Abstract

In modern symphony orchestra concerts, the audience can appreciate the intermingling of both male and female musicians on stage, but this familiar sight fails to register the many years of change that allowed these groups to perform as one entity. Mixed-gender ensembles were not always a reality. Taking a step back, we must still ask, why are there fewer female concert masters, principals, and conductors? The answers can be traced back to the strong patriarchal traditions of symphony orchestras. My research gathers details on the precedents that paved the way for future generations to embrace the idea of mixed-gender ensembles, and that opened the doors for women to hold positions in orchestras. I create a historical narrative of the progression in roles women held as professional musicians, tracing the number and type of ensemble opportunities that become available to women, as well as the catalyst for these openings. I show how World War II, women’s suffrage, and feminist movements helped push forward the opportunities for women musicians and allowed American society to grow more comfortable with mixed-gender orchestras.
Symphonic Metamorphosis: The Evolution of Women’s Roles in American Orchestras, from the late Nineteenth Century to the Present

Society’s acceptance of female musicians into largely male-dominated symphony orchestras has improved only within the past century. This “battle of the sexes” and tentativeness for even more progress can be traced to many deep-seated roots in our own antiquated social views. Though the contributions of women to symphony orchestras have proven instrumental to attaining extraordinary artistic standards, there is still a long way to go before we reach a truly balanced ecosystem on stage.

In early Western societies, women were lovingly viewed as a source of life; however, they were also seen as intellectually inferior to men and as a major source of temptation and evil. Society has long regarded women to be naturally weaker, relegating all the strenuous and mentally taxing work to men, while women performed their natural role as home-maker and child-bearer. These myths became the dominant social constructs of our world.¹ Behaving outside of these accepted ways was looked down on. These expectations were based on European conceptions of women’s physical and mental capacities, as made evident, for example, by sixteenth-century theologian Martin Luther’s statement: "Women should stay at home; the way they were created indicates this, for they have broad hips and a wide fundament to sit upon."² This statement proved to be the prevalent perspective on women’s place in society for the next four centuries.

Women’s social struggles were paralleled in their musical lives, as illustrated for example, in two different magazines from the middle of the twentieth century—nearly four hundred years after Martin Luther’s assertion. Though these magazines are catering to specific

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female audiences, the overarching theme remains the same: women must, in all aspect of their lives, defer to their husbands no matter their level of ability and talent, in order to be happy and successful. In a 1955 *Housekeeping Monthly*, (see Figure 1) “The Good Wife’s Guide” recommends ways to keep a husband happy: “Touch up your make-up, put ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. His boring day may need a lift and one of your duties is to provide it. Catering for his comfort will provide you with immense personal satisfaction.” Even the rhetoric utilized betrays the era’s condescension and subjugation of women.\(^3\) In another magazine, a 1960 edition of *Woodwind World*, (See Figure 2) musician-wives were advised to “play for him on request only. Don’t take the chance of running it into the ground. Practise when he is at work. Play second fiddle to everything he prefers, but don’t give up completely. If you want to be happy, be a wife first and a musician second, not a sad musician first and a poor wife second.”\(^4\) Despite evidence supporting the fact that music was seen as a “feminine” field, and was a predominant part of a young lady’s education and etiquette training, professional application of their musical talents was not encouraged. Instead, their skills were utilized in home recitals, while public performance was seen as immodest and

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inappropriate.\textsuperscript{5} To illustrate sentiments towards women in music, specifically mixed-gender symphony orchestras, a 1996 West German State Radio interview with the Vienna Philharmonic, revolved around forbidding women and non-whites into the male-dominated orchestra. In fact, this organization and orchestra is infamous for remaining stubbornly conservative.\textsuperscript{6} To justify upholding a strictly patriarchal governance in the orchestra, Viennese sociologist Roland Girtler offered his perspective on hiring women: [Women] can bring the solidarity of the men into question . . . creating competition [and distracting them]. In a monastery, it is the same. The altar is a holy area, and the other gender may not enter it, because it would cause disorder.\textsuperscript{7}

Women have been historically seen as the minority, the weaker sex. As such, they have been subjugated, oppressed, and hushed throughout history, dissuaded from attaining their own success, dreams, and aspirations for the mere sake of literally and figuratively playing second fiddle to their male counterparts. But the efforts of the few yet determined show that people and the human spirit recognize the importance of what is right and wrong—seen in the continual pursuit for positive change in order to create a more just society. It is important to recognize this development because it reaffirms like in any aspect of life, people should have an equal opportunity to strive for their dreams and their aspirations.

