



Curtis
Symphony
Orchestra
horn section



ORCHESTRATING GENDER EQUITY

New Curtis graduates will enter an orchestral field in which gender disparities have diminished but where pay gaps and instrument-based stereotypes persist.

BY HEIDI WALESON

In November 2022, the *New York Times* published an article noting a classical music milestone: For the first time ever, the New York Philharmonic's roster had more female than male players—45 to 44. It was significant statistic, given the fact that U.S. symphony orchestras were entirely or predominantly male through most of the 20th century. However, while overall membership in U.S. orchestras now approaches 50-50 for male and female players, that number conceals disparities at other levels. First, in instrumental sections: There are many women playing the high strings (27 out of 30 New York Philharmonic violinists are female), flute, and harp but very few playing bass, percussion, and brass instruments other than horn.

What is more, principal chairs are disproportionately held by men. The Los Angeles Philharmonic, for example, has one woman principal, violist Teng Li ('05). Female concertmasters are rare. One might expect to see a majority of female principal flutes but that is not the case. The more prestigious the orchestra, the fewer female principal players: Among the so-called "Big Five" orchestras few, if any, have had a woman in a tenured chair as concertmaster or principal bass, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, or timpani.

Within 40 leading orchestras in the U.S., the U.K., and Europe, 83 percent of principal players are male, according to a 2019 University College London study. Another study, conducted in 2022 by the nonprofit advocacy group Protestra, found that of the principal players in the top 20 U.S. orchestras, 78 percent were male.

Curtis graduate Cristina Cutts Dougherty (Tuba '22) says, "An orchestra has always been my ambition," but has found the lack of female representation there challenging. "Every



The Problem with 'Blind' Auditions

Part of the equation is the vagaries of the so-called “blind” audition. “A lot of orchestras, perhaps most, have screens in auditions, but a lot do not keep the screen up all the way until the offer is made,” explains Caen Thomason-Redus, vice president of inclusion and learning at the League of American Orchestras. “Also, depending on the orchestra, there are a variety of rules about who can be automatically advanced to certain rounds. You can have a situation where the person hired has participated only in a round that was not screened. That’s not really blind.”

Mr. Thomason-Redus is looking at ways for the League to collect data in this area. “There’s a misperception of how objective auditions are,” he says. “My guess is that when we have empirical information, we will see that there is more subjectivity than is acknowledged.”

Curtis faculty member Katherine Needleman (’99), principal oboe of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra since 2003, has been outspoken about gender inequities in musician hiring in orchestras and elsewhere. She points out how the existing male-dominated power structure can maintain the status quo; given

who holds the principal positions, hiring committees are often predominantly male. “There’s a network of people who have power to invite other people to do things,” she says. This can play out in processes that skirt the supposedly equitable audition system.

“It’s very common, especially in the top orchestra solo jobs, to have a ‘failed initial audition’ where the committee doesn’t hear the expected high standard of messianic playing [and no one is hired],” she says. In these circumstances, she says, hiring committees may invite players—mostly men—to participate in more exclusive processes such as private auditions (sometimes in hotel rooms for conductors); paid playing weeks in the orchestra which lead directly to hiring; or invitation to subsequent audition finals where committees have already worked with the player, know they are auditioning, and can recognize them behind screens.

Trial weeks played after auditions, and probationary periods before tenure is granted, cannot be blind, and Ms. Needleman says, “There’s so much implicit bias when

time I’ve walked in to sub as the only woman in the low brass—if not in the whole brass section—it’s scary, when you are 23 and there are all these middle-aged men. And it’s tiring when no one looks like you at the top of the field.” In her 15 live auditions for permanent orchestra jobs, she has encountered two other female tuba players in the pool.

These numbers also translate into pay inequities. Principal players, with their individually negotiated contracts, make the most money, and according to a 2018 *Washington Post* article, over 80 percent of the top earners in U.S. orchestras are men. The *Post* also found that of the 78 highest paid players in 21 orchestras in the survey, the average male earned \$254,695, while the average female earner made \$202,629.

These statistics are surprising given the fact that orchestra hiring is thought to be entirely merit-based. Certainly, the widespread adoption of screened auditions in the 1970s in the U.S. corresponded with a considerable jump in the number of women hired overall: According to a 2023 report from the League of American Orchestras, women went from representing 38 percent of musicians in U.S. orchestras in 1978 to 47 percent in 2022. Non-binary people accounted for 0.8 percent of musicians in these statistics. So why are there still so few women in principal jobs and in so many orchestral sections?

