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Breaking the Glass Ceiling: How Women are Succeeding while Being Undervalued in the Professional Orchestral World

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BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING:
HOW WOMEN ARE SUCCEEDING WHILE BEING UNDERVALUED IN THE
PROFESSIONAL ORCHESTRAL WORLD

by

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TITLE: BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING: HOW WOMEN ARE SUCCEEDING WHILE BEING UNDERVALUED IN THE PROFESSIONAL ORCHESTRAL WORLD

CLASS PROFESSOR: Dr. Douglas Worthen

The symphony has been largely male dominated for centuries. Women had been discouraged from playing music and essentially had to create a place for themselves in the professional orchestral world. They faced gender discrimination and harassment along their struggle to be accepted. Now that women are more represented, they still have to face harassment and a discrepancy in salary.

It can be argued that the discrimination against women is still prevalent, but they have made great strides and found success in this male-dominated profession. This paper intends to investigate specifically the role of women musicians in the western music orchestral world, their reception and whether professional struggles persist.

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BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Gender discrimination has a long history in the professional musical world. Performance was a man's craft for centuries. The culture has changed greatly to be more accepting of women in music, and they continue to achieve equal footing in the modern orchestra. The general condition of the orchestra's environment is reflective of the societal norms, which have evolved immensely.¹ To understand the role of women in today's orchestra, the historical changes that have paved the way cannot be ignored. Women have struggled to be taken seriously in what is largely still considered a male-dominated world. This brings a few questions that can be asked of the current state of the symphony: can women be fairly represented in modern orchestras and are women being compensated the same as they would were they men?

The attitude towards women of the current symphony is the result of a gradual change in societal norms that accepted women playing musical instruments. It was not socially acceptable for women to pursue music as a career in any fashion until the mid-nineteenth century. Historically, music was an essential part of the education of upper-class women, but they were not expected to play in public. When parlor music became popular in the 1800s, the middle class began to expand the possibilities for music performance.²

Parlor music was primarily mass-produced piano music and song. This mass production, along with the rise of the middle class gave people access to music that would otherwise only be privy to royalty and the upper class. During this surge in popularity, women largely kept to singing and were generally viewed as inferior instrumentalists, a sentiment that persisted well

¹ Sally Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002,) 11.

² Walter Frisch, *Music in the Nineteenth Century: Western Music in Context*, W.W. Norton and Company, 2013, 96-99.

into the twenty-first century.

One of the questions that could be asked of a musician is does gender matter? Women were thought to be inferior to men in many crafts simply because of their gender. Music being one of those crafts meant that there were strong opinions on whether women should be pursuing music as a career. For instance, this quote was accepted and published in the *Musical Standard* journal April issue of 1904:

Nature never intended the fair sex to become cornetists, trombonists, and players of wind instruments. In the first place, they are not strong enough to play them as well as men; they lack the lip and lung power to hold notes which deficiency makes them always play out of tune...Another point against them is that women cannot possibly play brass instruments and look pretty, and why should they spoil their good looks?³

Women were openly disparaged for pursuing a wind instrument because it was not considered a feminine craft. They were dismissed as being too dainty to be capable of playing a wind instrument, especially at the standard that a man would be able to play. Women being seen as merely a visual appeal, a female musician pursuing a professional career would be *absurd*.

Women were not employed by symphonies because of this view that women did not have the physical prowess to play an instrument at the level of male musicians.⁴ Due to this barrier, women had to create their own opportunities, and this prompted the emergence of all-female orchestras. Although they were not taken seriously by the public and viewed as novelties, by the 1930's, nearly every large city had an all-female orchestra and the discrimination against women

³ Gustave Kerker, "Opinions of Some New York Leaders on Women as Orchestral Players," *Musical Standard*, Vol. 21 (April 1904): 21.

