

It's time to pass the baton on to our female maestros

There are more women conductors than recent media stories imply – they just don't get the top jobs

By Jessica Duchon

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Just as the Proms was preparing for the first-ever Last Night to be conducted by a woman, Marin Alsop, an unholy row broke out. The Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko made a comment to a Norwegian newspaper suggesting that "a cute girl on a podium means that musicians think about other things". Never mind that plenty of women and gay men in orchestras seem perfectly happy to play for attractive male conductors. Or that some have been quipping: "What? He thinks we look at the conductor?"

Petrenko's remark set off the now depressingly usual mass hysteria, "moral outrage" and calls for resignation. This helps nothing. Throwing mud at one person – whose remarks were taken out of context and who is actually married to a female conductor – misses the real point. This was a small symptom of an enormous and endemic issue: namely, that it is still ridiculously difficult for women conductors to achieve prominent recognition.

Marin Alsop is a fine musician (and definitely not a "cute girl"), but she is far from being the only woman conductor in the world. Nor was she the only one at this year's Proms, since the excellent Xian Zhang was here conducting the Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi. Why is it still only Alsop's name that is widely known?

Following the Petrenko fuss, I began to tweet the names of women conductors and links to their websites. The Twitterverse sprang into action. So many suggestions fluttered in that I collated them all on my blog, JDCMB, in a post entitled Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman Conductor, updating it regularly. Twenty-four hours and thousands of hits later, the list held 85 names and the number is still rising. As one responding tweet pointed out, that's more than enough for a whole Proms season.

Quite a few women are conductors, then – but there is one heck of a glass ceiling for them to break through. As in the boardroom, so on the podium: these musical equivalents of female city executives face essentially the same situation. They are present. Some run extremely good orchestras. Yet they don't get the very top jobs.

Some commentators have blamed critics for not providing enough coverage of women conductors' performances. But when women conduct in the best concert halls and opera houses, they are certainly reviewed. Zhang was profiled in the national press before her Prom; and at English National Opera soon the young South Korean Eun Sun Kim will conduct a new production of *Die Fledermaus* and the critics will be there. The fact is that

the "big gigs" tend to be prioritised, and women conductors do not get the big gigs often enough. The situation is even worse when it comes to recordings.

My list is international and contains plenty musicians of note. JoAnn Falletta is music director of the Ulster Orchestra; Susanna Mälkki heads the Gulbenkian Orchestra in Portugal; Simone Young was until recently music director at the Hamburg Opera. The name of the young Australian-British conductor Jessica Cottis was tweeted to me more often than any other. Women conductors move and shake – in the artistic sense – as choral conductors and facilitators, notably the indefatigable Suzi Digby, founder of Vocal Futures. Young talent is rising through competitions, assistant-conductorships and international courses. Zoi Tsokanou from Greece made a fine impression in Bernard Haitink's conducting masterclass in Lucerne and was in the Gustav Mahler Conducting Competition this year. But where do they go from here?

Prejudiced attitudes against women conductors remain deeply ingrained. Every part of the classical music industry has to take some of the blame, from powerhouse orchestras and record companies down to the music colleges, where some successful women conductors say they had found themselves being actively discouraged on gender grounds. Classic FM's website revealed the existing degree of misogyny when a post in the comments boxes on a piece questioning equality in classical music declared: "Women simply do not feel or understand the subtleties of music as much as men."

Anyone who believes that female conductors can't be of adequate standard should reflect that many men – sometimes celebrated ones – are actually rubbish, but win world-class posts anyway. Without naming names, I've heard about a maestro who allegedly conducts Wagner's operas without knowing the words, another who was bounced into a top spot because nobody else was available, several who bully their players and soloists, and innumerable others who are crashing bores whom I wouldn't cross town to hear. Ironically, Petrenko is terrific. Most orchestral musicians do not care if the person on the podium is male, female, gay, straight, a cute girl or an elder statesman, provided he or she is a good conductor.

It would be silly to suggest that things haven't changed. They have. An equivalent list to mine 40 years ago would have been considerably shorter. But there is an awful lot further to go. Meanwhile, managers could follow some of the conductors' web links and book them.