stick to control the ensemble. If the performance took place in a dark church where visual signs were hard to see, some of these “conductors” would knock a key against a bench, leading by sound. Thus the bizarre story of the composer/conductor Lully, who pounded his walking stick on the floor to keep the beat. One day he became too excited, or perhaps exasperated, and ended up pounding his own foot. He died of gangrene.

By the end of the 17th century, the first violinist or concertmaster began to function as leader. In Haydn’s day, there were two conductors: the concertmaster with his violin bow and Haydn himself at the keyboard. Not until the 1830s did a conductor stand independently before an orchestra, holding a baton, as we expect today. But most of these were actually the composers themselves: Spontini, Spohr, Webern, Mendelssohn, each conducting his own works. The first professional conductor—our concept of a conductor today—only appeared in the middle of the 19th century.

Women do not enter the conducting scenario until the 20th century—in fact, until 1930. That year, Antonia Brico debuted with the Berlin Philharmonic, to rave reviews. She returned home to the United States, and received no offers to conduct at all. For 40 years, she led a community orchestra, the Denver Businessman’s Orchestra. Only after singer Judy Collins made a documentary film about Brico in 1974 did she begin at last to conduct widely. By then, however, Brico was in her seventies. In 1938, Nadia Boulanger, the famous teacher of Copland, Piston, Harris, and a long list of other respected names, became the first woman to conduct the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the following year, to lead the New York Philharmonic. But these were actually salutes to Boulanger as a musician, since she did not think of herself as a conductor; and they were single concerts, not a full-time job. So it took until 1930 for women to be considered as conductors for even a single concert. Music schools such as Juilliard didn’t even accept women into the graduate conducting programs until the 1960s.

## Obstacles Women Conductors Face

In 1967, Harold Schoenberg, then the chief music critic for the *New York Times*, penned the following in his book *The Great Conductors*: “As for women conductors, a musician knows when the upbeat starts, because that is when the slip starts to show.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, he was attempting to be humorous, but he was also echoing a view common at the time: a woman wasn’t suited for the job of conductor. Why?

To begin with, there is the issue of authority. Psychological studies have told us that we usually accept as leader the one who is biggest or has the loudest voice or is most aggressive. Women cannot compete in this way. In most cultures, women are taught or conditioned to get along with people, to fit in, to smile. According to tradition or social conditioning, if we make decisions, we succeed by doing so in a roundabout way, indirectly, subtly. This is not the expectation for a conductor. A conductor must be the boss: assertive, decisive, with no room for doubt; sure he alone knows the way. Decisions which affect a group of sometimes 150 or 200 individuals are made instantly during a concert or rehearsal. As for assertion, competition for conducting jobs is so fierce that, to be a conductor, you must be willing to jump onto the podium absolutely before anyone else. Overinflated egos help in this regard, yet women are conditioned against such aggressiveness. So, women have to fight against conditioning. The conductor also gains authority through total acceptance by the orchestra, board, and audience.

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As for the orchestra, as mentioned before, the road is rocky for women musicians, let alone music directors. Just 16 years ago, the Berlin Philharmonic suffered the trauma of the first woman player to join its ranks as principal clarinet. Rumors flew regarding the clarinetist and the conductor, Van Karajan, who had appointed her without the orchestra members’ consent. The orchestra’s treatment of the clarinetist became a major scandal, and she left after only a few years. But she had broken a barrier, and more women were accepted. The Philharmonic of Vienna—the city with perhaps the proudest musical history in the world, the inspiration of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and so many

others—is still all men with only one woman, and she, a harpist who had played with them for years, was allowed membership only because of the threat of public censure in March 1977.

If discrimination is this rampant for a woman who wishes to join an orchestra’s ranks, imagine the magnification when such players are asked to accept a woman as their superior—as their leader. I use the word “superior” purposely; some orchestra musicians will not accept a woman leader unless her superiority to them as a musician is proven. Musicians resent conductors to begin with. An

abundance of conductor jokes attest to this. Consider this one. “A musician calls the orchestra office to talk to the conductor and is told, ‘I’m sorry, but the conductor is dead.’ The musician calls back, and then again and again, always receiving the same message. Finally the receptionist asks why the musician keeps calling. The reply: ‘It is music to my ears.’” When I conducted one major orchestra, its principal second violin said to me, “I eat conductors for breakfast.” For many, accepting a conductor who is a woman adds insult to injury.