To fully appreciate the efforts female musicians made in advancing women’s future in American symphony orchestras, it is important to set the time period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of the United States into context and to examine the traditional roles women held in society and in music since this time frame ushered in modernizations to women’s roles in

the American music scene. Most of what we know of women’s “proper” role in music during this time period can be found in the vast number of literature in etiquette manuals and educational material, including John Bennett’s *Letters to a Young Lady* and Lydia Sigourney’s *Letters to Young Ladies*. These sources show that, up to about 1850, women’s role in music was largely in the background, centered around religious contexts and the home. This is true of both American and European societies. Beginning in the 18th century, music was seen as a “feminine accomplishment”; in the 19th century, music became a large part of a young woman’s education, in which they were taught to sing and play—most common choices were harp, keyboard and other stringed instruments.

Two consequences resulted in this view that music was a feminine accomplishment: 1) greater emphasis was placed on music in the school curriculum for girls than for boys and 2) music was seen, in a broad sense, as a feminine field. Research conducted on the history of American music education has revealed that private academies held a key role in the early American music scene as employers to professional musicians, providing a thriving market for the dissemination of textbooks, and cultivating an audience for a variety of musical genres that included secular cantatas. Significantly, the first ever American music conservatory was specifically for women and was called the Music Vale Academy, founded in 1835. Though women were not trained for the pursuit of professional musical activities, their large amateur presence was so influential in social circles—in which music played an important part—that music essentially became the authority and domain of women. Notable female amateur musicians during this time period included Eleanor Curtis Parke (George Washington’s

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stepdaughter) Martha Jefferson and her two daughters Martha and Maria. More prominent professional female musicians were largely English singers who emigrated to the United States to establish a career. This included women such as Mary Ann Pownall, Dolly Broadhurst, Georgina Oldmixton, Sophia Hewitt Ostinelli, and Elizabeth von Hagen, who was a member of a prominent family of professional musicians as discussed in Oscar George Theodore Sonneck’s *Early Concert Life in America (1731-1800).*

During Antebellum America, the view that music was a feminine accomplishment was declining, in favor of the term “piano girl,” as introduced by music critic James Huneker, began to proliferate. Susan Petigru King’s *Lily: A Novel* (1855), provides a prime example and definition of a typical piano girl:

> Three hours a day her fresh, young voice, or her pretty, graceful touch was heard at the piano. She was no great musician, but she had taste, if not execution; sang with sweetness and correctness, though her notes were few, and was, in short, one of those unpretending performers to whom one can listen without an hour’s praying and prelude.

The rhetoric used in this passage carries a subdued air of condescension. Further, we can gather characteristics of the archetypal piano girl. Deductively, the young female is of a comfortable income, as she has free time to practice for three hours instead of chores or work. The line that says she is “no great musician” suggests that she is not at all a professional, rather a mere amateur. And paradoxically, although she practices three hours a day—which seems in excess to the “proper” time to dedicate to a simple social skill—she can play music with only a touch of culture and “taste.” In addition, she can sing sweetly, granted within a limited range and scale, and she is humble, in every sense of the word. In short, she is an ideal woman given her accomplishment in learning music as a social skill, but also not talented enough to be overly

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ambitious, which makes her perfect husband material. However, as demonstrated in American pianist Amy Fay’s personal account, *Music Study in Germany* (1880)—which relays the experience of being an aspiring musician and studying abroad—the era of the “new woman” emerged.

