

IN Close (/programs/in-close) > News (/programs/in-close/news)

Gender Gap on the Podium

By Stephen Hegg (/programs/producers/stephen-hegg)

Thursday, January 29, 2015

Tacoma Symphony becomes one of the few symphony orchestras in the nation to appoint a female music director and conductor.

To find the ultimate figure of authority, look no further than the classical concert hall.

They're the maestros. From Leonard Bernstein, Zubin Mehta to Gustavo Dudamel, symphony orchestra conductors have been classical music's most visible figures--commanding, dramatic, elegant, and almost always male.

Except at the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra (<http://www.tacomasympphony.org/>), where Maestra Sarah Ioannides has been appointed principal conductor and music director. Even in 2015 it's a noteworthy event. Australian-born, British-educated Ioannides is also the music director of the Spartanburg (NC) Symphony and a past music director of the El Paso Symphony. She opened the 2014-15 Tacoma season with sell-outs.

Sarah Ioannides backstage between entrances "I'd love to say it's no big deal," says Melinda Bargreen, noted classical music writer and critic. "Unfortunately the podium

has lagged behind the rest of the professional orchestra fabric in terms of hiring women and allowing women to step into prominence that many of them deserve."

Female conductors are rare enough. But even fewer are appointed as music directors, the artistic leaders of symphony organizations who not only conduct but determine repertoire and programs, soloists, and often personnel.

Says Ioannides, "I equate it with, say, a President of the United States. Well, could a woman do that job well? Of course they could, but it hasn't happened yet, so it's hard for people to see that leadership role being taken until it happens."

Of the top 25 American orchestras with budgets of \$15 million or more (which includes the famed philharmonics of NY and LA, and the Seattle Symphony), there is only one female music director, Marin Alsop, who became the first female music director of a major American orchestra when she took the podium of the Baltimore Symphony in 2007.

1 The number of female music directors in the top 25 symphony orchestras in North America

The numbers improve a bit when looking at the next 82 orchestras (including the Tacoma Symphony) with budgets of \$1 million and up; 13% of music directors are women. But since women make up almost half of symphony musicians in North America and much of the superstar soloist roster, why is the tempo of change so slow within the conducting ranks?

"The long tradition of men being on the podium is a big hurdle for women," says Anna Edwards, music director of the Seattle Collaborative Orchestra (<http://www.seattlecollaborativeorchestra.org/>) and the Saratoga Orchestra (<http://www.sowhidbey.com/>). "There are just not enough women in the applicant pools, [and] women seem to have to exceed in order to just get to the same level as many men."

Blind auditions, adopted by North America orchestras some thirty years ago, closed the musician gender gap among players. Applicants audition behind screens, usually without shoes so that their very footfall doesn't give a gender cue. That doesn't work for sizing up

a conductor.

Some of the resistance may be found in orchestra boardrooms. And perhaps in donors.

“There’s always fear with the unknown I think,” Ioannides says. “And in non-profits where you want to make sure there’s no risk involved for the financial well-being and security, I’ve been told often before ‘Well you know we didn’t want to take a woman in this scenario.’”

A skilled conductor doesn’t merely beat time and meter. It is artful physical communication that helps create musical drama and truly sets conductors apart on the podium.

“We work a lot on getting the right gesture for the right sound, the right tempo, the right character,”
according to Philharmonia Northwest (<http://www.philharmonianw.org/>) music director Julia Tai.

There seem to be fixed notions of what male and female gestures are, even in music. Again, the notion of air-slashing arms of the maestro. One associates strong, aggressive movements (such as a clenched fist thrust into the air) with male physique, natural for the top-heavy male body. But female conductors who try that often come across as inauthentic. Instead, the maestra can find gestural intensity by working arms and hands from her core.

“So as a woman, there are certain things we do very well,” says Tai. “There’s the lyrical, being musical part - it comes easy. But for us, we have to learn how to be assertive and if you want a big chord, how to make that chord really sound majestic.”

There is one thing that every conductor must have.

“Confidence,” states Edwards. “I think the reason some women may not be confident is because they are expected to be something that they’re not.”

<i>Tacoma Symphony Concertmaster Svend Ronning</i>	Violinist Svend Ronning, playing under Ioannides as concertmaster of the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra, has observed that confidence.
<i>Tacoma Symphony Concertmaster Svend Ronning</i>	

“The effective women conductors I have worked with in the past have gotten the results they want from the orchestra by being themselves. They haven’t particularly acted, they don’t necessarily dress like men, [and] they don’t behave in a stereotypically masculine way.”

If what aspiring women conductors need are role models, the Northwest offers plenty. In addition to Edwards, Ioannides and Tai, the Victoria Symphony (<http://victoriasymphony.ca/>) is led by Maestra Tania Miller, and there are a growing number of female guest conductors of the Seattle and Vancouver symphonies. Next year, the Seattle Symphony will add a woman as a conducting fellow.

At a time when symphony orchestras face heavy competition for audiences and need to need to find ways to be more socially relevant, hiring Ioannides seems an exceedingly smart move by the Tacoma Symphony Orchestra board.

“I think the fact that Tacoma now has Sarah is a step in the right direction in many ways,” claims Bargreen. “It’s tearing down some of those old cultural stereotypes.”

Sarah Ioannides takes a bow after first concert
Sarah Ioannides takes a bow after first concert

Sources: League of American Orchestras

Videos courtesy EuroArts, La Philharmonic, Deutsche Grammophon, BBC