⁴ Shelley M Jagow, "Women Orchestral Conductors in America: The Struggle for Acceptance—An Historical View from the Nineteenth Century to the Present," *College Music Symposium* 38. (1998): 126-45.

musicians somewhat declined.⁵ Smaller orchestras began to employ women. A smaller orchestra meant a smaller budget and the affordability of women musicians meant more women in the orchestra.

As women were being accepted into larger orchestras, their pay was abysmal compared to their male counterparts.⁶ Even after mixed orchestras were formed in the 1940s, few women were admitted into America's top orchestras until blind auditions became more common in the late 1960s. Blind auditions are a process in which the committee judging the auditions are separated by a screen from the musicians auditioning. This would mean that the musician's audition would depend on the full merit of the way they played. Unfortunately, this did not prevent gender discrimination beyond the blind auditions.⁷ In addition to the prevalence of discrimination in the hiring process, women that were hired faced harassment in many Western orchestras.

Abbie Conant is a world-renowned American trombonist. During screened auditions in 1981 for the Munich Philharmonic she outplayed her male counterparts, slotting first choice for the seat. However, they showed favoritism to the men and overlooked her in face-to-face auditions. Her ability could not be denied for long, and she eventually won back the spot of

⁵ Linda Dempf, "The Woman's Symphony Orchestra of Chicago," *Notes* 62, no. 4 (2006): 857-859.

⁶ Amy Louise Phelps, "Beyond Auditions: Gender Discrimination in America's Top Orchestras," DMA diss., University of Iowa, 2010: 7.

⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

principal trombone.⁸ She was then alienated from colleagues and not paid the proper wage of a principal player. The Munich Philharmonic responded to the hostilities of her colleagues by moving her down to second trombone and removing her title of principal. Conant filed a lawsuit against the orchestra.⁹ It took her several years of pushback and continued hostility, but the orchestra eventually settled back pay and reinstated Conant her principal chair. Despite succeeding in winning back her position, she did not stay long, as she felt unwelcome and moved into the private sphere of performance.¹⁰

Marie Speziale was the first woman to win a chair in the trumpet section of a major US symphony, the Cincinnati Symphony, at a time of great gender bias. Prior to this she auditioned for the St. Louis Symphony in 1962 and was told she would not be heard, solely because of her gender. Later in 1969 under a different conductor, the St. Louis Symphony hired Susan Slaughter who became the first woman to hold the position of principal trumpet in a major US orchestra.¹¹ Currently, St Louis is the only large US symphony with more women than men in the orchestra.¹² While the view of women in orchestras has been slow to evolve in many major

⁸ Abbie Conant, "The Status of Women in German Orchestras: A Report Based on Practical Experience," *VivaVoce* 48. 1998, accessed March 18, 2019. <http://www.osborne-conant.org/status.htm>.

⁹ Amy Louise Phelps, "Beyond Auditions: Gender Discrimination in America's Top Orchestras," 9.

¹⁰ Abbie Conant, "The Status of Women in German Orchestras: A Report Based on Practical Experience."

