

# WOMEN OF COLOR IN THE CONDUCTING PROFESSION: WHERE ARE THEY?

By Ronnie Wooten

Women have always faced obstacles in certain professions that have historically been dominated by their male counterparts. As one considers professions such as physician, professor, scientist, mathematician, and others where women are still often considered “underrepresented,” the picture for women of color (in spite of some improvements over the years) remains quite dismal, particularly when one adds the socially constructed concept of “race” to the mix. Another field where this is unfortunately quite evident is music. People often refer to music as “the universal language,” which is very seldom a practiced reality. Music is probably “universal” in the sense that it is found in every known culture on earth; however, if it were truly universal, then all types of music would be instantly understood, acknowledged, and appreciated by whoever hears it—no matter their musical or cultural background. It is both interesting and ironic that something that is considered “universal” has historically excluded women (with the exception of certain stereotypically defined roles) and more specifically women of color. This paper will highlight one of the most elusive and exclusive professions as it relates to women of color—maestro, conductor, music director, or leader.

## The Reality of Being a Black Female Conductor

Noted musician Antoinette Handy, in her book *Black Conductors*, states the following about Black female conductors: Perhaps such [discussion of black women conductors] was not an oversight, since no black woman was leading an “established” ensemble on a regular basis, and none had been championed by any of the nation’s leading music critics or managers . . . Finally the extent to orchestra members, managers, boards, and audiences are today gender-blind remains a matter of speculation. The extent to which these same groups are color-blind is also a matter of speculation.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of a documented (though limited) history of success in the conducting profession, women of color might be viewed as “the invisible woman/women,” with appropriate acknowledgements to Ralph Ellison.

Beginning in the late 1980s, a few American magazines and newspapers began to publish articles about women in the conducting profession. The titles alone serve to verify the variety of challenges that all women face in such a White-male-dominated profession. Titles include: “Female Conductors Win New Batons” (*Richmond Times Dispatch*), “A Female First for the Philadelphia Orchestra” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), “Female Associate Wields Baton for Discovery” (*Dallas Times Herald*), and “The Opening Door: ‘Women in Music’ Is Story of Struggle and Opportunity” (*Chicago Tribune*). Heidi Waleson wrote an article for the *New York Times* in 1989 titled “Music Maestra, Please,” in which she referred to what she called “a new breed of women conductors.” She wrote:

The world of orchestra conducting has not been turned upside down just yet, of course—all the major orchestras are still in the hands of men and resistance to women is far from extinct. But the days when a woman on the podium might have provoked . . . [an] outburst from audiences seems to be fading, albeit only recently.<sup>2</sup>

Waleson concluded:

The obstacles to a career in conducting have not fallen entirely for women, of course . . . The biggest

orchestras still do not have women guest conductors . . . And American women conductors have the same problem American men have: the preference of American orchestras for foreigners [conductors].<sup>3</sup>

The September 23, 2013, issue of the American progressive magazine *Mother Jones* featured an article by reporter Hannah Levintova titled “Here’s Why You Seldom See Women Leading a Symphony,” which provides a rare and critical look (complete with graphs and charts) demonstrating the lack of female conductors in the orchestral music profession. The article includes a few photographs and comments from female conductors and other musicians reacting to a quote that appeared in the magazine, attributed to Vasily Petrenko, who at the time served as principal conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. Mr. Petrenko made the following statement (among others) that was quoted in a Norwegian newspaper regarding women conductors: “Orchestras react better when they have a man in front of them because ‘a cute girl on the podium means that musicians think about other things.’” (His words have also been translated as “sweet girl,” which isn’t really any better).<sup>4</sup>

His statements obviously generated a significant amount of disagreement and were quickly met with statements from European female conductors, musicians, and arts administrators, such as Sarah Alexander, who at the time served as chief executive of the National Youth Orchestra, where Petrenko was also engaged as conductor.

From the *Guardian*:

[She] said it was very disappointing that Petrenko should “express such a narrow view when he is chief conductor of an organization that is run by a woman, half of whose teaching staff are women, all of whose senior management team are women and 50 percent of its members are young women, for whom we actively encourage a vision as future leaders.”

She added: “It’s not an opinion I have ever heard him express before.”<sup>5</sup>

Petrenko later clarified that he was referring only to orchestras in Russia, and that his wife was a choral conductor. He encouraged women to study conducting, assuring them that their success depends “on their talent and their work, definitely not their gender.”<sup>6</sup>

Sexist, chauvinistic comments such as these have historically plagued women who seek careers as music conductors (and performing musicians as well), and are still quite prevalent in the profession today. Even though comments such as these are not generally made in public forums, given these days of social media and the instant sharing of information via the World Wide Web, most people generally keep such ideas in the “back room,” given the ways that the role of women in society continues to evolve and also that such ideas are generally unacceptable to many people. It is highly likely that the comments by Petrenko were directed primarily toward White, European female conductors, as opposed to female conductors of color. The article most likely does not include any women of color as part of the statistical data; none are mentioned by name, and no photographs of any such women were included. It is also quite probable that the magazine articles mentioned previously have relevance in the lives of all female conductors; however, it remains questionable as to whether women of color and their often unique circumstances were specifically considered in those writings.

