

A glass ceiling for women in the orchestra pit

Next week, Julia Jones takes the baton at the Royal Opera House. But a woman on the podium remains a rare event. And that is absurd, says Jessica Duchen

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Imagine how the conducting profession might look today if Herbert von Karajan had been a woman. Female conductors could have dominated podiums the world over, with a Herbertina to set the example. This isn't so, of course – but that doesn't mean it might not happen in the future, and the near future at that. Until very recently, female conductors have been too few, their careers limited in comparison with those of male maestros. But a gradual yet definite sea-change has been taking place: more and more women are refusing to be deterred from their ambitions and are rising to prominence on the podium.

Figures such as Marin Alsop from the US and the French baroque firebrand Emmanuelle Haïm have captured the imaginations of the public, musicians and managers alike; and perhaps it wasn't insignificant that in 2008 the TV reality show *Maestro*, which focused wider public attention on the question of what makes a good conductor, was won by a woman, the comedian Sue Perkins. And now another is in the spotlight: the British conductor Julia Jones, 48, is about to take the podium at the Royal Opera House for the first time, in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

If Jones's name is unfamiliar, that isn't surprising: this is her first performance in her home country. She moved to Germany as a trainee in her twenties and has been conducting overseas ever since, her work ranging across three continents. She's currently the music director of Lisbon's Teatro Nacional de São Carlos and the National Symphony Orchestra of Portugal.

Her career has flourished, so what's been the problem elsewhere? Why are there so few women conductors? "How come we're even having this conversation?" Jones protests. "It's 2010! Women conductors should not be the issue – it's the musicianship that counts, it's what you can bring to the work that is important, and for that gender is completely unimportant."

That is the ideal, of course, but a conductor has to reach the podium before she can start making music. Jones says that she was actively discouraged from her aims by her professor at music college: "He was worried that I wouldn't get a job." But she stayed determined, and won through. "I've never encountered any issues or any prejudice from musicians because I'm a woman," she insists. "On the contrary, I was elected to my job by the musicians of the orchestra. What other proof do we need?"

To some extent, the scarcity of female conductors is a vicious circle. With so few women having been in high-profile posts, the role models have not existed to inspire more, so the situation becomes self-perpetuating. Even today, women remain a minority among applicants to conducting courses.

But nobody in any field can avoid the sorry truth that unequal standards still apply to men and women where positions of power are concerned. The biggest problem for any woman wielding power is usually about how those under that power might perceive and respond to it. And power is at the heart of a conductor's work: essentially, the strength of mind and personality to compel 100 accomplished professionals to follow your lead. The most challenging thing about conducting, Jones feels, is that aspect of its psychology: you need the self-assurance to stand up on the box in front of the orchestra. "If you are self-conscious, wondering what they think of you, doubting yourself, it's a non-starter," she says.

Emmanuelle Haïm agrees: "If you know what you want musically then the musicians are completely OK and there is no question at all," she says. It can be the crisis moments that provoke more problematic situations, though: "If there are difficult issues, for instance if a male conductor is yelling in a theatre about something, then it's generally accepted – the way men handle difficult situations is taken as a mark of authority. But to do this as a woman can be very badly perceived. Different ways of handling a crisis are more usual for men. Showing the same authority from a woman's point of view is sometimes not that easy for others to deal with."

Many might think that even the matter of standing up in front of an orchestra is still more difficult for women than for men, especially in the young years when they're starting out. This was certainly part of Haïm's experience. She was interested in conducting from as early as 11 or 12, but, she says, "I was slightly shy, as a girl in front of a big group. If I had thought, 'I'm not a girl, I'm not a boy, I'm just somebody,' it would have been fine. But as a girl, as an adolescent, I don't know... So I left it on the side." It was thanks to her enthusiasm for orchestral playing as a harpsichordist and a request from some friends that she should conduct them that she finally got started in earnest.

"At first, I was surprised that journalists would always ask me why female conductors are so rare," she remarks. "At the time I didn't understand, because I

didn't see the problem. But I see the problem now!" She has a young daughter. "If you are a woman without a woman's family life, then I don't think there are too many problems in being a conductor," she says, "but to raise a family as well as doing a job that is so time-consuming and demanding is very tough. It's not the same as it was for the male conductors of long ago, whose wives would usually be there to assist them and look after the children. Life is more difficult for a woman, whether a conductor or not a conductor – just a bit more difficult."

The incompatibility of an international lifestyle with raising a family is certainly a problem, but this applies equally to singers and soloists, and to business careers of many types. The conducting profession still looks sluggish about catching up.

