EDUCATION OF WOMEN CONDUCTORS:
Could An All-Girls Club Be the Answer?

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Introduction

In the past ten years, many female orchestra conductors cracked the “glass ceiling” and made several “firsts”: Marin Alsop was the first woman to conduct the Last Night of the BBC Proms and the first female Music Director of a major U.S. orchestra. In 2014 Elim Chan became the first female winner of the Donatella Flick LSO Conducting Competition. Additionally, Xian Zhang was recently appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the BBC National Orchestra & Chorus of Wales, and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla will take the post of Chief Conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra starting in the 2016-2017 season. Even with these exciting accomplishments and an overall increase in the number of women accepted as orchestral musicians, women are still underrepresented at the highest levels as professional orchestra conductors. Among 21 major orchestras in the United States, there is only one female music director: Marin Alsop of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. In the decade since her appointment in 2007, no other female conductor has yet advanced to lead a top-tier orchestra in the U.S.²

In recent years, orchestras have employed more and more female musicians, staff members, and members of management. The percentage of female musicians in symphony orchestras has increased significantly: by the mid-1960s, less than 10% of the musicians in the biggest five U.S. orchestras were female.³ In 2014, the figure for these five orchestras rose to 35.2%.⁴ The 2013 Orchestra Statistical Report by the League of American Orchestra showed that 46% of U.S. orchestra musicians were female.⁵ Research has shown that “blind” auditions—musicians performing behind a screen concealing their identity—has helped promote gender-equality in the hiring process, resulting in an increase in the number of female orchestra musicians.⁶ However, it is not
possible to evaluate a conductor behind a screen in this manner, as conducting primarily involves movement, gesture, body language, and other non-verbal communication that must be seen.

Previous research on women orchestral conductors has focused on common difficulties encountered along their career paths, including power struggles while attempting to claim a leadership role within the organization, gender discrimination, having a masculine image of a conductor imposed on them, and work balance for women in leadership roles. As society changes and more women devote themselves to the profession of conducting, cultural perceptions gradually evolve, easing many hardships compared to ten years ago. But the pace of change is slow and the progress unsteady.

Responding to the lack of women conductors in the highest level of professional orchestras and opera houses, two programs devoted specifically to women conductors launched in 2014-15: Women Conductors @ Morley in the U.K. and the Linda and Mitch Hart Institute for Women Conductors at The Dallas Opera in Dallas, TX. Morley College organizes several weekend workshops throughout the year, while the Linda and Mitch Hart Institute is an annual program for selected participants. As supplements to the often male-dominated conservatory education, could such women only training environments promote the number, level, and achievement of women conductors? I attended an Opera Conducting workshop offered by Women Conductors @ Morley, where I interviewed conductors and educators including Diane Wittry, Alice Farnham, Karin Hendrickson, and Keith Cerny. In this article, I will first introduce these two women-only conducting programs and the gender issues they address. After examining all factors, I will give my opinions on whether single-sex educational environments would promote female participation and advancement in the professional conducting field.

**The All-Girls Clubs**

**Women Conductors @ Morley**

Women Conductors @ Morley was co-founded in 2014 by conductor Alice Farnham and Morley College’s former Director of Music Andrea Brown. During its
inaugural 2015-16 year, two phases have been offered concurrently: Phase I courses are open to young women aged 16-19 or full-time students (with no age limit) new to conducting who wish to begin conducting training; Phase II courses are for female conductors aged 19 and above with the goal of advancing their conducting techniques and understanding in a particular genre, such as opera, ballet, or choral conducting. All courses are presented as two-day workshops during weekends. Phase I courses are offered throughout the U.K., including London, Birmingham, Glasgow, Oxford, and Cambridge; Phase II programs are only offered in London.

Phase I courses give beginning conductors more than hands-on conducting experience. In addition to teaching basic conducting techniques, Farnham includes body language coaching sections. She brings in successful female conductors as role models for the young conductors. During the course, she also addresses issues commonly faced by women conductors, such as leadership style, communication skills, body image, and attire for rehearsals and concerts. The goal of Phase I courses is to encourage more women, whether just beginning their musical training or long-time professional musicians, to enter the field of conducting.

Phase II courses are two-day boot camps of conducting skills taught by renowned conductors with specific areas of expertise. Some courses offered in the 2015-2016 year include Conducting Romantic Symphonies led by Sian Edwards, Opera Conducting by Julia Jones, Ballet Conducting by Andrea Quinn, and Conducting Concerti by Rebecca Miller. These courses are suitable for both young and professional women conductors who wish to advance their techniques and develop deeper understanding of conducting in a particular style. While the content of the Phase II instruction is ostensibly gender-neutral, Farnham emphasizes that the women-only educational experience provides a unique, supportive atmosphere.