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There is, however, an ameliorating development. The number of women musicians in orchestras is increasing. With a few exceptions, I have noticed a feeling of kinship among successful women. Recognizing the difficulties members of their gender face, women musicians are generally quick to applaud and support women conductors. They welcome the woman conductor with strong initial support, open-armed; then, they demand the same level of expertise that they would expect from any conductor.

The board of the orchestra worries about the financial and administrative side of the organization. Will the woman music director be adept at budgetary issues? Will she be successfully involved in fund raising? Will she be charismatic and a community leader? Will she have box-office appeal? What about the issue of sex appeal? The board, often composed of

conservative individuals, wants to appoint experienced conductors with track records as music directors. Of course, not many women fit that description yet. Only a handful are leading even such metropolitan orchestras as Colorado, Long Island, or Grand Rapids.

Finally, the public has long associated and envisioned a conductor as a man. Just think of *Fantasia*, of Mickey Mouse shaking hands with Stokowski. So the public itself may have difficulties at first blush with the concept of a female conductor. The conductor is highly visible; there’s no doubt about who is running the show. An audience of 2,000 or more per concert must be convinced to accept change. There is the caricature of women dragging their husbands to symphony concerts. Will they continue to do so with a woman at the helm? What is the impact of a young, attractive woman conductor? These questions do not yet have definitive answers.

As an aside, it’s unfortunate for us all when a woman conductor falls into the societal trap of paying too much heed to expectations of glamor. Should a woman conductor seem to be completely devoted to her appearance or her sex appeal? Some women waste valuable time, time that should be spent on the music, debating: When did I wear this dress last? Is this slit too much, or what about this backless gown? How much décolletage is appropriate for the CEO? Such questions shouldn’t even arise.

Another obstacle for women in conducting is the lack of the equivalent of an “old boy network.” Even in the business world, so few women have reached the top that mentors are few and far between. And with tokenism—the scenario in which only one member of an underrepresented group is really welcome—being a mentor can produce second thoughts for a woman. In conducting, the problem is severe. Every woman conductor is still struggling; I know of none who is completely satisfied with the position she has reached, and who therefore has the time and energy to help younger conductors.

Women in all careers face a third issue: the difficult mix of private life and family. Is it possible to juggle career, marriage, motherhood, household management, volunteering, and more? To get ahead, conductors of professional orchestras must move from one orchestra to the next. Jetting around the world for guest-conducting stints, they are rarely stable in one place. Who pays the price? Conductors have awkward schedules. In many orchestras, rehearsals fall on weekday evenings; concerts are scheduled for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, nights the rest of the world thinks of as time off to spend with family. Famous male conductors generally have wives who devote themselves totally to their husbands’ careers. The joke is, of course, that women conductors need wives. (That is, of course, true for many working women.) Finally, with societal mores ever tugging at our psyches, it can still be challenging for the woman conductor to be as visible and well known as she must be without a spouse’s ego getting bruised. Few men want to be thought of as secondary. All of these situations pose significant challenges for a woman in a conducting career.

A last issue concerns both men and women conductors: the bias against the home-grown. As Americans, we have a long tradition of importing our musical talent from abroad. We still feel musically and culturally inferior, and so look to other countries for our conductors. Not until the 20th century did we even give credence to American composers; Copland was really the first to be lauded in the 1920s. Foreigners with thick accents were always immediately perceived as better, and this is a bias slow to change. Think of the big five orchestras today: the New York Philharmonic has Kurt Masur; the Philadelphia Orchestra, Wolfgang Sawallisch; Boston, Seiji Ozawa; Chicago, Daniel Barenboim; Cleveland, Christoph Von Dohnányi. Not one of these music directors is American. Look at the next five major orchestras: Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, St. Louis, San Francisco, National. Only two American leaders emerge: Michael Tilson Thomas and Leonard Slatkin. In Schoenberg’s book, not one of the 25 conductors is a woman, and only 3 are Americans.<sup>4</sup> Many promising American talents have had to go to Europe to have careers. I myself have had ribbing that,

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in order to get ahead, I should use my middle name, Nien-hwa, rather than Marietta, and I should develop a thick Chinese accent.