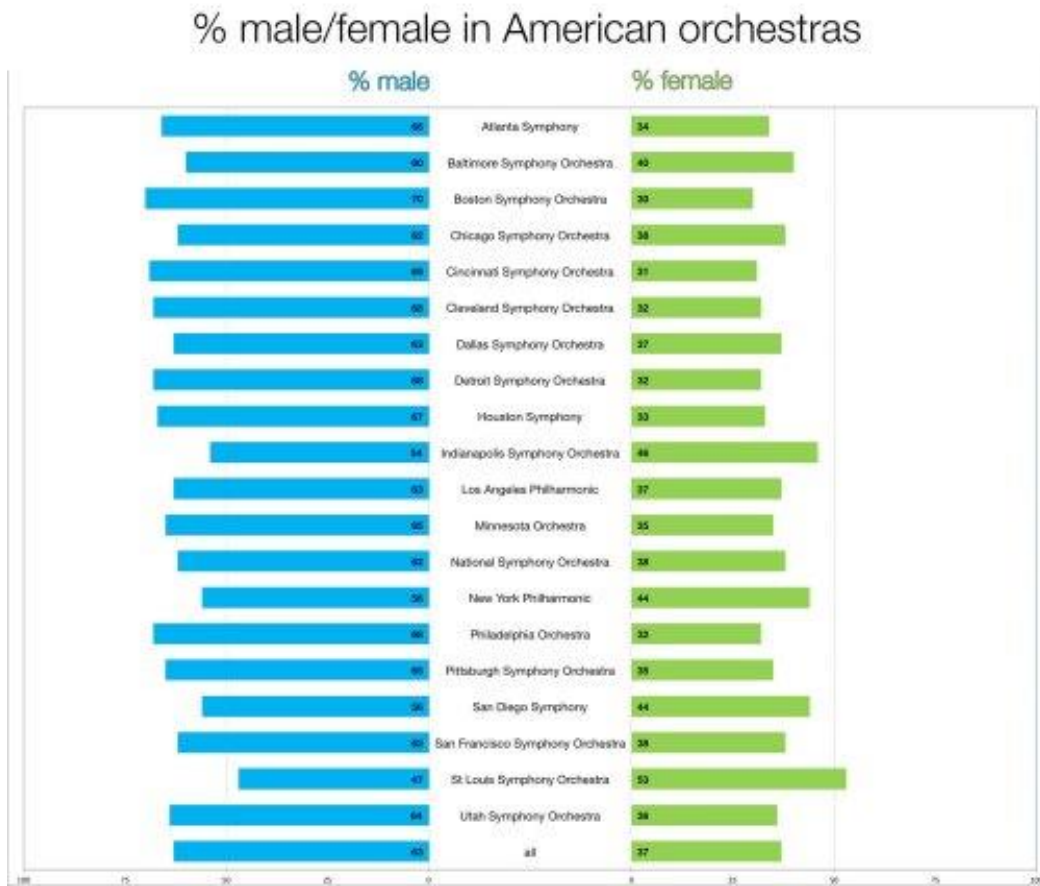
¹¹ Leslie Ellen Aboud, "Playing like a girl: An analysis of the role of gender in trumpet performance" (Honors Program Theses, University of Northern Iowa, 2010), 5-6, <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/hpt/28>.

¹² Suby Raman, "Graphing Gender in America's Top Orchestras" *Suby Raman* (blog). <https://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088>.

orchestras, these women and organizations set the groundwork for inclusion.

While women have progressed over the years, have they found fair representation in today’s orchestra? In 2014, Composer and blogger Suby Raman investigated the gender representation of America’s top 20 orchestras. On average, American orchestras are made up of 63% men, and 37% women.¹³ Only one of the orchestras had more female than male musicians; the St Louis Symphony.

Figure 1. Percentages of males and females in American orchestras¹⁴



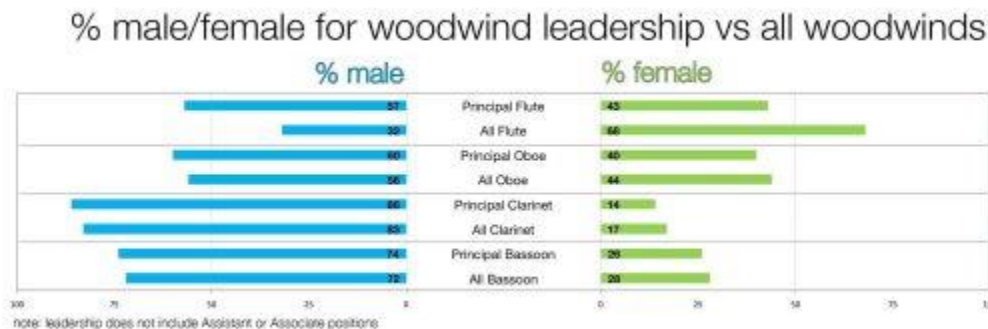
¹³ Suby Raman, “Graphing Gender in America’s Top Orchestras” *Suby Raman* (blog). <https://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Figure 1 shows great improvement with the inclusion of women in the orchestral world based on the percentages of women present in current American major symphony orchestras. Now that women are being more represented as players, are they being fairly compensated today as well? There have been countless instances of women players being underpaid as they were making a place for themselves as professional musicians.