**Linda and Mitch Hart Institute for Women Conductors**

Dallas Opera launched the Linda and Mitch Hart Institute for Women Conductors in 2015, aiming to provide support and opportunities for talented women, with the ultimate goal of bridging the gap between early career success and future engagement with top-tier opera houses and symphony orchestras. The inaugural institute in 2015 ran
for nine days and was expanded to two weeks in 2016. In addition to working with the Dallas Opera Orchestra during rehearsals and concerts, the program includes master classes with renowned conductors, seminars and discussions on issues such as repertoire selection, career progress, management, communication skills, and networking with other professionals.

The topics covered by the institute are gender neutral, but the goal of all events is helping female conductors advance in their career paths. For instance, selected participants receive broad media coverage through this highly-visible program. Each conductor receives HD video recordings of her performances with the Dallas Opera Orchestra after the program concludes. Such videos are crucial in securing guest conducting opportunities and eliciting arts management interest. Additionally, master classes with the Dallas Opera Music Director Emmanuel Villaume and Principal Guest Conductor Nicole Paiement focus on developing conducting techniques, understanding the repertoire, and working with singers. During seminars and panel discussions, Dallas Opera General Director and CEO Keith Cerny leads discussions on such topics as agency, opera management, fund-raising, and self-branding. To further assist women conductors’ career progress, participants might be invited back to assist or conduct future Dallas Opera productions. In addition to the institute residency, Dallas Opera also hosts an annual summer reunion. All participants and observers are invited to return up to five years after their initial admission into the program.

**Impact**

The underrepresentation of female conductors in the orchestral/operatic profession has various contributing factors. Fundamentally, not many women choose conducting when they start music education. A lack of women conductor role models paired with gender stereotypes reinforced by music educators likely play a role in this matter. The women who do choose to pursue conducting commonly encounter gender-influenced obstacles that hinder their advancement to the top level of the field. Most of these challenges are beyond the control of women conductors, such as employment equality in the hiring and promotion process, gender perception and discrimination. On the other hand, there are some areas firmly within their control where women conductors can take
action to help spur the process: being prepared musically and technically when chances become available, making oneself more marketable with superb PR materials and interview skills, and networking with other conductors and arts managements.

Some long-standing professional development opportunities for women conductors do exist, such as the Taki Concordia Fellowship founded by Marin Alsop, the Women Conductor Grant from the League of American Orchestras, or the Seminar for Women Conductors sponsored by the same organization. Nonetheless, the impact of these programs is rather limited as the League initiatives are one-time events, and only one Taki Concordia fellow is selected every two years. Additionally, these programs are limited to female conductors with certain experience or already well-established in their careers. Women just entering the field of conducting, who could use the most encouragement, are not served by these programs.

The two new regularly-run conducting programs for women are more inclusive in that they are designed to benefit female conductors in different stages of their training and careers. Phase I courses of the Women Conductors @ Morley program opens a door for any woman willing to step up to the podium, even if she is just curious to learn a little bit more about the conducting profession. Women participants may be young people just beginning their musical education or professional musicians including singers, instrumentalists, and vocal coaches. Phase II programs open more windows for those who are already established in the field, helping women conductors grow and advance their conducting abilities for specific genres or styles. Having role models from various areas of expertise may also broaden participants’ horizons while improving their techniques, musicality, and musicianship. The Linda and Mitch Hart Institute is open to talented female conductors with strong commitment to the field of opera. In addition to providing musical training, the Institute helps conductors develop professional tools such as communication skills, personal branding, and career management to use to further their own career progress.

**Gender Issues in Conducting**

In addition to giving women conductors targeted support and opportunities, what are other benefits of women-only training programs? Are certain gender-specific matters
better discussed within a single gender? Do women learn better with female peers than in a mixed-gender setting? Below I will discuss several gender-related challenges women conductors commonly face and whether a single-sex conducting course would better address such issues.

