



Amy Beach



Ruth Crawford Seeger



Gabriela Lena Frank



Joan Tower

## 100 Years of Progress for American Women in Classical Music

BY GRACE LICHTENSTEIN

Raise your hand if you know that 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage in New York, as well as the 150th anniversary of the birth of Amy Beach, the first acclaimed American composer.

Do I see any hands? Certainly you did not see mine. If I ever came across the name “Amy Beach,” I probably thought it was a strip of sand somewhere on the Jersey shore.

Yet in 1917, New York’s state voters jumped the gun on the federal amendment that granted women the right to vote in 1920. That same year Beach, a world-class pianist as well as one of the American composers whose works were frequently played at the time, performed her Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

These days, Beach’s music is nearly forgotten. Indeed, other female composers from the first half of the 20th century who were once known in music circles, as well as conductors and instrumental soloists, seem to have faded from historical view. Among them was Pete Seeger’s stepmother, Ruth Crawford Seeger, wife of composer Charles Seeger, protegee of Henry Cowell and the first woman to get a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition. According to a biographer (quoted by Alex Ross) Crawford Seeger’s “confidence [was] sapped by her husband’s neolithic belief that

‘women can’t compose symphonies.’” Instead she transcribed folk songs for many years until returning to composition after World War II. She died in 1953. Among others in the early 20th century were composer Marion Bauer and conductor Antonia Brico. British composer and conductor Ethel Leginska, who spent much of her career in the U.S., died in 1970 in obscurity. In Europe, perhaps the most famous composition teacher was a Frenchwoman, Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979) who taught many great American male composers, including Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter and Philip Glass. She was also a noted conductor in the U.S. and Europe.

Why do most of these women remain unknown to most of us? (If asked to name women composers, readers likely might reply initially by naming two Germans, “Clara Schumann” and “Mendelssohn’s sister,” Fanny Hensel.) With all the progress American women have made in other fields since suffrage was granted nationwide, with a woman running for president in 2016, why is classical music success still the ultimate glass ceiling?

This essay is limited to American composers and conductors who have spent most of their careers in the United States. What female U.S. conductors typically come to mind? New York native Marin Alsop, music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra since 2007, is the first and often the last one mentioned. That’s



Julia Wolfe



Jennifer Higdon



Ellen Taaffe Zwilich



Susanna Malkki

because orchestras were a boys' club well into the 1970s and 1980s, when various organizations gave in to pressure for blind auditions, in which applicants played behind a screen, to increase the numbers of women chosen. Why, in a country where the first conservatory—Music Vale Academy, founded in Connecticut in 1835—was for women only; where music teachers throughout the 19th and the early 20th century were predominantly women; why has classical music lagged so far behind in parity?

The answer seems to be sexism, of course, but also until very recently the lack of mentors and of opportunities for women in conservatories to learn composing and conducting. As late as 2001, in an interview with Chicago producer/educator Bruce Duffie, eminent composer Joan Tower, now 78 years old, said a key problem was that women “don’t have a lot of role models...especially among dead composers.” Nor, Tower said, do they have “enough of a support system. So they have to forge their way very much by themselves and some of them just don’t have the strength to do this.”

“I think it’s a pipeline issue, a training issue,” Melissa Smey, executive director of the Arts Initiative and the Miller Theatre at Columbia University, much of whose programming is focused on living composers, told me. She pointed to research compiled in 2016 by Alex Ambrose and WQXR’s Q2, the radio station’s 21st century digital arm. It showed a huge disparity among men (85%) versus women (15%) teaching composition at major music conservatories. There are no numbers on gender differences among composition students, but

the point is that key decisions on who gets accepted are being made by men. And student composers study with mostly male professors.

Gabriela Lena Frank, the 44-year-old American composer who is a member of Yo-Yo Ma’s Silk Road Ensemble, recalled in an interview with Deborah Hayes “a prominent, quite old composer” in a guest lesson in college telling her “that women didn’t write aggressive music.” (She had included a passage marked *fff*, or very loud.) “I wasn’t offended, to be honest. I saw this guy as from another era...simply old fashioned.” Snipes by other male teachers “were simply challenges for me to prove them wrong.”

After formal studies are finished, composers face the issue of getting their works heard. A survey of programming by the 22 largest American orchestras shows that less than 2 percent of the works in the 2014-2015 repertory were by women. Even among living composers in that survey, less than 15 percent were women. “These numbers are both abysmal and embarrassing, particularly in this day and age,” said Kristin Kuster, a composer and an assistant professor of composition at the University of Michigan.

Some women like Joan Tower combat this by creating their own ensemble or collective. Tower formed the Da Capo Chamber Players in 1969 to ensure that her own music was heard. Later, in 1977 she became the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in Music Composition—more than a half-century after Aaron Copland had received the first—further raising her profile.