These speculations tend to be reinforced by orchestral conducting historian Elliot Galkin in his book, *A History of Orchestral Conducting*, in which he writes:

It must be recognized that, as in other professions requiring sophisticated education and enjoying social esteem, opportunities for female and black conductors have become available only during the last half-century. Such musicians, no matter how impressive their abilities, have been restricted to guest appearances;

appointment to positions of titular leadership remains isolated.<sup>7</sup>

### **History, Terminology, and Clarifications**

It was not until the eighteenth century that the person whose role and responsibilities as “leader” or “conductor” of an orchestra became distinctly separated from those of the regular performing musicians in those same organizations. It may be helpful to make a distinction between “leaders” and “conductors” in this discussion. Even though at one time the terms were interchangeable and even to this day include many of the same responsibilities, the term “leader” most recently has been used to designate those persons who are associated primarily with jazz groups and/or non-Western, classical ensembles. “Conductors” or “maestros” tend to be associated primarily with classical-type ensembles, primarily symphony orchestras. It must be stated that in the early years of the documented history of “the person who leads the performing musicians,” the term “leader” seemed to be the preferred one, as in descriptions of Jean Baptiste Lully (1632–1687),<sup>8</sup> who is often referred to as the first “important” leader/conductor in music history and worked as chief musician in the court of King Louis XIV of France, or as in the cases of J. S. Bach (1685–1750) and W. A. Mozart (1756–1791), who both “led” their ensembles while seated at a keyboard instrument, usually a harpsichord or pianoforte.

### **The Role of Public Schools, Colleges, and Universities**

In a profession that continues to be dominated by White males, White women currently and historically have encountered difficulty finding significant opportunities as conductors in professional venues. Unfortunately, it almost follows naturally that women (and men) of color have many more challenges in obtaining conducting positions with significant (professional) music organizations, and Black men have had far more opportunities than Black women. A handful of Black women have made or sought to make their careers in instrumental/orchestral conducting; however, more of them have achieved recognition as music

teachers/conductors of public school or college or university ensembles. Most of the successes in the public schools are of Black women who are choral or band conductors, with more of them in choral music. Nationwide, there are several examples of Black women band conductors in the public schools; however, often because of sexist issues, many more of them tend to be choral conductors. Of those who are band conductors, many tend to work at the middle school level as opposed to high schools. One of the primary reasons for this is that high school band conductors must spend many hours outside of regular school hours with marching and athletic bands, and this type of demand is not conducive to starting or maintaining a strong family life—a reason that is quite troubling and inaccurate for a number of obvious reasons.

At the university level, Black women tend to be present primarily in non-conducting roles, and if they are conductors, they are primarily in choral conducting—not orchestral or instrumental. In most universities, there is usually a person who holds the title Director of Choral Activities, Director of Orchestral Activities, or Director of Bands. The present writer (at this time) can only name one or two Black women who hold any of those titles at the university level—including in the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This is another subject (outside of the scope and purview of this article) that definitely needs serious study, both historically and critically.

### **Women Conductors of Color**

A small handful of Black women have had careers as conductors of primarily instrumental ensembles (i.e., orchestras), such as Cuban-born Tania Leon, Margaret Harris, Georgianne Lundy, Marsha Eve Mabrey, and Kay George Roberts. Several others have served as conductors of vocal groups in the professional realm, as well as in churches. Several Black women have enjoyed success as conductors on Broadway, such as Linda Twine (b. 1947), who led the sixteen-piece orchestra for Lena Horne’s one-woman show *Lena Horne: The Lady and her Music*,<sup>9</sup> and Joyce Brown (b. 1920), who made history in 1970 when she became the first woman to conduct an opening on Broadway—the musical *Purlie*.<sup>10</sup>

Following are relevant reviews and information regarding five of the previously mentioned Black female conductors. There is not a great deal of this type of information available, for a variety of reasons; however, that should not be considered a reflection of the impact that these Black women have had on countless musicians they interacted with in the role of conductor. Also, a number of Black women have made significant careers as leaders of “jazz orchestras,” which are not included here.

**Tania Leon (b. 1943, Havana, Cuba):**

Training: B.A., C.A., Peyrallade Conservatory (Havana); M.A., National Conservatory (Cuba); B.A. (Accounting/Business), Havana University; B.S. (Music Education) New York University; M.A. (Composition), New York University; Tanglewood (Boston) Conducting Program.

“Olsens’ Overture *Lulu* is a bright, sassy piece of infectious energy, and it got a fine performance as conducted by Tania Leon, a maestro of obvious technical and interpretive talents who really knows how to keep an orchestra in rein.”

*Daily News* (New York)<sup>11</sup>

“She is a strong music personality who has a top-notch baton technique and a beat of utmost clarity. Moreover, the orchestra played extremely well for her.”