**Gestures and Perception**

It is debatable whether conducting education should be gender specific. The job of a conductor is to use everything physical and psychological—eye contact, body language, gesture, leadership skills, and charisma—to provoke musical responses from an ensemble. Diane Wittry, author of *Beyond the Baton* and a conducting educator, suggests that teaching conducting is about helping each individual find his/her own way of expressing musical ideas that receive desired musical responses. Because everyone has a different physical build, height, length of arms, etc. regardless of gender, there is not an obvious justification for generalized separation based on the conductor’s gender.10

Aside from finding the suitable gestures for each individual conductor, it is equally important, if not more, for conductors to understand the perception of their movements. Even when men and women use the similar body language, their approaches may be perceived differently according to gender. Alsop points out that different societal interpretations of a conductor’s physical gestures could affect music-making by the orchestra:

I think it really is advantageous to be able to speak with women about the reality of how their gestures are interpreted. It's useful to have a safe place to talk about it, where everyone's a woman and we can say, ‘that gesture looks girly and it's going to be interpreted in such-and-such a way.’11

Alsop’s statement echoes Judith Butler’s theory, “gender performativity,” which asserts that gender identities are formed through performative repetition of certain traits recognized by a society.12 Since the stereotypical image of a conductor is a strong masculine figure, female conductors are discouraged from showing femininity for fear of being labeled “girly.” Women are expected to present masculine characteristics on the podium in order to be accepted to do their jobs. This supports findings from my previous
research on the image of female orchestral conductors: with more women seen on the podium, there is a wider acceptance of differences projected from the podium than there was ten years ago, but a non-masculine, gender-neutral image of the conductor has not yet been established.\textsuperscript{13}

It is understandable that, based on Alsop’s past experience, she recognizes the ability to emulate so-called masculine mannerisms as a must for every conductor. In a 2000 interview, Alsop stated that:

\begin{quote}
If I am very strong to you as a woman… people say, “Oh she’s a bitch,”… “Oh my god, she’s too macho”… but if a man does that, people melt, “Oh he’s so manly.” If a woman is very… frilly and delicate they say, “Oh it’s too lightweight, it’s too feminine.” If a man’s like that he’s “sensitive.”\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

Sixteen years have passed since Alsop’s interview, and more women have entered the top levels of the conducting profession. I have high respect for Alsop for her pioneering achievements and advocacy for women conductors, but I believe it is time to assert a more diverse and inclusive image on the podium. Female conductors might use different movements and gestures, but only in the same way that shorter or taller male conductors make adjustments according to their own body types. Conductors of any gender should change a weak gesture because it does not reflect the music or provoke the desired sound, not because someone might view it as “girly.” Women conductors should not feel obliged to move like their male counterparts in order to be accepted in the profession. Pedagogically, instead of imposing the expected characteristics and traits of the masculine gender on students of both genders, conducting mentors ought to guide each person in finding his or her own way to convey musical intents and to inspire corresponding musical responses. This approach should not require a same-sex training environment, or a “safe place to talk about issues.”

\textit{Power and Confidence}

Conducting and ensemble directing certainly involve more than gestures and conducting techniques. A conductor needs to have broad knowledge of repertoire; a thorough understanding of music; strong interpersonal, communication, and leadership skills; charisma; and vision, among other skills. Even with all of these tools under their
belts, Alsop, Cerny and Farnham all agree that women conductors face certain challenges more than their male peers.

For Alsop, the main issue is power. “[F]rom my experience, the biggest challenge for women would be about how to deliver a gesture that elicits a powerful sound without any kind of apology.” Cerny similarly observed that conductors participating in the Hart Institute program tended to be apologetic when making a musical demand. He sees this issue related to women lacking self-confidence as described in the article “Confidence Gap” by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman. An article discussing women and career, its subtitle reads “Evidence shows that women are less self-assured than men—and that to succeed, confidence matters as much as competence. Here’s why, and what to do about it.” Similarly, in addition to teaching conducting techniques, Farnham makes it a point to bring in a body coach in order to address physical awareness and confidence-building with participants for her Women Conductors @ Morley Phase I courses.

Power, competence, and confidence are closely tied to each other in pursuing leadership roles as many studies find self-confidence correlates to success. There are, however, two sides to the issue of “confidence gap”—women not feeling powerful and confident in their positions, or women simply not being regarded as powerful and confident for what they do, regardless OF how they really feel. Kay and Shipman address the first scenario by citing body evidence showing that women are less self-assured than men. They conclude that “men overestimate their abilities and performance, and women underestimate both. Their performances do not differ in quality.” Anthropologist Daniel Grunspan, instead, focuses on the other side of the issue. A recent study by his team shows that male college students drastically undervalue their female peers and over-rate the males. Thus, a “chicken-egg” dilemma presents itself here: do women really have less self-assurance than men, or do men consistently regard their female counterparts as less confident and less capable? One could also argue the causality that women are less self-assured than men because the society consistently taught them so.