Unlike a meek woman who learns music to impress a suitor, the “new woman” was any young lady who was serious in her studies and in the pursuit of a professional music career. What was once seen as a mere accomplishment became relegated into a number of different paths in the music job market. One of the most popular areas of music for women to occupy was teaching. Between 1870-1910, the number of women in the career category “music and music teaching”—as created by the US Bureau of the Census to delineate music professions—increased and the proportion of women in music soared from 36% to 60%. Additionally, women began to take on roles as patrons with a cultural responsibility in promoting and cultivating music in society. In the Centennial Congress of 1876, Fanny Raymond Ritter delivered a speech in front of the Association for the Advancement of Women called, “Women in Music.” The description she offers for women’s role in music thrived for the subsequent fifty years: “The role of the genuine unpretending amateur, the assistant, the befriender of artists, is especially fitted to the cultivated woman. . . . With lady amateurs then will chiefly rest the happy task of preparing . . . the soil which must foster the young genius of future American art.”

Amateur female musicians took charge of forming music libraries, curating instrument collections, taking advantage of their money and social status to host music salons from their

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own homes in which professionals, amateurs, and music connoisseurs alike mingled, exchanged ideas, and performed, and lastly, supporting and sustaining the efforts of “gifted women-artists, compelled by sacred duty or sublime adversity, to make a public display of their talents.”

Prominent women who took on these roles founded conservatories, women’s colleges and music clubs. In 1867, Clara Baur, founded the Cincinnati Conservatory. In 1885, Jeannette Meyers Thurber, established the National Conservatory in New York. In 1917, Ada Clement and Lillian Hodgehead, founded the San Francisco Conservatory.

One of music clubs founded in 1898 was the National Federation of Women’s Music Clubs, founded by Florence Sutro.

Increased funding for these establishments gave women access to higher education and skills suited for a professional job climate of the second half of the 19th century. Additionally, this era saw a rise in musical theatre which presented women with an abundance of opportunities in acting, singing, dancing on stage for ballets and productions.

Though fewer in number, society began to accept women on the concert stage, performing as virtuoso instrumentalists. Examples of such women include Camilla Urso and Maud Powell—both of whom held international fame as talented violinists and outspoken champions of equal opportunities for female musicians. Urso was the first woman to be accepted into the prestigious Paris Conservatory, and in Edith Lynwood Winn’s *The Child Violinist* (1908), Urso is widely credited with doing “more in America to cause girls to enter the field of violin playing than anyone else has done.”

In 1904, Maud Powell became the first solo

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16 Ibid. 14.
instrumentalist to record for Victor Company’s Celebrity Artist Series (Red Seal Label), and was an internationally touring performer. Women’s chamber music and orchestral ensembles included the Fadette Ladies’ Orchestra of Boston (1888), the Eichberg Ladies’ String Quartet, and the Women’s String Orchestra of New York (1896).

Well into the twentieth century, the feminist movement emerged as many began to consider the unjust standards women were forced to comply with. It was in this movement that aspects of women’s lives such as political rights, stereotypes, and opportunities for education and jobs came under scrutiny, and later, in 1920, American women’s suffrage was granted with the approval of the 19th Amendment. The debate over women’s intrinsic potential for the arts and music began in 1880 with George P. Upton’s fierce articulation of biological determinism in his book *Woman in Music*. He quotes and consults with famous musicians and music authorities such as Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and Mozart to support his thesis. It is worth mentioning that it was also during this time that female composers were proving their abilities to compose serious and symphonic works through actions and achievements. In 1893, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the first woman composer to have a symphony performed by an American orchestra was Amy Marcy Beach and her *Gaelic Symphony, Op. 32*.