Others followed the same formula. In the 1960s, electronic music pioneer Pauline Oliveros

became a founding member of the San Francisco Tape Music Center. Julia Wolfe, the winner of the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for music, co-founded Bang On A Can, among the most popular experimental music commissioning and performing organizations, in 1987 with two fellow Yale graduate school students. Still others, like Meredith Monk and Laurie Anderson, two veterans of the New York downtown avant-garde scene, both produced and performed in their own multimedia works.

Jennifer Higdon, a Pulitzer winner and one of the most successful women composers today, took a different route. From the start, she self-published her music “out of necessity”; major music publishers showed no interest in her work. Lately, many of the same publishers would love to have her on their roster, but that venture, Lawdon Press, makes it possible for her to earn her living as a composer. That’s because Higdon, 53, holder of the Milton L. Rock Chair in Composition Studies at The Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, is third on the list of living composers (and the only woman) whose music was in the 2014-2015 repertory of the 22 largest U.S. orchestras.

At one time, Higdon believed that pioneers like Joan Tower and Libby Larsen “helped kick the doors down” for female composers. However, she told me she that lately she has indeed run into gender squabbles, in the form of “nasty emails” and letters from strangers who “seem angry that I get commissions and... performances. Sometimes it seems like it’s [just] because I’m a woman.”

The current generation of women composers now filling the pipeline has many more role models and mentors. Joan Tower cited Nancy Reich, the biographer of Clara Schumann, as someone who changed her life when she taught a course about women and music at Bard College. “I was totally naïve,” said Tower. “I knew nothing about this subject.”

As an undergraduate at Bowling Green College, Jennifer Higdon was mentored by her flute teacher, Judith Bentley, who encouraged her to compose. Two younger composers, Missy Mazzoli and Ellen Reid, are playing it forward: they connect young women with established female professionals in a project at Kaufman Music Center’s Luna Lab in New York. “We can provide positive role models, foster confidence, and give these young women an outlet for unique self-expression,” they say.

Although she does not call herself a mentor, Melissa Smey has featured a host of young

women—Ashley Fure, 34; Anna Clyne, 36; Missy Mazzoli, 36; Hannah Lash, 35, among them—at the Miller Theatre’s signature series, “Composer Portraits.” What’s special about these is that an entire evening is devoted to each composer, rather than programming just a single piece.

Even the Pulitzer Prizes are catching up. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich broke through that glass ceiling in 1983, capturing the award after 40 years of male winners. Since then there have been five additional female winners. In 2013, at the age of 30, Caroline Shaw became the youngest person ever to win the award. A busy violinist and vocalist, too, she appears regularly with American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) and Roomful of Teeth.

As for that other glass ceiling—conducting—more and more women are pressing upward. As Marin Alsop has said, by now, 30 years since she herself was a young conductor, she “assumed that there would be more and more women in these roles.” There are not. But as the lone woman among conductors of America’s top tier orchestras, Alsop has become proactive in her advocacy. In 2002, she created a fellowship for young female conductors. There have been 11 recipients, “and they are all doing fantastically well,” she said recently. Four are American music directors and another has her own orchestra.

Concurrently, the Dallas Opera has established the Linda and Mitch Hart Institute of Women Conductors to boost the careers and provide hands-on training for six talented conductors a year under 40.

Are younger women actually getting jobs? Yes. Susanna Malkki, 47, who has already guest conducted the New York Philharmonic and who will soon be the principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, is set to take the podium for the Metropolitan Opera 2016 premiere of Kaija Saariaho’s *L’Amour de Loin*, the first opera by a woman presented at the Met since—gasp!—1903. Barbara Hannigan, 45, a renowned soprano, has added conducting to her resume and is scheduled to make her American conducting debut with the Cleveland Orchestra in 2018-19. Xian Zhang, 43, a former associate conductor of the New York Philharmonic, is now the music director of the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra. Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, 30, is the associate conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, in addition to being music director of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in England.

And New Zealander Gemma New, 29, a former Dudamel Conducting Fellow at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, has just become resident conductor of the St. Louis Symphony while continuing to serve as music director for the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra in Ontario. This millennial brings no baggage concerning “women conductors” with her. “It is just the norm for a Kiwi girl to pursue the career of her choice,” she said. “No one ever told me that a woman couldn’t pursue a male dominated profession.”

For that matter it never occurred to 29-year-old British conductor George Jackson that women could not be his mentors. His “first taste of big name conductors” he told me, was Sian Edwards, whose master class he took some years ago at a Scottish festival. Later he worked with Marin Alsop at the Cabrillo Festival in California. Male? Female? “Audiences make that distinction,” he says. Professional musicians today, he declared, only care about whether the result is good.

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