

Discrimination in the European cultural scene

Perspective of an African Opera practitioner

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The discourse on female conductors and the lack of them in the European scene has a far-reaching reality that reflects the global environment. The element of race as an added inquiry makes this topic very interesting to me, not just as an opera producer, administrator and educator but also as someone who has recently relocated to Europe and is looking to understand the nature of inclusivity as a concept and a reality. A simple online search for the numbers in terms of representation clearly shows that the ratio of female to male conductors is skewed to favour men and more evidently men who are white.

With the above in mind, I was curious to see if this was a reality or just my perception. An article by Suna Erdem published in August 2022 also raises this question in relation to the movie *Tár* which centres around the world of a chief conductor of a major German orchestra who happens to be a woman. The article states that the film is not based in reality as no woman holds such a position in the German music world. It further claims that, based on research done before the pandemic, only one in ten conductors is female (see Erdem 2022).

There has been movement in securing female conductors to take the reins of festivals, notably Oksana Lyniv, who conducted Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* at the Bayreuth festival, or female conductors such as Marin Alsop, who are given the helm of chief conductor. I have also seen several female conductors that have been invited as guest conductors at a number of performances here in the Netherlands, where I am based. There are other women who are regular guest conductors but

the focus of this essay is not on whether female conductors are being hired to work with major orchestras but rather their representation in terms of a forward movement in inclusivity.

This brings me to a number of questions as to why the rise of female conductors is not moving at a quicker pace and why most orchestras and opera companies are not looking to female conductors to hold positions of power.

- a) Does the discourse around female representation in the music sector need to be looked at as an imperative?
- b) Why do we talk about the promotion of female conductors?
- c) What does the discrimination of female conductors in the music-political system look like?
- d) Is conducting the last bastion of white colonial privilege?
- e) To what extent is the assumption of the lack of female conductors correct?

First it would be presumptuous of me to look at the above questions without delving deeper in the realities of orchestral acceptance of female conductors and how they sit in the landscape of the music sector. Do we look at just the existence of female conductors in general or is it even more important to look at how many of them—if any—hold positions of authority in the orchestras. Marin Alsop, who once led a major American orchestra, is referred to in an article by Vipasha Aloukik Pai, saying that she never wants to be referred to as a woman conductor: »I think I speak for everyone I know when I say that one more question about being a woman conductor and I'm going to be ill.« (Pai 2021) Does this mean that some female conductors just want to be referred to as conductors without referring to their gender? And how does this influence the very present movement that representation should be invested more on and not just taken as a given?

How then do we look at the presence of female conductors if the above is a general thought? There is also the assumption, or at least there used to be, that female conductors didn't want to put themselves up for positions for fear or rejection or even outright misogyny that lurks in the

spaces of orchestral music. In the same article, British conductor Sian Edwards mentions that she has noticed more women coming forward in the last ten years but, »[b]efore, they weren't really putting themselves forward. Which meant that they were often behind their male colleagues when it came to auditioning for a place like the Academy because they just hadn't put themselves out there to do as much as the boys had.« (Pai 2021) In September 2022, Don Baton wrote in his blog:

»Historically, conducting was an almost entirely male field. That fact will surprise precisely no one. As the conducting profession came of age in the early 20th century, not only were women discouraged from getting on the podium but conducting came to be identified in the public mind with principally masculine virtues: control, dominance, power.« (Baton 2022)

So, this also means that female conductors might have to sometimes find this type of positioning by practitioners in music and not just other conductors.

a) Does the discourse around female representation in the music sector need to be looked at as an imperative?

While this essay mainly looks at Europe where the discourse on female conducting is currently being examined, I would like to share some of my own experience, not just as a musician but also as a director, producer, educator and administrator, who is a newcomer to the European landscape. My career started during the Apartheid times in South Africa where a woman conducting an orchestra was not a reality to consider. During my days as an opera singer, I was privileged enough to work with some wonderful and exciting chorus masters who happened to be women and when opportunity allowed, they were asked to act as assistant conductors and in some rare occasions even conduct some rehearsals. I do not remember them being any less effective than the guest conductor that was hired to lead the production, but I must admit

that I still didn't have the pleasure of having one of them conduct me in a performance with an orchestra, in particular opera.