Addressing these generalizations of gender difference could be useful in a conductor’s training if the knowledge is well applied. Alsop is absolutely correct about the importance of understanding how one’s behavior and movements are interpreted.
Conducting, after all, is all about predicting how an ensemble would respond to a conductor’s presence, gestures, body language, and verbal communication. Cerny’s observation connects findings of the above-mentioned studies: when a woman is apologetic, she is more easily perceived as less confident about herself, and further interpreted as being less competent at what she does.

Looking at my own conducting training, I have received comments from various mentors that I was too “polite” or was not showing enough power for an intense musical passage like the opening of Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 4. I always associate this issue with my own personality and body type rather than my gender. After years of trying to copy other conductors, I have come to an understanding that each body type requires specific adjustment of conducting movements. A powerful gesture used by another conductor will not have the same effect with me since our bodies have different shapes. Some male colleagues of similar build—who are tall and thin—and I share the opinion that it is natural for us to express lyricism and fluidity with our long arms. When it comes to showing intensity, a conductor with more body weight might seem more grounded with extra strength. Everyone is individual and unique, and conductors of every stage continue to seek the most effective ways suitable for their bodies to invoke the desired music making.

As studies show that each gender has its tendency and marked difference, it is important for women conductors to be aware of such differences and how they are perceived. A single-sex environment allowing participants to observe each other’s conducting, use of body language, and various styles of communicational and leadership skills is certainly beneficial. Women should acquire the knowledge and awareness that many people often underestimate and undervalue them, or wrongfully associate confidence with competence. These findings should not require women to behave like men, or to impose a masculine performativity on women. There should not be only one type of confident and powerful conductor; female conductors should be encouraged to present a more diverse and inclusive presence on the podium.
Clothing

During individual interviews, both Farnham and Cerny identified women conductors’ attire as an issue to be addressed. Farnham discussed hairdos and what to wear in rehearsals and concerts with Phase I conducting students. Cerny did not include this topic in the Institute’s first year program, but did comment on various styles of concert attire of the participating conductors. Interestingly, my previous research also found that music critics tend to pay more attention to female conductors’ appearances and outfits than to male conductors. Commentator Anthony Tommasini, former Chief Music Critic of the New York Times, felt the need to comment on conductor Marin Alsop’s attire in addition to her music making in a 2007 review: “Ms. Alsop… looked as dapper and dynamic as ever in her customary black slacks and stylish jacket.” The editor found this a salient enough detail to include in the headline of the concert review “Baltimore's New Maestra with Contemporary Flair.” Two years prior, the former Chief Music Critic of the Boston Globe, Richard Dyer, made the observation that “Alsop, dressed in a long white coat and black slacks, is a no-nonsense conductor.” Without the description of the conductor’s attire, these two concert reviews would have been just as valuable.

It is still true in 2016 that women in the public eye are often evaluated by their appearances over their professional abilities. One salient example is the focus on Hillary Clinton’s wardrobe, hairstyle, and fashion choices, which has been an ongoing theme in the media since her time as First Lady, followed by her Secretary of State days, all the way to her presidential campaign. A 2013 study by “Name It Change It,” a media-monitoring project of the Women’s Media Center, found that any description of a woman candidate’s appearance, whether neutral, positive or negative, damages her favorability, and voters’ likelihood of voting for her. On the contrary, such media coverage on her male opponent’s appearance does him no harm. The findings can possibly be applied to female conductors. In a field where women are still underrepresented and fighting for more recognition, no comment on the conductor’s appearance is the best comment.

Many female conductors choose to wear pantsuits or an otherwise gender-neutral outfit to draw minimum attention to their physical appearances. Soprano and conductor
Barbara Hannigan, on the other hand, conducts in sleeveless dresses because “it’s something I can move in that doesn’t distract me or the orchestra… I don’t tie my hair back, either, because I never do unless I’m having a bad hair day.”27 Hannigan has a unique career path toward becoming a conductor as she is first an established musician in the women-only field of soprano singing. For this reason, it might have been easier for her to fight against the gender stereotype that women have to dress in men’s suits when doing what is stereotypically a man’s job. Yet, as stated above, I believe that rather than emulating the gendered traits of the traditional maestro, it is time for women to present a more inclusive performativity of being a conductor, rather than being a male or female conductor.

From an educational point of view, it is important for female conductors to understand that their attire choice is an important part of the impression they make on the ensemble. One can choose to comply with the gender performativity theory and reinforce masculine traits by wearing a woman’s tuxedo or pantsuit, or to show femininity and conduct in a dress or sleeveless outfit, but it should be her own conscious decision. Though a discussion on attire selection is not limited to female conductors, many male mentors and conductors do not have specific experience in this area. Including this topic in a female-only conducting seminar is certainly valuable, and would help conductors in different stages of their career paths.

