

Tacoma in forefront with its first female conductor

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Perhaps the most obvious change in the Sarah Ioannides era will be that the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra will be led by a woman — its first female musical director.

It's not a subject Ioannides is comfortable talking about, commenting during the audition process before her hiring that gender "makes no difference" in music making.

But Ioannides, as a female conductor, is in a real minority.

Although comprising some 40 percent of doctorate conducting graduates, women make up 20 percent of all America's conductors, assistant conductors and directors — and 13 percent of those in music director positions.

Just one — Marin Alsop — is at the head of one of the country's 24 top budget orchestras.

When Alsop became the first woman to conduct the Last Night of the Proms concert in London a year ago, articles flew around the media about the quote from Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko, who said a woman on the podium was just a pretty distraction.

Ioannides was the first woman on the conducting staff at the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, where she worked from 2002 to 2004. The Los Angeles Times gave her the accolade of being "one of six female conductors breaking the glass podium."

So is it hard being a female conductor?

"That's such a hard question to answer," Ioannides said, after a long pause. "I don't know what it would be like if I were a man. But if you look at the lists, yes — women have not fully broken through.

According to a League of American Orchestras survey in 2011-2012:

47%

of orchestra musicians in the 2011-12 season were female.

But, according to current League of American Orchestras membership:



20%

of conductors, assistant conductors and music directors are female. **225 out of 1,130 positions.**



13%

of music directors are female. **76 out of 605 directors.**



12%

of music directors are female in orchestras with budgets around the same as the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra. **10 out of 82 directors.**



There is only **one** female music director at any of the 24 highest-budget U.S. orchestras (Marin Alsop at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra).

Source: League of American Orchestras

“It is a challenge. The world is still changing, and has not yet completed its journey of equality, though we’re making faster progress (than last century).”

That said, Ioannides is quick to acknowledge the support from audiences and award-givers, saying she’s been welcomed in the field and that “the opportunities are out there” despite some doors being firmly closed.

In Tacoma, Ioannides already has won support because of her gender, not despite it.

“I’m excited that we can be at the forefront of (women conductors) in Tacoma,” said TSO board president Dick Ammerman in December when Ioannides was announced as the new music director. “She’ll bring a different type of vitality. It’ll also give us bragging rights.”

And for Tacoma City Ballet director Erin Ceragioli, Ioannides’ gender gives her a possible artistic edge.

“She’s more attentive to details than I have found male conductors to be,” Ceragioli said. “She seems eager to please, rather than eager to be pleased — the ‘maestro syndrome.’ She doesn’t have that.”

For Janis Upshall, principal second violin in the orchestra, there’s no musical difference having a woman on the podium — but there is when she steps off.

“I find women conductors easier to talk to,” Upshall said. “But I love the fact that we have a woman conductor now, just because of the equality thing. I’m so glad that women are getting the chance to get ahead now. Out of all those contestants, she won. That’s fabulous.”

Finally, the biological fact that discourages many women from becoming conductors — the difficulty of having a family and being on the road — might work in Tacoma’s favor.

Married to Yale trombone professor Scott Hartman, with 4-year-old twins and a 6-year-old daughter (plus a live-in au pair), Ioannides is well-settled for now in South Carolina.

But she will be moving her family to Tacoma at least for the month of December, thanks to the orchestra’s “Messiah” and “Nutcracker” performances.

“I’ve been looking at some schools,” she said. “I thought we should spend some more time here.”

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