More recently, Elizabeth Rowe, the principal flute player of the Boston Symphony Orchestra filed a lawsuit against the orchestra for not receiving a wage that other principal players were receiving. She argued that in 2017, she received “roughly three-quarters” of the wage the principal oboist received for “comparable work.”¹⁵ She claimed to have also received less than the other principal players who were all male. It should be noted that men hold about 90% of all principal positions, even in situations when the section will primarily consist of female plays, such as a flute section. This is reflected in figures 2 and 3.

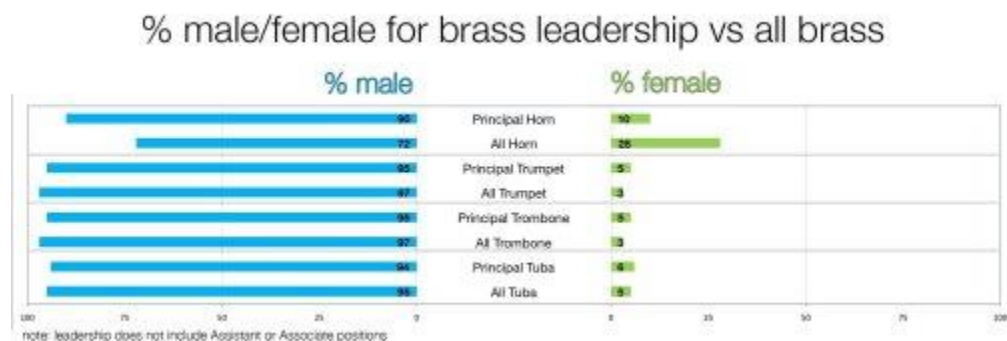
Figure 2. Percentages of male and female woodwind principal positions¹⁶



¹⁵ Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Top Flutist Settles Gender Pay-Gap Suit With Boston Symphony Orchestra,” National Public Radio, Inc. February 2019, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/21/696574690>.

¹⁶ Suby Raman, “Graphing Gender in America’s Top Orchestras” *Suby Raman* (blog). <https://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088>.

Figure 3. Percentages of male and female brass principal positions¹⁷



The starting salary for a musician in the Boston Symphony Orchestra is around \$132,000.¹⁸ This does not account for principal wages, demands and expectations as a principal player. Each male principal wind player of the symphony received between \$255,000 and \$290,000 while Rowe’s pay remained roughly around \$200,000. She sought approximately three years of unpaid wages. The Boston Symphony Orchestra settled the suit, and both Rowe and the Orchestra were satisfied with the settlement.¹⁹ Perhaps the current situation of wage is not due to gender discrimination, but the legal process makes it difficult to get the information for an evaluation of gender discrimination.

There certainly is compelling evidence that the wage gap exists in the orchestral world, much like in other professions. A recent analysis by the Pew Research Center found that nationally, women in the workforce earned 85 percent of what their male colleagues earned in

¹⁷ Suby Raman, “Graphing Gender in America’s Top Orchestras” *Suby Raman* (blog). <https://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088>.

¹⁸ Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Top Flutist Settles Gender Pay-Gap Suit With Boston Symphony Orchestra,” National Public Radio, Inc. February 2019, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/21/696574690>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

2018. The pay gap has narrowed substantially since the 1980s but has been relatively static within the past 15 years.²⁰ Some states are seeking to remedy the gender pay gap. A law signed in 2016, in Massachusetts will prevent employers from asking job candidates about their current salaries, which for women may perpetuate pay imbalances. Under the new law, employers also cannot prohibit workers from discussing their salaries.²¹ This would allow transparency of salaries and give women a chance to achieve a fair wage.

