

A View from the Violin Section

Agnes Roberts



Agnes Roberts

Gayle Scott, Vancouver

In 1971 I asked the personnel manager of the renowned London Symphony Orchestra of London, England, if there were any women in his orchestra. He replied in the negative, explaining that it had been a tradition with that organization not to hire women. Then I asked if he would knowingly jeopardize the standards of his orchestra in order to maintain that tradition and he replied 'yes'. Today there are still major orchestras in the world where women are not hired (i.e. the Vienna Philharmonic and the Czech Philharmonic, both of which are top ranking orchestras in the world). The symphony orchestra tradition in North America started in the U.S.A. and the major American orchestras did not hire women until as recently as the past generation. The New York Philharmonic in 1966 hired its first woman, bass player Orin O'Brien. The Chicago Symphony and Boston Symphony, longtime bastions of male supremacy, have yielded to women in the past twenty-five or thirty years. Even with this gradual appearance of women in orchestras here in North America, a well-known conductor is quoted recently as saying:

They become men. Men treat them as equals; they even change their pants in front of them. I think it's terrible.¹

This remark is from Zubin Mehta who has established himself as one of the great conductors of today. He is 42 years old, 'young' in terms of the conducting profession, especially young considering his formidable record of conducting. A prominent musical leader in the world, his musical decisions are understandably respected in the profession. Mehta has been resident conductor and musical director of the Montreal Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He is currently with the New York Philharmonic and the Israel Philharmonic and women have played in all of these orchestras. And yet he feels women playing in an orchestra 'become men'.

There are reasons for this apparent contradiction in Mehta's musical life. Traditionally, the great conductors have been tyrants, men who not only assumed full responsibility for all aspects of music-making in their orchestras, but who demanded that they be solely responsible for this awesome undertaking. The world's great orchestras have in turn, been built by these tyrants (i.e. Serge Koussevitsky who was the conductor of the Boston Symphony from 1924-49 and George Szell who conducted the Cleveland Orchestra from 1946-70). To play in a great orchestra meant to subject oneself to the very personal discernment of a particular conductor, and this conductor was the supreme dictator of hiring policy. The generation of the tyrant conductors has

gradually yielded to the power of the Musicians Union, orchestra committees, artistic committees and audition committees composed of the orchestra musicians themselves. More recently bills such as the Women's Equal Employment Act in Canada have added legislation to persuasion. Thus, the power of the present day conductor has been limited by conditions which have evolved over the past twenty-five or thirty years. Even the great Sir Thomas Beecham, whose staunch opposition to women in orchestras was more than once the subject for his famous caustic remarks, gradually found himself conducting orchestras with women players. He once said he didn't like women in orchestras because if they could play — they demoralized their male partner, and if they couldn't play — they demoralized their partner anyway!

The Canadian orchestra tradition is younger than that of the American. There has been no tradition of an autocratic conductor yielding supreme power for many years from a Canadian podium. While there was never an official policy of not hiring women in Canadian orchestras,² forms of discrimination did appear a generation or more ago. Women musicians who were working in the 1930s and 1940s found a strong anti-woman attitude. One Toronto Symphony bass player remembers being given a scholarship to study at the Conservatory in Toronto in the 1940s and then being advised by the very man who had awarded her the scholarship, the principal of the Conservatory, to give up the idea of ever becoming a professional bass player. A woman bass player was unheard of at that time. In spite of the principal's advice, she practised, played the audition, and became the first woman bass player in a professional Canadian symphony orchestra. Most people who lived and worked through those years will agree that a woman had to be much better than her male counterpart in order to be hired for a job, and even when hired, the pressure to continue to prove her ability never ceased. This Toronto bass player says,

What it did mean however, was that I had to become, or thought I had [to become] some sort of superwoman — full-time professional musician — housewife, mother, taxiing kids to lessons, cooking, shopping, etc., etc., etc. If I wanted to pursue my career, I had to prove nothing else would suffer — a syndrome that women in my position at that time fell into because of societal pressures!³

Other women musicians of that period recall much the same attitudes as this Toronto bass player, with the added observation that women were rarely hired to play extra concerts outside of the regular orchestra season and so had to depend on the salary from the symphony which in Toronto had a season of only twenty-six weeks during the 1950s. That left another twenty-six weeks each year in which musicians had to scrounge a living somehow. If a man was available, there was no need to hire a woman. Considering the personal dedication demanded for a career in music and the ever-present need to eat, being refused employment because of gender was hard to take. One of the frequent excuses for not hiring women which I personally heard in my own experience as a professional violinist was that if the husband worked, why should the wife be taking home a second salary? This attitude has subsided in the last ten years or so. At least it no longer appears to be a principle of hiring.