When I took over the reins of an opera company, I didn't exclusively seek out female conductors either, which I have to admit with a bit of shame. This essay in some way indicates that this is a global issue and I hope that at some point, it will be expanded to challenge the global position with regard to female conductors in general. In his blog post, Don Baton carries on: »Like many observers, I once assumed that the main reason for the lack of female music directors was that conservative elements in the industry—other conductors, musicians, administrators, and audiences—weren't ready to see a woman on the podium.« (Baton 2022) My recollection was not conservatism at all but rather traditions that are not easily or willingly changed.

I believe that the answer to the question if this discourse is imperative should be, yes, it is imperative, which is why I chose it as the first question. All you have to do is reflect on how the role of a female conductor is portrayed in the movie *Tár*, where the protagonist is depicted as a troubled woman, which raises the question if a male character would have been presented in the same way. In her article »Where are the female conductors?« Suna Erdem quotes Marin Alsop: »I was offended as a woman, I was offended as a conductor, I was offended as a lesbian,« she told the *Sunday Times*, suggesting the film was »anti-woman,« since the character *Tár* is portrayed as »an autocrat who plays sexual power games, treats the orchestra as her own fiefdom and is shown bullying a male musician, rigging an audition in favour of an attractive cellist and dismissing the idea of female fellowship.« (Erdem 2022)

Another article about women conductors on the podium by Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, which was presented at a symposium, looks at the pedagogical and professional implications and recent discussions about women's experiences in the orchestral profession, revealing gendered politics within many of the generally accepted norms and customs of the orchestral tradition. Bartleet writes about the absence of women's voices in the profession based on an ethnographic study of 17 female conductors in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. The study looked at interviews to unearth narratives and draws questions

from the conductors' own experiences. Bartleet asserts that men have had the authority to create and cultivate the traditions in the music industry and as a result, conductors have always been imbued with inherently masculine traits. She suggests that most of the ideologies remain rooted in the concept of patriarchy. It is for this reason that I feel it is imperative to have this discourse around female representation, particularly in regard to conductors in major orchestras. During her research, Bartleet also interviewed a number of administrators who suggested, »that this mode of segregation of women conductors will slowly change over time as women rise through the system.« (Bartleet 2008)

As mentioned earlier it is very clear that the music industry has always felt a little uncomfortable around handing over reins to a female conductor. This is supported by Don Baton who suggests that sometimes orchestra companies give chances to female conductors who might not be ready to be taken seriously as conductors. He refers to a performance he attended where a female assistant conductor was given the opportunity to conduct a symphony concert stating that her performance was below par and very much of an assistant level and not representative of a seasoned and ready conductor (see Baton 2022). The implication of his statement sits very uncomfortably with me because I believe that it is the very type of critique that will always prevail in the patriarchal system as the main reason why female conductors are not given an opportunity. Even though Brydie Lee Bartleet presented her findings already in 2008, I think they might still hold true with some administrators today. I believe that the only way to give credence to the assertion that this topic is not of importance is when misogyny is deemed completely socially unacceptable.

For comparison, I would like to refer to a certain feeling that has been mentioned by a number of airline passengers when they discover that the captain will be a woman and their first instinct is to wonder, »Are we going to arrive safely?« I would like to suggest that only if we start looking at female conductors as conductors, we will be able to stop having this discourse. With that in mind I say, let the discourse continue and let's make it imperative!

b) Why do we talk about the promotion of female conductors?

In the previous section I mentioned my disappointment in a critique which argued that if a female assistant conductor was to be given an opportunity to conduct a major orchestra or even a symphonic work, they would need to be more than just an assistant conductor in terms of quality. The question I want to ask is why would that statement even be written in a critique, and would the same critique have been given to a male conductor of the same calibre. So, in this section I really want to investigate or rather state my case as to why we're talking about the promotion of female conductors and also why we should continue doing so.