*Daily News* (New York)<sup>12</sup>

**Margaret Rosiezarian Harris (b. 1943, Chicago, IL):**

Training: B.S., Curtis Institute of Music; M.S., Juilliard School of Music. She was a child prodigy on the piano and was regularly performing public concerts from age four.<sup>13</sup>

“For the first time in 69 years, the Minnesota Orchestra (formerly the Minneapolis Symphony) was conducted by a woman—Margaret Harris . . . Beethoven was clean, no-nonsense, never strained .

. . . [Her] conducting has both grace and precision.”

*Minneapolis Tribune*<sup>14</sup>

“Margret Harris, who has conducted on Broadway and with major symphonies, is about as attractive a young leader as any orchestra is apt to find. Yet with all her obvious charm, she does not play to the audience at all. Except for the brief formal bows, she paid strict attention to the orchestra.”

*Detroit Free Press*<sup>15</sup>

“. . . brilliant, sparkling, with enthusiasm and intensity as Miss Harris permitted the full sonorities of the orchestra to exert itself . . .”

*Chicago Defender*<sup>16</sup>

**(Georgianne) Anne Lundy (b. 1954, Houston, Texas):**

Training: B. Mus. Ed and Performance, University of Texas-Austin; M. Mus. (Conducting), University of Houston.<sup>17</sup>

“With the rising young conductor Anne Lundy at the helm, what we beheld was a glorious evening of beautiful music . . . With a steady hand and a clear beat for which she is becoming known, Anne Lundy as usual, brought intelligence, a quiet dignity and maturity far beyond her years to this massive, complicated and demanding work [Handel’s *Messiah*].”

*The Informer*<sup>18</sup>

“Lundy conducted the work [William Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony*] alertly and capably and the combined orchestra [Scott Joplin Chamber Orchestra and the Houston Symphony] responded with an enthusiastic performance.”

*Houston Post*<sup>19</sup>

### **Kay George Roberts (b. September 16, 1950, Nashville, TN):**

Training: B.A., Fisk University (Major: Music); M.M., Yale University (Major: Conducting and Violin Performance); M.M.A., Yale University (Major: Conducting); D.M.A., Yale University (first woman, second black) (Major: Conducting).<sup>20</sup>

“From the moment she strides on stage, it is clear that this woman is in command. Her physical appearance . . . is striking. Her hand movements are precise and her facial expressions compelling.”<sup>21</sup>

“As pioneers go, [Davy] Crockett and [Daniel] Boone have nothing on Kay George Roberts. She hasn’t exactly tamed the wilderness, but she has brought a new look to a profession that traditionally began and ended with white European men.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Marsha Eve Mabrey (b. November 7, 1949, Pittsburgh, PA):**

Training: B. Mus., University of Michigan (Major: Instrumental Music Education); M. Mus., University of Michigan (Major: Instrumental Music Education); D.M.A., Cincinnati Conservatory (Major: Orchestra Conducting).<sup>23</sup>

“Professor Mabry, with empathy, left her mark on an acoustical ‘Best Seller’ [Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*]. . . Without any ostentatious gesticulation, the experienced woman conductor motivated the Sinfonietta Frankfurt.”

*Offenbach Post* (Offenbach, Germany)<sup>24</sup>

“Marsha Mabry . . . challenged the orchestra with new and unfamiliar repertoire and was . . . successful in the ambitious endeavor.”

*Savannah Morning News*<sup>25</sup>

As has been noted in the previous information regarding these outstanding Black women, their primary training was received at many of the finest schools of music and conservatories in the world. Also note that several of them have degrees in music education (teaching) and/or other nonmusical disciplines in addition to their conducting and performance degrees, and many of them have had great success as performers, soloists, and composers. Many of them studied and/or apprenticed under some of the most famous orchestral conductors in the world, such as Leonard Bernstein, Seiji Ozawa, and Leonard Slatkin, to name a few. All of them have clearly demonstrated that they possess the skills and talents of their male counterparts of any color; however, significant conducting opportunities continue to elude them. They have managed to have a consistent degree of success with not only American ensembles, but those in other countries as well, and have all demonstrated expert musical knowledge in several musical genres, including symphonic, opera, oratorio, musical theater, and jazz.

### **Final Thoughts**

While there are no significant numbers of White females in the conducting profession, they seem to have benefited much more and have tended to have more opportunities in more significant venues than Black female conductors. This is similar to the manner in which White women seem to have benefited more quickly than Black women in this and other professions, in a manner reminiscent of the benefits that they received after the Equal/Civil Rights Era and the resulting legislation that followed those movements. Black women are probably the most underrepresented group in this selective and

often biased profession, and might be viewed as what some sociologists refer to as a “double minority.” There are numerous factors that have prevented female (and male) conductors from entering the profession, and continue to do so; however, when race and gender are considered simultaneously, it becomes even more of a challenge. Currently, the limited roles that women and people of color have traditionally played are being challenged in virtually every profession around the globe, which is a clear demonstration that improvements are happening. Nowhere is this more evident than in the world of classical music performance, whether we are speaking of actual performing musicians or the person leading those musicians—the conductor.

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