Steps are being taken to ensure more female representation and wage equality in the orchestral world. What other means could be taken to further the goal of gender equality in the orchestral world? A well-rounded education for both boys and girls on musical instruments. Females were not accepted in conservatories until the late-nineteenth century, and their choice of musical instruments were very limited.²²

Narrow instrument choices persisted in modern early education. This flawed idea that certain instruments should be played by a particular gender reduces musical options for both boys and girls while also fostering sexism. In two different studies conducted from 1978, including both music majors and non-majors, researchers found that the students established a general scale, gendering instruments. These studies revealed that flute, and clarinet were

²⁰ Nikki Graff, "The Narrowing, but Persistent, Gender Gap in Pay," Pew Research Center, March 22, 2019, accessed April 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/22/gender-pay-gap-facts>.

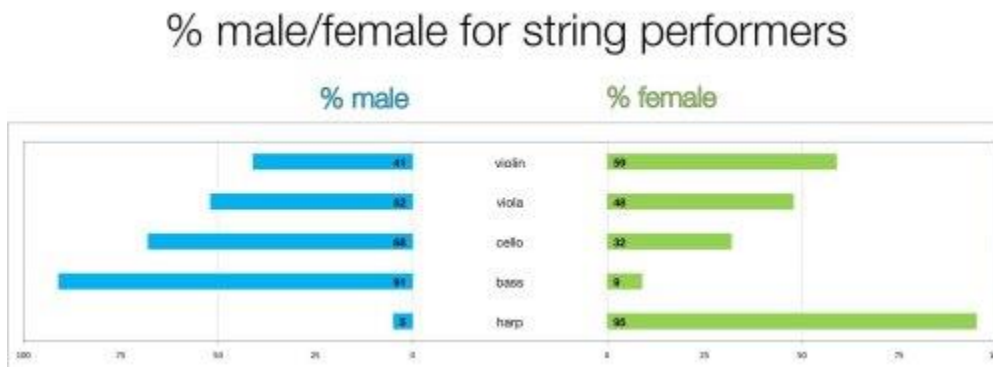
²¹ Stacy Cowley, "Illegal in Massachusetts: Asking Your Salary in a Job Interview," New York Times, August 2016, accessed April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/business/dealbook/wage-gap-massachusetts-law-salary-history.html>.

²² Amy Louise Phelps, "Beyond Auditions: Gender Discrimination in America's Top Orchestras," 5.

considered feminine while brass, percussion and saxophone were viewed as masculine.²³ They are rarely given models of musicians playing instruments viewed as opposite their own gender. This can pressure any student from picking an instrument they want to learn for one “better suited” for them.

When a girl chooses her first instrument, she is likely to avoid what is considered a “boy’s” instrument, and vice versa. This is perpetuated by both the instructor believing in the preconceived notion of instruments as well as the peers acceptance based on this established expectation. Furthermore, this means there are less instruments that girls are encouraged to choose from than the boys. This correlates with the representations of instruments in a professional orchestra, as shown in figures 4-6.

Figure 4. Percentages of male and female string performers²⁴



²³ Harold F. Abeles, and Susan Yank Porter, "The Sex-Stereotyping of Musical Instruments," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 26, no. 2 (1978): 67-68.

²⁴ Suby Raman, "Graphing Gender in America's Top Orchestras" *Suby Raman* (blog). <https://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088>.