We have to address the issue in the same way that we look to rectify gender parity in work situations where women are not given the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Just as organizations are now putting emphasis on hiring individuals who would help them rectify the parity not only in terms of gender but also race and other areas of othering, orchestras need to tackle this problem as well. Music educator and conductor Latoya A. Webb says the following about empowering female conductors: »I believe that equal opportunities exist in music. However, changes are moving slowly. While some progress is evident, females are still underrepresented in the field due to historical views.« (Webb) If this statement doesn't encourage us keep talking about promoting female conductors, I know that we will as a music industry will be lost. Webb carries on by giving a number of tips, one of her suggestions being the creation of safe spaces, whether in educational or professional environments, to initiate the dialogue about the unequal opportunities.

Another aspect that we need to consider when we speak about the promotion of female conductors is the fact that the more female conductor contenders see a representation of themselves either on stage or in academic institutions, the more we create confident musicians that will be called, as Alsop once requested, conductors and not female conductors. To quote Webb: »Many of us would not be where we are today if it were not for mentors guiding us. The lack of females in leadership/conducting positions of all levels... hinders the growth within the profession.« (Webb) I would like to stress this assertion of mine by referring to

Cathy Desmond who writes: »Although women occupy desks in all sections of most orchestras, the role of conductor has remained predominantly a male preserve. In a recent survey of 150 international orchestra appointments, only five were women.« (Desmond 2017)

Before I conclude this section, I would also like to mention that the reason why the promotion of female conductors should never stop being part of the discourse is that the stigma of female conductors being weaker or just as tyrannical as some of the male conductors might perpetuate the misogynistic view that women need to be treated differently. In an article written in 2023, the author Xenia Hanusiak opens with the question: »Will a new generation of women on the podium perpetuate the tyrannical charisma of their male predecessors or overturn it?« (Hanusiak 2023) Why do we still refer to female conductors as people who will either perpetuate the patriarchal system or be entirely different from men? This misconception is why we need to continue the conversation about promoting female conductors.

c) What does the discrimination of female conductors in the music-political system look like?

One should always be very careful to qualify what discrimination looks like as it is in most cases subjective. When asking people what they understand as discrimination, different individuals will give different responses. I believe that discrimination is an issue that needs to be tackled constantly. But what shape does the discrimination towards female conductors in the music-political system take? First, I would like to look at the possibility that it could take different forms. In 1998 Marietta Nienhwa Cheng wrote that she once was asked what she did for a living. When she responded that she was a conductor, the other person assumed she meant a train conductor (see Cheng 1998: 81). This presumption already indicates that conductors are rather thought of as male, and if female, they would not be automatically associated with orchestras. I believe that this way of thinking is still prevalent today. In her article, Cheng mentions the types of obstacles that female conductors have faced in the past:

Firstly, she refers to the issue of authority. Traditionally, conductors are expected to be very loud and aggressive in how they claim their territory within the orchestral environment. If the same behaviour was attributed to a female conductor, this would be seen as negative. She then goes on to say that discrimination at the time was experienced by any female player who was accepted into an orchestra. If that's the case, how would you expect that discrimination to be any less for a female conductor who also has the position of a superior? Cheng states that in some cases a woman would have to prove her musical prowess first before she is met with respect (see Cheng 1998: 83). My question is: Would the same expectations be laid on a male conductor? The answer may be yes, but because there is already a premise of discrimination for women it might be perceived in a heightened manner. In her article »Classical Sexism: Gender Bias and Female Conductors«, Eleanor Price opens with a provocative statement saying that classical music has a long legacy of sexism. I assume that this is part of her own lived experience as a musician, not a generalized statement. She mentions that in her 12 years as a musician, she has only worked with one professional female conductor (see Price 2017). The fact that the article was written in 2017 indicates that the issue is just as prevalent today as it was 20 or more years ago.

Vipasha Aloukik Pai mentions stories of a several conductors who had one prestigious conducting competition and auditioned for a number of orchestras with wonderful feedback on their talent and also on how they related to the orchestra players. Pai goes on to quote Jeri Lynne Johnson, a female conductor who happened to be not just female but also Black and who was refused a position with an orchestra as a conductor: »They just didn't know how to market me. I didn't understand what that meant. So, I questioned them further and he said: »You don't look like what our audience expects the conductor to look like.« (Pai 2021) This shows that it is not just about whether a female conductor is capable but that marketing perpetuates the stereotype that a female conductor would not be received as well as a male one, both on the sides of the players or the administration and the market or audience.

