

Conducting's glass podium: Female music directors are still rare, but the Northwest has nurtured some

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By [Melinda Bargreen](#)

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When the Seattle Symphony presents its annual “[Messiah](#)” Dec. 15-17, there will be a woman on the podium. You might not think this fact is worthy of a “Hallelujah,” until you consider that Ruth Reinhardt will be the first woman in the orchestra’s history to conduct this annual and beloved holiday fixture.

This is a milestone worth considering. The mere fact that female conductors are a comparative rarity around the world, at a point in history when women instrumentalists are commonplace — female orchestra musicians make up 36 percent of the Seattle Symphony — is an indication of the glacial rate of progress for women in ascending the podium.

Of the 22 major U.S. symphony orchestras (ranked by budget size), only one has a woman in the top job of music director (aka principal conductor): the Baltimore Symphony’s Marin Alsop. And she faced daunting obstacles: 90 percent of the orchestra’s musicians publicly declared their opposition to her appointment in 2005. She met with the players and eventually won their support, along with international acclaim and a contract renewal.

One reason there aren’t more female conductors is likely that symphony orchestras are highly traditional entities. They perform repertoire whose core formed in the 18th and 19th centuries, and for whom the 20th century still counts as “new music.” Most maestros, and many orchestras, still wear traditional formal dress, and most symphony concerts adhere to a long-held formula.

That traditionalism can manifest in comments by male conductors such as those by Vasily Petrenko, National Youth Orchestra and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic conductor, [who told a Norwegian newspaper in 2013](#) that “a cute girl on the podium means that musicians think about other things.” Or even this past month, when Mariss Jansons, chief conductor of the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and conductor emeritus of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, [apparently told The Telegraph](#) that, while he wasn’t against having female conductors, “for me seeing a woman on the podium ... well, let’s just say it’s not my cup of tea.”

The Seattle Symphony, meanwhile, has had an unbroken succession of male music directors. But women have also made their mark, as guest conductors, and assistant and associate conductors.

Former SSO associate conductor Carolyn Kuan is now music director of the Hartford Symphony (in Connecticut); former Seattle Symphony conducting fellow Ruth Reinhardt, who leads the upcoming Seattle Symphony “Messiah,” is assistant conductor of the Dallas Symphony.

(Of the choice of Reinhardt for the “Messiah,” Seattle Symphony CEO Simon Woods said: “Ruth was here for a year and we really loved her. It’s evident that she is a really instinctual talent and is quite special. The ‘Messiah’ is a big gig: it gets audiences who don’t necessarily come to concerts all year, and it is important to have a good communicator and a great role model for kids and grandkids as well.”)

The Seattle Symphony also has featured other stellar female guest conductors, including Finnish-born Susanna Mälkki (principal guest conductor, Los Angeles Philharmonic) and Lithuanian conductor Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla (music director, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, in the U.K.). In May, SSO audiences will hear the local debut of Karina Canellakis, former assistant conductor of the Dallas Symphony, and guest conductor of major orchestras from Paris to Vienna. And conductor Julia Jones led a very successful “The Magic Flute” at Seattle Opera this year.

Guest conducting is one way aspiring conductors gain wide-ranging experience and develop continuing relationships with orchestras, a key part of eventually ascending to the music-director position.

Around the world, there are a few other hopeful developments: the Dallas Opera’s annual Hart Institute for Women Conductors, and the Taki Concordia Conducting Fellowship for female conductors, created by Marin Alsop, who had also previously been music director of the Eugene Symphony. (Two Seattle guest conductors, Reinhardt and Canellakis, are Taki Concordia winners.) In England, the Royal Philharmonic Society’s “Women Conductors” program offers workshops throughout the U.K.

In the meantime, what’s it like on the podium for female maestros? We’ve asked four conductors with Northwest connections about their careers and hopes for the future.