Figure 5. Percentages of male and female woodwind performers²⁵

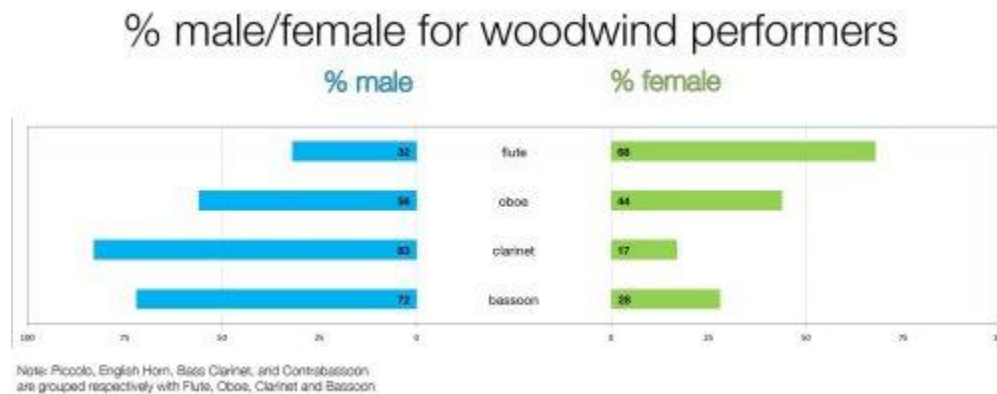
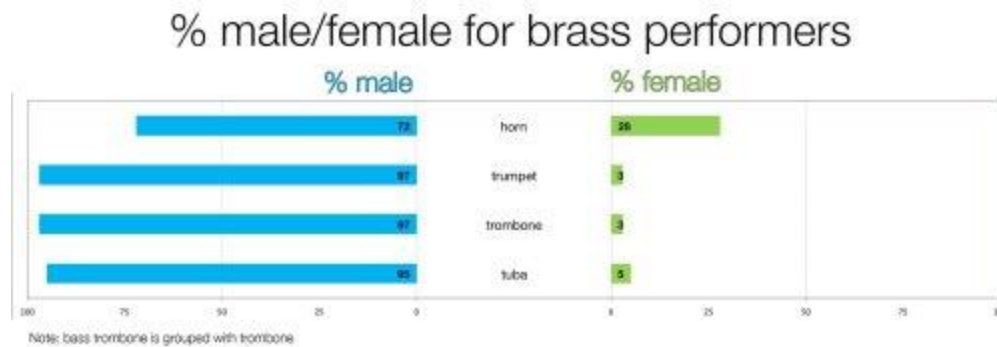


Figure 6. Percentages of male and female brass performers²⁶



The only female-dominated wind instrument is the flute, which was gendered as a feminine instrument in the studies. Interestingly, clarinet was viewed as a feminine instrument but is the most male-dominated of the woodwind instruments. The more masculine instruments are primarily played by men in the orchestra. The primitive gendering of instruments should be avoided completely in education to diminish the idea that any one person cannot play an instrument based on their gender.

²⁵ Suby Raman, “Graphing Gender in America’s Top Orchestras” *Suby Raman* (blog). <https://subyraman.tumblr.com/post/102965074088>.

²⁶ Ibid.

Women like Abbie Conant, Marie Speziale, and Susan Slaughter have shown that women can indeed play a “man’s” instrument at the same standard and have found great success. Elizabeth Rowe is very successful and still had to fight for equal pay to reflect that success the same as it would a successful male principal player. Women are finding success in the orchestral world, despite the extra hurdles in the way. Until there is clear gender equality, women will have to work harder than men to be taken seriously. Susan Slaughter once said, “I tell my female students they can’t be ‘as good as’ anybody else; they have to be better.” She makes a good example of what a woman can do with a wind instrument. Role models like Slaughter can help encourage the future female musicians to lead the way to actualized gender equality in the orchestra.

There are a few ways that women will continue to find success in the orchestral world. The hiring process needs critical review to ensure that women are treated the same as men at any point of the auditions. The pay should reflect the position and expectations of that position regardless of the gender of the musician. Early music education needs to encourage all students to play any instrument that interests them while discouraging any external influence from other students or educators with preconceived notions of gender-assigned instruments. The representation of women in curriculum and performance can give young female musicians and audience members role models. Women musicians are successful. There is still a lot that can be done to ensure that women can obtain these levels of success at the rate as men.

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