## **Advantages of Women Conductors**

As mentioned, an inherent clash exists between male and female conditioning and training. In today's professional arenas, can women be themselves, or do they have to take on the guise of a man's world? Is assertiveness really the best route to success, or is it just the traditional male one? Are there traits women hold in greater depth which should be more highly valued?

Women are conditioned to be more likeable, to maintain ties, to be flexible. Women want to preserve community, harmony, friendship, and goodwill; they want to come to agreement. Women avoid confrontation, and accord full marks to sensitivity. These are assets which they bring with open arms to most situations. Increasingly in the world of business, companies are taking a new, appraising look at the values by which women tend to live. For example, women tend to incorporate greater collegiality into their management styles. Often they seem to make others feel valued, and are good at encouraging workers on a one-to-one basis. Such approaches to management are different and, some companies are recognizing, perhaps better.

I notice, for example, that when problems arise during rehearsals, I tend to try to solve them in a less public way than many of my male conducting peers. I have witnessed repeated, somewhat humiliating criticism of individual musicians in front of an entire orchestra. Instead, I make an effort to take an individual aside, privately, at a different time. I sometimes think to ask if difficulties in other areas of a musician's life are interfering with his or her performance. I sense that, treated this way, musicians are perhaps happier in the long run. Similarly, the model of the autocratic, godlike decisionmaker whose instant judgments are always correct, and immediately become law, does not sit well with me. Some decisions are sounder after some reflection, discussion, and a little time. I believe that many women already operate along such lines in their approach to decision making.

Other examples: disagreements occur during rehearsal. When it's a matter of judgment—when there is no wrong or right—I try to take something from both sides. Sometimes such an approach actually strengthens musical interpretation, and leads to new insights. In my view, it's a case of the advantage of many heads together solving a problem. Often there is little musical conflict between the conductor's strong, individual artistic vision and the communal approach. Instead, the two can coexist, and even feed each other. Studies have shown that orchestra musicians experience some of the lowest job satisfaction of many types of employees; they have little input or control.<sup>5</sup> Musicians,

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therefore, welcome the opportunity to be heard. Again, I try to involve musicians when it comes to choosing guest artists or programming. The final decision is mine, of course, but I firmly believe that, in the end, gathering—and stimulating—creative input benefits everyone: the organization, the musicians, the audience, and myself.

Change is crucial. Certainly, women need to advocate change. Countries with feminist ideologies, after all, are the furthest along in terms of equality for women. Ideally, men and women will change and learn from each other, thereby incorporating each other's approaches. It will be a step in the right direction when routes other than stark competitiveness and assertiveness multiply and earn legitimacy. The world will greatly benefit from this change.

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## **My Own Experience**

And now I turn to my own history. In Chinese culture in the past, boys were more important than girls. For one reason, girls were lost to their parents when they wed. They became part of the husband's family exclusively. So it was common practice not to pay as much attention to girls, to insist on their obedience and subservience, and to neglect their education. I was extremely lucky, therefore, to have grown up here in the United States with parents who wanted me to have a career. But it almost didn't happen that way. After my father completed his graduate studies in the U.S., he was expected to return to China. Had he done so, I would have faced quite a different life. So, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the U.S., I went to the opposite extreme of what is expected of girls.

There was the added fact that, as the only Chinese family in our southern Ohio town, we were always different. From grade school until college, I was generally the only nonwhite in my class. I looked different from my classmates. No matter how hard I tried, I could not be the same—which is the normal goal of young girls; to be the same is to be liked. This difference molded me, creating an independence which may have been the first step on the path toward leadership. This is not the way of most Chinese girls, or even of girls in many cultures. Instead of being passive, quiet, and obedient, I became a performing musician, a leader, someone who would be the center of attention. So background has its effect.

In college and graduate school, I had two women as role models, both choral conductors. They showed me that it was possible for a woman to conduct. In their generation, with careers that flourished in the 50s and 60s, the successful woman conductor was a choral, not an orchestral, conductor. Quite often, the choral conductor prepares the chorus, then the orchestral conductor leads them

in concert; so there is a hidden, unspoken hierarchy in which orchestral conducting is more significant. Naturally, sitting in the audience while someone else conducts the concert, the choral conductor feels frustrated. Both my role models, Iva Dee Hiatt and Lorna Cooke De Varon, were deeply concerned about this. Margaret Hillis, the highly respected choral conductor with whom I worked at the Aspen Music Festival, encountered the same situation. In the 1950s, she was first drawn to orchestral conducting, but saw no possibilities for women in that field. Being realistic, she turned to choral conducting.