Not that there haven't been successful women conductors in the past. The first woman to conduct a symphony orchestra was one Mary Davenport Engberg (1880-1951); better known is Nadia Boulanger, the French composer and professor, whose recordings of works such as the madrigals of Monteverdi and the Requiem by her teacher, Fauré, are now treasured classics. Dame Ethyl Smyth, the composer, used to conduct performances of her own works after the First World War. The late Rosalyn Tureck formed her own orchestra, the Tureck Bach Players, and conducted them and other orchestras, notably the Philharmonia, in the late Fifties and early Sixties.

But Covent Garden did not employ any women conductors until 1988, when Sian Edwards and Jane Glover appeared there. The Cuban-born Odaline de la Martinez was the first to reach the Proms; she and the British conductor Diana Ambache have championed the work of female composers, who are arguably less well-represented in classical concerts than women conductors. Now, the younger generation includes the increasingly popular Anu Tali from Estonia and Xian Zhang from China.

It's easy to adopt the perception that Britain is slower than other countries to accept women conductors in high places. Sian Edwards's stint as music director of ENO lasted only three years. De la Martinez and Ambache found success principally through orchestras they started themselves. Marin Alsop's tenure at the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra was between 2002 and 2008, but she has no obvious successors: today, no women hold principal conductor or principal guest conductor posts among Britain's leading symphony orchestras.

In Lisbon, though, Jones is not the only woman in a significant podium job; at the Gulbenkian Orchestra, there are two – the Australian-born Simone Young is principal guest conductor and Joana Carneiro is guest conductor. In the States, JoAnn Falletta is music director of both the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, while conductors such as Anne Manson and Eve Queler are enjoying distinguished careers in concert halls and opera houses.

Over here, we're more likely to find women soloists doubling up as directors of smaller orchestral ensembles, a practice that is popular with chamber orchestras such as the Britten Sinfonia, which works with artists such as the pianist Joanna MacGregor and the violinist Tasmin Little, who have directed the concertos they perform from their instruments and then conducted other works in the same programme.

The pianists Imogen Cooper and Mitsuko Uchida have recorded acclaimed discs of Mozart concertos, again directing from the keyboard. But while male soloists often can't wait to transform themselves into conductors, this doesn't seem likely to happen to any of these excellent women – though I must admit to curiosity about the results were Uchida to begin conducting Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. I would be first in the queue to hear her.

On the other hand, the change is happening – slowly, but definitely. "Look at politics," says Jones. "It took a long time for women to be accepted in that sphere, but today it's normal." With orchestras themselves no longer male preserves, and powerful women involved as managers and chief executives, the cause of the woman conductor has inevitably benefitted. Most orchestras today involve roughly equal numbers of men and women, so it seems perhaps more natural to see a woman directing them. Now, some organisations are taking steps to encourage young women on to the podium: the League of American Orchestras offers special grants to four outstanding women conductors each year.

Perception problems do linger. Some conductors are always more successful than others, but if a woman conductor isn't popular with her players or the critics, the fact that she is a woman is more likely to be mentioned. Some commentators still prefer to carp at Maestra's choice of clothing rather than listen to her work – perhaps that is why so many prefer to wear the same traditional garb as their male counterparts, usually tailcoats or a Nehru jacket. Still, when musical results convince, the reinventions, appointments and magazine covers can follow apace.

It might take just one breakthrough example to open the doors and chuck away the padlock. And it can only be a matter of time before a Herbertina von Karajan or a Georgina Solti emerges to change the orchestral world forever. The day of the woman conductor is on its way, and not a moment too soon.

Julia Jones conducts 'Così fan tutte' at the Royal Opera House, London, from 29 January to 17 February (020 7304 4000; Roh.org.uk)

MAESTRO: OTHER GREAT FEMALE CONDUCTORS

Sian Edwards

A British conductor respected for great professionalism and expertise, especially in opera. Studied with Sir Charles Groves in Britain and Ilya Musin in St Petersburg. First woman to conduct at the Royal Opera House, 1988; music director of English National Opera 1993-95. Conducted premiere of Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Greek* in 1988. Repertoire from Mozart to cutting-edge contemporary works.

Xian Zhang

Born Dandong, China. Made debut at 20; moved to US 1998. Assistant conductor at the New York Philharmonic under Lorin Maazel in 2004; Maazel appointed her its associate conductor in 2005. Hugely acclaimed for '*La Bohème*' at English National Opera, 2007. This season she became music director of Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi. One to watch.

Emmanuelle Haïm

French harpsichordist and conductor, now among best-loved of early music specialists. Founded her own orchestra, *Le Concert d'Astrée*, in 2000. First woman to conduct at the Lyric Opera of Chicago; has guest-conducted at Glyndebourne and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Recording of Handel Italian Cantatas with the soprano Natalie Dessay won the Diapason d'Or in 2005.

Marin Alsop

Currently music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Studied in Tanglewood with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa. First woman to record complete symphonies of Brahms, and also Mahler's Fifth with London Symphony Orchestra. Admired for interpretations of American music. Controversy surrounded her appointment in Baltimore, but she has emerged all the stronger.