



Interview: Rebecca Miller

The conductor who is cracking the glass ceiling

By Jessica Duchon, January 17, 2014

You might not expect to find a pair of musical game-changers lurking in the quiet back streets of Hendon. But the suburb is home to two rising stars of classical music who are raising the stakes for their generation. Rebecca Miller is at the forefront of a new wave of women conductors, challenging the traditional male domination of the profession. Her husband, Danny Driver, is a virtuoso pianist, lauded for his performances on the modern instrument, yet now about to give a concert playing the very different 18th century fortepiano.

Miller and Driver are an unassuming, genial couple, preoccupied with the logistics of juggling work and parenthood. Let them off the leash on the concert platform, though, and the sparks quickly begin to fly. This month, they appear together at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, where Miller makes her debut conducting the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in music by CPE Bach, with Driver a soloist under her baton. Suitably enough, the event is titled *Game Changers*, a reference not only to the composer - who was the son of JS Bach and forerunner to Haydn and Mozart - but also, rather appropriately, to its performers.

Miller and Driver met at the Aspen Festival in Colorado, playing Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. But they quickly discovered they had something extra in common - both are descendants of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chasidic movement. "Danny's descended from his daughter, I'm descended from his son, so we're distant cousins," Miller says. "This heritage was very important to my grandfather, so to discover that Danny was also related was quite extraordinary. There's a family pride in knowing that this great man was part of our heritage."

Music is an essential part of the Chasidic spirit, she points out. "A Chasidic service is astonishing. I don't think there's a moment when they're not singing. If they're not praying, they're singing niguns, amazing melodies without words. I went to a Chasidic synagogue in Safed once when I was in Israel and the energy was incredible. Everybody was singing with full commitment, completely focused and not thinking about anything else. It's still a powerful memory 15 years later."

She identifies, too, with the relatively egalitarian side of Chasidism. "With the niguns everyone can get involved. A farmer in a field can hum it and it's just as holy as someone official singing it in a shul. It's maybe a metaphor for music for us today. The classical music world historically has been slightly closed off and I'm always working towards opening it up for the people and providing access points - not dumbing it down, but trying

to destroy the barriers that prevent people from coming to concerts and getting interested in music."

One barrier could well be the sexism that seems ingrained in the world of conducting. This has been much in the spotlight in recent months, after several high-profile conductors were quoted across the world's media making comments about women's conducting ability that would have been (one hopes) unthinkable had the word "woman" been replaced with "black" or "Jew".

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Rebecca Miller

Miller is unusual among female conductors in having found two powerful role models. The first was her mother, the baroque flautist and musicologist Leta Miller, who encouraged her to try her hand at conducting. The second was a dynamic woman conductor at the University of Santa Cruz in Miller's Californian home town, with whom she took her first lessons.

"It never occurred to me to be surprised that she was a woman," Miller says. "She was just a conductor I knew." Such examples are all too rare. "We've had a time of not wanting to talk about the issues facing women conductors, but I think it is essential that we bring these into the open, otherwise nothing can change. I hope that one day we'll reach the point of not talking about it because it's no longer a problem.

"I know there are men back there making cat-calls. But you have to ignore many things as a conductor and learn to let those things roll off you. You have to be sensitive for the music, but also reasonably thick skinned. It's a tricky balance." Or "empowered sensitivity", as Driver interjects smiling.

Miller moved to the UK in 1999 after meeting Driver and they married a year later. "It was daunting but very exciting to move to a city as enormous as London," she recalls. "I didn't have much work when I first arrived. So we started an orchestra together - the New Professionals - and ran it for 10 years." Posts as assistant conductor to major US orchestras in Houston and Louisiana eventually took over her time. Now she is music director of the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society, one of the longest-running choruses in the UK. In forthcoming seasons we can expect to hear her conducting the BBC Concert Orchestra and the Royal Northern Sinfonia, among others.

She and Driver are convinced that music-making can be a route to reconciliation, or at least a symbol of it. In the concert Driver will play a concerto for two keyboards by CPE Bach, with the Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani as his fellow soloist. "Mahan is a very interesting musician and person who really thinks deeply about what he does. I'm looking forward to playing with him," Driver says.

The "double concerto" is unusual, written for one harpsichord and one fortepiano: "They seem to converse or even duel with one another," Driver says.

2014 holds many excitements for the couple. Miller is taking up a post at Royal Holloway College as the institution's Fellow in Music Performance. Driver will perform at the Eilat Chamber Music Festival in February, as well as being broadcast live on Radio 3 in a concert from Scotland in March.

But they still manage to prioritise family life with their two small children. "One great thing about working together for this next concert is that we actually get to see each other," Miller quips. "And while we are one another's worst critics, we are also each other's strongest supporter."

Rebecca Miller conducts the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment at Queen Elizabeth Hall on January 30