While I was a member of the Toronto Symphony and its orchestra committee in the 1960s, there were complaints at one time about the appearance of pregnant women in the orchestra, one complaint coming from a woman in the audience. Meanwhile, a man could come on stage looking like a Zeppelin — a condition lasting considerably more than nine months — and nobody would complain! The double standard prevails in the gossip department also. A man's clandestine life could go by, noticed by others, but not to his detriment. A woman doing the same thing, however, had the gossip mills working overtime. Another popular argument still voiced is that women just aren't physically strong enough to produce a big sound on an instrument. Just for the record, there are plenty of men who can't produce a big sound either. Examples of women in highly responsible positions in chamber music ensembles and orchestras — not to mention solo careers — are too numerous to list here. But they dispel any argument about the inadequate physical capacity of women to handle such positions.

My own professional career as a violinist in a symphony orchestra began in the Vancouver Symphony in 1956. Regardless of how much studying and experience in ensemble playing a young musician has, (and I had finished eleven years of studying prior to 1956), the first experience in a fully professional orchestra is always a new world. Those of us entering this world following years of student training, found ourselves 'learning' again. It takes several seasons of playing before a musician is familiar with the repertoire and has adjusted to the ensemble demands of a particular orchestra and conductor. Considering the years involved in becoming a professional musician, and the subsequent years in becoming a better professional, it is understandable that this is a career, not a job, and it is a commitment for the whole of one's working life.

After one season with the Vancouver Symphony came the realization of just how much more studying was needed to be the kind of musician I wanted to be. I auditioned for, and received a scholarship to, the Toronto Conservatory for further study, becoming part of a larger musical community and eventually joining the Toronto Symphony where I remained for more than fifteen seasons. It was in Toronto that my life as a professional musician took shape.

Most of my working life has been spent playing concerts and rehearsals and, of course, doing my own practising at home with spare time often spent in playing chamber music with other musicians who share this same interest. Because of the unusual scheduling, life within a symphony orchestra is not unlike a small community — some say 'incestuous' — a group of about one hundred players who are together for many hours every week. Our 'seasons' or musical 'years' begin in the autumn and end the following summer. Within our musical community, close friendships are formed, and many musicians marry other musicians. Orchestra tours bring us together all day every day, sharing meals, accommodation and travelling experiences.

It is a unique kind of career, an erratic mode of life, often very tiring, sometimes frustrating, but for a musician it is the only way to live.

The symphony orchestra is a tradition-bound institution which probably explains why it has been slow in accepting women into its ranks. The concert dress for generations has been formal and black, for both men and women; the format of a programme hasn't changed in years, and the orchestra adheres to the many formal musical traditions within its own ranks. All of this combines to present a highly-structured and rigidly controlled traditional institution. Contrast this with the greater freedom of behaviour in the popular music field which also has shown a greater tolerance of women. In Vancouver, a former concertmaster of the symphony and well-known soloist, Jean de Rimanczy, was an enthusiastic supporter of young musicians, advising us and encouraging us to enter the profession. He did see the obstacles ahead for women musicians, and while not wishing to discourage us, he admitted it would be difficult *because* we were women, advice based on conditions of the years up to and including the 1950s.

I have been a musician in professional orchestras in three Canadian cities, in the U.S.A. and in Mexico, but I didn't find that the routine of the orchestral player differed greatly at all.

In Mexico approximately thirty-five musicians played in the orchestra and only one, a harpist, was a woman. (This is not surprising considering the male 'macho' society of Latin America.) In North America women have been able to assert their rights as musicians in recent years and are continuing to do just that. Many women are now principal players in Canadian orchestras. The first flute players in the Vancouver Symphony and the Toronto Symphony and the Canadian National Ballet orchestra are all women. Marta Hidy, an Ontario violinist, has been both a concertmistress and soloist with a number of Canadian orchestras. The National Ballet orchestra has had two excellent women concertmistresses. Women can be principal players if they choose the difficult and highly competitive route to these positions. Not every man wants to, or is capable of being a principal player either, so the question of discrimination in this area of principal players or even rank and file orchestra players has now been replaced by the question of choice. In this respect women have achieved the freedom to choose their own direction. Maybe it doesn't seem to be a great achievement but from where I sit in the violin section things are definitely better than they were.

- 1 Irving Kolodin, "Zubin Mehta", Stereo Review, Sept. 1978, pp. 75-78.
- 2 Table showing the percentages of women musicians in three Canadian orchestras over a period of years. The first entry for each orchestra represents its first season of operation.
- 3 Budd, Ruth, letter to the writer, 5 October, 1978.

Atlantic Symphony						
season					1968-69	1978-79
% women					30.2%	48.9%
Toronto Symphony						
Season	1923-24	1930-31	1943-44	1953-54	1968-69	1978-79
% women	0%	1%	8%	8%	21.2%	25%
Vancouver Symphony						
season		1930-31		1958-59	1968-69	1978-79
% women		15.2%	*	27%	31.6%	35%
*No figures available.						