Additionally, the changes in the music scene were correlated to the upheavals of two World Wars and the Great Depressions. It was in this era that society was emerging out of Victorian morality into more modern ideals of gender equality. Women continued in their efforts to make music one of their thriving professional options. A certain type of “professional

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segregation” and the pursuit of solo careers as instrumentalists were both common themes of this time. According to R.C. Blitz’s Women in the Professions, 1870–1970, in Monthly Labor Review, the percentage of women in “music and music teaching” in the first half of the century increased; however, the upward trend that occurred earlier, began to dwindle from 1910 to 1940. Despite this, women active in the music industry was at 41%—the highest statistic compared to all the other professions which ranged from 12 to 14%.26 Between 1940 and 1950, the number of women in music and music teaching continued to decline, but the proportion of women to men is increased. This may be credited to men seeking more lucrative professions in the business and technical areas of the job market, thus decreasing the competition for more women to enter the field. Additionally, music education played a huge factor in women in professional music opportunities. As aforementioned, thanks to the wider access to higher education, women received more validated training and education for pursuit of professional music careers. No longer were musicians on a freelance basis as advanced degrees were achievable and compensated jobs became the norm.

In professional orchestra settings, men still dominated the workforce. The majority of women accepted were harpists, as the harp was seen as inherently feminine due to its ethereal sound qualities.27 So, “professional or occupational” segregation as illustrated by the introduction of all-female orchestras and ensembles, was a consequence of unfulfilled supply and demand. As more and more women received professional music training from conservatories and were entering the job market, there were more demands for jobs; however, discrimination against women instrumentalists was highly prevalent, and prevented them from easily finding

work. Thus, the phenomenon known as all-female ensembles was formed to address the demands for jobs with a growing population of musicians, and they became a significant force in the music world between about 1925 to 1945. Establishing women-exclusive orchestras called for the women to be socially outspoken and to have economic influence. This undertaking of organizing and being independent reflects the ideals of feminism. These all-women orchestras encompassed women of a wide variety of ages, social status, and races, as discussed in flutist, and historian Antoinette Handy’s discourse, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras*. The overall trend of these ensembles was: “Membership was open to instrumentalists, composers, and conductors, without regard to race, creed, or color.” About 30 women’s orchestras flourished in cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, with trailblazing women such as Antonia Brico, Ebba Sundstrom, and Ethel Leginska partnering with and conducting for them as a means for work. In 1938, Frédérique Petrides, a conductor and the founder of the journal *Women in Music* claimed that there were 522 women playing in the eight major women’s orchestras. In terms of solo instrumentalist careers, some of the forward momentum gained during the turn of the century stagnated, and only a few virtuosic performers equaled the international fame of musicians such as Urso or Powell. Some of these women were violinist Erica Morini, harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, and pianists Olga Samaroff, Ruth Slenczynska, and Rosalyn Tureck.

The sentiments and institutional policies of adopting “mixed” orchestras shifted in a positive direction as America faced the social and economic consequences of World War II. Many symphony orchestras were losing funding and the number of male musicians diminished as they were drafted or found other means of employment. By 1945, according to the American

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Symphony Orchestra League, many orchestras had begun to welcome women into their ranks. Most of the major orchestras, including those of Boston and Chicago, hired their first female musicians; the percentage of women increased from two to eight percent between 1942. By 1948, though it directly affected a few individuals, groundbreaking precedents were set. The percentage of women in music professions was once again on the rise. For example, 1950 started with 50.7% and rose to 57.1% by 1960. Although the job market for the music field was declining in relation to other occupations, music was still one of the five leading professions for women. As women’s orchestras declined substantially after the war, symphony orchestras slowly but surely became integrated. Female employment in the major symphony orchestras increased from 8% in 1947 to 26.3% in 1982, exhibiting significant growth between 1947 and 1955 and from 1970 to the mid-1980s. With the exception of the New York PO—which only began accepting women in 1966—major orchestras became integrated by 1945.

The first of these women to become a full-time, permanent member of a major American orchestra was cellist Elsa Hilger. She was born on April 13, 1904 in Czechoslovakia and trained in the prestigious Vienna Conservatory, where she and her sisters impressed their professors. Their performances around Europe and Hilger’s solos with the Vienna Philharmonic gained them praise as prodigies. Along with her two sisters, brother, and mother, Hilger came to America in 1919. Her mother rejected an offer of $1,000 a week for the siblings to make appearances in variety shows, insisting their coming to America was to showcase their talents in more fitting venues. Sure enough, within their first year in America, the family toured the country, performing concerts in top venues such as Madison Square Garden and Aeolian Hall. In 1935, an opening in the cello section of the Philadelphia Orchestra came up, and conductor Leopold