Clockwise from top left: Katherine Needleman, Cristina Cutts Dougherty, Erin Keefe, Jennifer Montone.

you are looking at someone for a leadership role.” Her solution? “Invite everyone who is going to be considered for the job to the preliminary round,” she said, adding, “And grant people tenure from behind the screen. Not comfortable with that? Well, time to devise an audition process which actually tests what you want.”

Instrument Stereotypes Persist

Increasing the number of women playing non-typically “feminine” instruments—bass, brass, percussion—in orchestras has its own challenges. Rebecca Cherian, who recently retired after 34 years as co-principal trombone (and only female brass player) in the Pittsburgh Symphony, cites the persistence of “emotional stereotyping,” with women prohibited from feeling or exhibiting certain “masculine” emotions. “It’s not acceptable for women to be brass players, because brass expresses power through loud and aggressive sound,” she notes. “One trombone can overpower the entire string section.”

Individual women have successfully bucked that stereotype over the years. They include Carol Jantsch, principal tuba of The Philadelphia Orchestra, and Cynthia Yeh, principal percussion of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Horn players like Curtis faculty member Jennifer Montone, principal in Philadelphia, have made somewhat greater inroads. However, while more women study these instruments in conservatory than was once the case, the orchestra numbers don’t seem to be rising. A 2014 survey of the top 20 U.S. orchestras by composer Suby Raman found that 28 percent of the horn players were female; trumpets and trombones were three percent each, and tuba and percussion players five percent each. When horn player Nikolette LaBonte looked at the same orchestras again in 2018, she found that those percentages had either stayed the same or decreased in four years. Female bass players had also dropped from nine percent to six percent.

On Facebook, Ms. Needleman regularly posts publicity photos of all-male brass ensembles, competition juries, and festival faculties. In these and other, often freelance organizations, what Ms. Needleman sees as the old-boy network often does the hiring. Mr. Thomason-Redus also sees “a striking homogeneity. An orchestra does a huge work with a ton of horns, and I see an entirely male section, including the four to ten extra horns they bring in.”

Changing the Workplace Culture

The effect of these gender disparities varies from orchestra to orchestra. Curtis faculty member Erin Keefe (Violin ’03), who won the post of concertmaster at the Minnesota Orchestra in 2011, found that her way as a female leader had been paved by her predecessor, Jorja Fleezanis, who held the position for two decades. But orchestral culture can cast a broad shadow. In Baltimore, Ms. Needleman has never felt part of the “inner circle” of male principal

players and committee leaders who play poker, have drinks together, and go out with guest conductors after concerts. “The three women principals are not included,” she says.

Elizabeth Rowe, the principal flutist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, made headlines in 2018 when she sued the orchestra for gender discrimination, asking for equal pay with the male principal oboist. The dispute was settled out of court, and Rowe remained in her post. She now also works as a leadership coach and advocate for gender equity in the performing arts. She notes that being female in a heavily male environment “inevitably means that you stand out. The code-switching to fit in requires a cognitive load. I’m deciding if I’m going to laugh at that joke—it helps you fit in, but it’s sexist. When your brain is occupied with that, it’s not doing what you are there to do, which is make music.” Having few women in leadership roles also affects major

decisions on hiring, tenure, and the like, she says. “When nine out of ten people on a committee are white men, with similar lived experience, they tend to reward others that fit into that framework.”

The classical music industry’s recent focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion may shine a light on some of the practices that are holding back greater gender parity. Some individual leaders are already taking steps to rectify disparities. Kim Noltemy, who became president and CEO of the Dallas Symphony in 2018, surveyed the pay landscape at her orchestra and rebalanced salaries within job titles as well as in over-scale pay. Her administration also consults with orchestra committees on tenure decisions, trying to ensure that social as well as artistic aspects to the job are being holistically considered.

Generational change may help as well. Ms. Needleman says, “I started as the youngest in orchestra; now, I feel middle-aged at 44. I have hope for the young women now joining the orchestra, who see this and talk about it. We were always quiet. I hope their generation is less willing to accept being shut out of the network.”

Ms. Cutts Dougherty is part of that new wave. “A lot of women of the older generation worked to not stick out, to fly under radar in how they acted and dressed,” she says. “I think that is changing. My colleagues in my quintet, Seraph Brass, are all women and we are learning to express our femininity, and not be afraid to do so. It’s going to change as more orchestras get more female players.” As of next fall, there will be at least one more: In March, Ms. Dougherty learned that she had won the audition for principal tuba of the Phoenix Symphony.

Heidi Waleson is the opera critic of the Wall Street Journal and the author of Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America (Metropolitan/Picador).

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