Sarah Ioannides

This busy 45-year-old conductor has divided her time among directorships of Symphony Tacoma and the Spartanburg (North Carolina) Philharmonic, plus the family’s East Coast base (her husband, trombonist Scott Hartman, teaches at Yale University). With a 9-year-old daughter and 7-year-old twins, and regular guest-conducting trips to Europe, life has been hectic.

Now, as Ioannides (“ee-an-ee-dees”) ends her Spartanburg tenure, she is “really focusing on my work here in Tacoma. I want to get to know the community as an insider, and to work on collaborative projects that you could never do as a guest conductor,” she said.

Ioannides observes that there is “the opportunity now for women to make a lot of progress — even though we still make up only about 7 or 8 percent of orchestral-music directors. There needs to be more. And are we just token females, or are we given the same opportunities and the same pay?”

The Australian-born Ioannides was named by [the Los Angeles Times](#) as one of several female conductors cracking the “glass podium” and was termed part of “a new wave of female conductors” by [The New York Times](#).

As an 18-year-old, Ioannides already knew she wanted to be a conductor, forming her own orchestra at Oxford University. “I can’t change the industry or the world,” she says now, “but I can have a symphony orchestra reach out and embrace a community. I can help to bring a new, fresh outlook to the more stuffy and enclosed environment of classical music in general.”

Carolyn Kuan

Seattle Symphony’s former associate conductor recently became an American citizen in a ceremony before a concert by her Hartford Symphony Orchestra, with what she thought was “just a few people” in attendance — until she turned around and realized there were a few hundred board members and concertgoers there to celebrate. She’s starting her seventh season in Hartford and just signed a six-year contract, so you might say they really like her. There, she’s also the orchestra’s youngest music director, at 40, and the first Asian American. She’s also conducted the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Washington National Opera, and St. Louis Opera.

“Certain stereotypes about women are very beneficial to conductors,” she observes. “We communicate well, we are team builders and collaborators, we care about people. I want to make a real difference in my community.”

Kuan cites the mentorship of Marin Alsop and Gerard Schwarz as key to her development. “None of us can get where we are without help and advice.”

Frances Walton

At 89, this Northwest marvel who founded several institutions (including the Olympic Youth Symphony and Philharmonia Northwest) is also a pianist and a cellist, as well as a conductor who studied with Leonard Bernstein and Seattle’s Stanley Chapple (who “didn’t approve of women on the podium”). An avid swimmer, Walton was the second seed on the 1948 Olympics U.S. women’s swim team.

Walton says she has been “very lucky, in that I never experienced bias as a conductor. I didn’t want to be a professional; I wanted to be beneficial to young people in their musical development. Maybe I didn’t have sharp enough elbows.”

“Women who conduct are still looked at as a curiosity,” she observes. “But I think we should honor both sexes. I’ve really had the best of both worlds: marriage, a husband and three kids, conducting opportunities, great students and colleagues.”

Ruth Reinhardt

At 29, the German-born Reinhardt believes, “Things are really changing for my generation. It’s definitely easier now — we have the luxury of being born when so much has already been done by people like Marin Alsop.”

A composer and instrumentalist (oboe, violin, piano) as well as a conductor, Reinhardt says she wants to “make music at the highest level and with people I like. I’m interested in how we can make people in the street identify with their orchestra and see it as their symphony.”

She points to the Seattle Symphony as an important starting point for her: “It was my first audition, and they gave me a job and a title and a stamp of approval. I will always be grateful for that strong support.”

Reinhardt is looking forward to conducting her first “Messiah” in Seattle, she says.

And, perhaps, to the day when more, still highly male-dominated, traditional orchestra hierarchies believe as conductor Carlo Montanaro (a regular Seattle Opera guest) does. When [asked recently about the differences](#) between men and women conductors, he said: “Zero. ... I see a musician.”

Melinda Bargreen, who has reviewed music for The Seattle Times since 1977, is the author of two books, “Classical Seattle” and “50 Years of Seattle Opera”; she also writes for several print and online publications. She can be reached at mbargreen@gmail.com.