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30 Ibid.
Stokowski—knowing of her abilities—invited Hilger to audition. She was hired, and for the next thirty-five years she performed as soloist and orchestral musician, touring with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Beginning her career as last chair in the cello section, it took her ten years to move up to second chair, graduating much later to associate principal. Stokowski’s successor Eugene Ormandy expressed that if it were up to him, he would have hired Hilger as Principal long ago: “Elsa, I wish your pants were longer. I’d put you in first chair.”31 In 1941, French horn player of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Helen Kotas became the first ever woman to hold the Principal chair in a major orchestra under recommendation. She held the position from until 1947, when former French horn principal Philip Farkas returned and reclaimed the chair. Conductor Arthur Rodzinski found a loophole in Kotas’ contract that demoted her down the section.32 Finally, in 1952, flutist Doriot Anthony Dwyer became the first-ever woman to win the Principal chair in a major orchestra. She played flute with the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1952 to 1990. Dwyer enjoyed a long, successful career as a soloist, orchestral musician, and teacher.33 Even more progressive changes of the twentieth century resulted from the approval of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which further provided women equality of opportunity and innovative employment practices.

American symphony orchestra personnel were previously hand-picked by the conductor or music director, despite the formality and pretense of an audition. In addition, top candidates were the male students of choice teachers. In efforts to overcome these biases, most major American orchestras revised audition policies in the 1970s and 1980s to make them more open. This resulted in changes that took several forms. First, open orchestra positions were widely

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advertised in union papers, which made auditions more widely accessible to women. Second, the audition committee—which was once composed of only men—was reconstructed to include orchestra members, thus mirroring the democratization that other American institutions embraced. There was one more issue to resolve: candidates were still being chosen based on favorites due to the committees’ ability to see the musicians and read their résumés. So, another set of procedures was undertaken to ensure more impartiality. This is what we now know as the “blind” audition, which puts a screen between the musician and the committee, making the identity of the musician completely anonymous and preventing judgment based on sex, race, or age.34

As a result, women are able to compete with men on a level playing field. Extensive studies of audition and roster data conducted by economists Claudia Goldin and Cecelia Rouse indicate that blind audition processes “increases—by 50%—the probability that a woman will be advanced from certain preliminary rounds and increases several-fold the likelihood that a woman will be selected in the final round.”35 Furthermore, the studies show that since the adoption of blind audition practices, American symphony orchestras exhibited a 25% increase in women musicians hired, between 1970 and 1996.36 Prior to 1980, the “Big Five” American Orchestras: Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, and Philadelphia, employed a measly 12% or less women; however, with the blind auditions policy in practice, the proportions rose. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra, for example, saw the number of women musicians rise to 35% in the 1990s. In addition, working conditions improved with Congress’ approval of the 1978 Pregnancy Discrimination Act. This compelled orchestras to eliminate such clauses that would

35 Goldin and Rouse, 738.
36 Ibid, 716.
void a woman’s contract if she became pregnant.  

The statistics of women in music have risen an impressive amount; however, recent gender representations in the top twenty American orchestras—as studied by composer Suby Raman (See Figure 3)—reveals there is still a disproportionate distribution of male and female musicians, and room for progress remains. Going section by section within these orchestras proves that the higher paid jobs and leadership positions are in the hands of male musicians. On average, male musicians dominate the stage by an overwhelming 63% to 37% women (See Figure 3). There is currently only one exception to the elite male-dominated orchestra model, and that is the St. Louis Symphony.

Although that the role of women in classical music has evolved into one of more equality

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in the past couple of centuries, there remains much room for improvement. The increased number of women hired, thanks to these improvements, debunks the long-held yet antiquated belief that women are inferior to men as musicians. With continued efforts, society will continue to unlearn these antiquated gender constructs in order to truly eliminate discrimination in our classical music industry. Then and only then will both male and female musicians be able to truly create a diverse, robust, and equal workplace where music can flourish and all of humanity’s need to express its soul through this art form can be fulfilled.
Bibliography