**Conclusion**

First, I would like to applaud both programs, Women Conductors @ Morley and the Linda and Mitch Hart Institute for Women Conductors, for their initiative and work encouraging and promoting women conductors. According to the participants I interviewed, it is evident that more women are encouraged to enter the profession of conducting thanks to the Phase I and Phase II programs that Farnham designed. I spoke with fellow participants and auditors while attending the Opera Conducting workshop at the Royal Opera House. Whether singers, vocal coaches, or choral directors, these participants were inspired to step in the conducting field as a result of their participation in the program. They reported feeling less intimidated because of the supportive and friendly environment of the courses, and many of them opted to attend more than one
Phase II workshop. Both the Phase II program and the Hart Institute program equip female conductors with more tools for career progression: the programs added depths of understanding about conducting and music, provided a venue to network with fellow women conductors, and addressed areas and topics related to the music business. Even though participating conductors may not reach the next steps of their career directly through such projects, they certainly help alleviate difficulties along the road.

In addition to providing inspiration, opportunity, and support to women conductors, these two programs stand out by including discussion of gender-related topics. Women conductors are forced into a unique position in their field: in order to advance their careers, they must fight the traditional perception of a male maestro and the expectation that women conductors should reiterate and repeat masculine behavior. Addressing these matters among women conductors in a women-only environment can be beneficial as participants network and observe each other’s work freely. That being said, rather than filtering out all “girly” gestures, movements, or outfits, conducting mentors and training programs should help each individual conductor find her own way of expressing musical ideas while understanding issues of power, confidence and perception. I am a strong advocate that a more diverse and inclusive perception of conductors is the goal of the new performativity, and no contrived masculine identities should be imposed on any conductor, regardless of gender.

The key to a profession of equality, diversity, and inclusion is for everyone, from the underrepresented to the privileged, to understand the importance of such an advocacy. A single-sex educational program has the advantage of explicitly encouraging greater numbers of women conductors, supporting their career progress, and raising awareness of certain gender-related challenges. As for whether the two programs discussed here will produce the intended results of helping participants actually advance in career paths, it is too early to determine. The status quo of the conducting profession cannot be changed quickly enough by only a handful of initiatives focusing on women conductors. More programs addressing the issue of gender equality are needed where the power lies: with the people making decisions in the hiring process and other “gatekeepers of opportunities.” As the findings of Tonic’s Advance program in English theaters show, equality in the profession of performing arts will only be achieved very slowly if left to
occur naturally.\textsuperscript{28} With more people becoming aware of and addressing the issue of gender equality and inclusion, we can optimistically expect a more diverse performativity in the profession of conducting and more women advancing to the top levels of the field.

1 The author would like to thank Diane Wittry, Alice Farnham, Karin Hendrickson, and Keith Cerny for their kindness and help on the research.
2 Susanna Mälkki was recently appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the LA Phil beginning in the 2017/18 season, but this is not a Music Directorship.
8 In July 2016, the Women Conductors (formerly Women Conductors @ Morley) announced its new partnership with the Royal Philharmonic Society. All Phase I and Phase II courses will continue to be offered in the 2016/17 year.
10 Personal interview.
13 Ting, “The Female Image.”
15 Jessica Duchen, “Marin Alsop’s Classes.”
18 See Ad de Jong, Ko de Ruyter, and Martin Wetzels, “Linking employee confidence to performance: A study of self-managing service teams,” Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 34, no.4 (2006): 576-587. Self-confidence in cognition studies usually refers to self-efficacy, the feeling that one is capable of completing a certain task, which is the first level of the issue and also what the women-only conducting programs address.
19 Kay and Shipman, “Confidence Gap.”
21 Personal interviews.
22 Ting, “The Female Image,” 47.
25 For a thorough analysis and discussion of comments on the attire of both female and male conductors in music critic, please see Ting, “The Female Image.”
26 Celinda Lake, Alysia Snell, Cate Gormley, Flora Lethbridge-Cejku, and Bob Carpenter, “An Examination of the Impact of Media Coverage of Women Candidates’ Appearance.” http://wmc.3cdn.net/0d817481d880a7de0a_60m6b9yah.pdf.
28 The 2013-2014 Tonic’s Theater Advance program focused on theaters in England and surveyed women in creative roles in English theaters. For the second phase of its study, Tonic’s Theater is working with theater, dance, and opera companies on promoting equality and diversity. “Conductor” is also one of the subjects of the second phase survey. For further information, see http://www.tonictheatre-advance.co.uk/about/.