I started my career first as a choral conductor, because there were opportunities in that field which I thought didn't exist in orchestral conducting. After seven years, however, my nonvocal, instrumental background as a pianist and cellist asserted itself, and I realized I felt the most artistic satisfaction in the realm of orchestra. This was an unusual path, and since I have become an orchestral conductor, I have often been the only woman in auditions, interviews, etc. I am often asked, how does it feel to be a woman conductor? How does one truthfully answer that question?

Let's turn to questions more easily answered. Have I noticed any difficulties in my career as a woman conductor? Even without going into guesswork about subtle bias, I'll give two examples. One very highly respected singer once told me (I believe it was, in his mind, a positive observation), "You conduct like a man. It is very strong." Casting further light on the situation, another famous male conductor told me, "You are unique because, unlike so many other women who are trying to be conductors, you haven't given up your femininity." Comments such as these are eye-opening.

Have I had to change? Yes. Musicians must be highly critical of their own playing and the playing of others in order to succeed. They must have the highest discipline and personal artistic standards or they wouldn't make it in the very competitive world of professional music. And the conductor must have this critical judgment most of all. In fact, another orchestra joke reflects this with black humor. "Why are conductors' hearts coveted for transplants? Because they've had so little use." I had to change my tendency to be accepting and easy-going, to please instead of to lead. Some examples:

- ◆ I used to smile forgivingly at mistakes made; but no longer, because it seems to send the message that it is all right to make mistakes and to be unprepared.
- ◆ I have stopped being exclusively encouraging, saying something was good when it wasn't. Now musicians working with me know there is a standard and the sky is the limit.
- ◆ I used to speak more softly, with a higher pitch. Sometimes my vocal cadences went up instead of down. I realized that these mannerisms lack the sense of authority. I strengthened my voice. The pitch has dropped.

- ◆ Whether for symbolic reasons or because of Harold Schoenberg's quip, I avoid skirts or dresses when I conduct in rehearsal. Pants offer more authority and attract less attention to gender.
- ◆ I have stopped trying to be everyone's friend. Leadership is not synonymous with socializing.
- ◆ Finally, and hardest for me especially with my Asian upbringing, I have learned to catch myself when I am compromising musically—pleasing—when I know that that is not in the best interests of either the organization or the music. A conductor must have clear ideas, vision, and direction.

In sum, I have gone through a learning phase, a developmental process, to become a better leader.

## In Closing

As we all know, it's far easier psychologically to uphold tradition than it is to break barriers. Shattering stereotypes is hard work. Therefore, until the woman conductor is more commonplace and naturally accepted, she must be strong and willing to take risks. There are no guarantees. She must have incredible

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motivation. She must work harder than others—in a word, she must be driven. The expectations for women are still higher. She must always be on top of her game.

A final barrier lies in the state of the orchestra today. If you read the *New York Times* religiously, you might think the orchestra is an endangered species that is nearing its end. Are orchestras facing financial difficulties because they are stuffy, dusty museums without wide appeal? If this were the case, the orchestra strikes and closures across the country in recent years would mean fewer and fewer orchestras, and therefore fewer and fewer opportunities for women conductors. I have not bought into this view. These orchestras bounce back. Orchestras do not die; they change. They go through metamorphoses, with more education or program themes or crossover outlooks. It is my belief that classical music will always be appreciated. Therefore, opportunities for women to conduct will be there. In fact, since women are up and coming, we may be the ones who adapt most quickly.

Women conductors are making steady progress today. The doors have been opened. To end within my opening metaphor: “All aboard!”

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> From material developed for A Quantitative Analysis of Women in Leadership Roles in Symphony Orchestra Organizations that begins on page 91 of this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Normally I use the term “conductor,” not “woman conductor,” but for the purposes of this article, I’ll live with the distinction.

<sup>3</sup> Schoenberg, Harold. 1967. *The Great Conductors*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>4</sup> *The Great Conductors*.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, see Judy, Paul R. 1996. Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: An Interview with J. Richard Hackman. *Harmony* 2 (April), 1-13.