We already see two categories as regards the discrimination of female conductors: one being the question of talent, the other one the

question of saleability. So, what we need to ask ourselves is: Are those the predominant forms of discrimination? There also is discrimination in terms colour, which I don't think is the most important aspect for this essay. Another aspect of discrimination that could be examined is how many female conductors in academic studies are given the opportunity to study further than their bachelor's degree? In her article, Pai mentions that Sian Edwards noticed that »few women were making it to the Master's level at the Royal Academy of Music, and when they did, weren't adequately prepared to face the competitiveness.« (Pai 2021) There is one aspect of discrimination that we can never ignore and that is misogyny, i.e. when a section of male conductors would utter statements that reduce women to being household carers and that their bodies are not made for such a position. In the same article, Pai refers to French conductor Claire Gibault who was shocked when a male colleague serving with her on a competition jury stated that »women's arms were made for holding babies and not conducting orchestras« (Pai 2021).

d) Is conducting the last bastion of white colonial privilege?

Based on what has already been said, I think that privilege is mostly reserved for male conductors. What we haven't talked about is the fact that the issue of gender and gender discrimination and discrimination based on race is a very nuanced conversation to be had. The question that needs to be asked is: When we deal with the discriminations against female conductors, do we preclude the issue of race altogether and if yes, why is that so?

We might ask, how many Black female conductors are active in the European music field? In the time I have been here, I have not heard or met any. However, the same could be said for Black male conductors. Yes, they exist, but one could argue that they are even fewer than female conductors. Why is it that Europe is not opening up to all races? Is it correct to assume that the gatekeepers, i.e. the music administrators, are deliberately not looking for Black conductors be they female or male? I don't know if that's true. I think this issue could be further examined, maybe

in a different essay. If we look at successful Black opera singers that come from previously disadvantaged or developing countries, who happen to be Black, the number has increased significantly.

The next question is an important one, and I don't know if I am the most qualified person to join the discourse: It is the question of whether white colonial privilege has found a way to retain conducting as their own. To answer it, we—but in particular those of European origin—have to look inwards. Do you feel that conducting is the last bastion of white colonial privilege, or is it just an issue of tradition and favouritism? What has been already touched on in this essay confirms that white privilege still exists in orchestras, and white male conductors have more opportunities than any other race or even gender would.

So, why is it that the classical music world lags so far behind other art forms? We could attempt answering this question by referring to Jennifer Hambrick, who published an article on the plight of female conductors and receiving opportunities in 2015. Yet, the article is just about gender discrimination, not about the supremacy of white men that can be traced back to the days of slavery and colonization. Hambrick refers to a conductor, that started her career at a very young age and when she got into the position of authority, standing in front of an orchestra as their conductor, she would overhear people say, besides being anxious or envious, that they did not particularly like the idea of a female conductor. The education system perpetuates an ideology of white supremacy where there is impunity for some people who will get away with statements like 'This is not a career that is open for women' or 'Why do you bother wanting to be a conductor when there are no opportunities for you?' Thus, I conclude that conducting might not be the last bastion of white privilege. But the choices of appointment are undeniably influenced by its ideology.

e) To what extent is the assumption of the lack of female conductors correct?

For me as a Black South African cultural practitioner who spent most of his life either performing or holding positions of authority within the opera world and the classical musical world, this essay was challenging. What I found so challenging was not the critical question of representation and discrimination of female conductors in particular, but discrimination as a whole which is a very destructive system that all administrators within the classic music world should work at destroying. Did we answer the questions posed at the beginning of this essay? I believe that the question of discrimination against female conductors is a real issue, and I think the works that published on this topic by different individuals within the music space prove it. I also find it interesting that a large number of articles on the issue of female conductors were mostly from America and the United Kingdom.

I think it is important that we are honest with ourselves about what deserves discourse and what needs to be discarded. I look forward to a time, in particular here in Europe, when I can see conductors without having to refer to their gender or race. I also would like to stress that female conductors do not have to act like male conductors to be taken seriously. As a teacher of a famous female conductor once said, »You don't have to be like a man, you don't have to pattern yourself after any man, you have to find your way over having authority that will be natural to you«. I conclude this essay with an aspiration of hope that gender—as well as race which was not covered here—will cease to be an issue in bringing musicians into leadership positions.

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