

Where Are The Women?

An Examination of the Lack of Female Percussionists in Top Orchestras  
in the United States

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## **Introduction**

Currently, there are only three women percussionists in the United States' top orchestras, known as the "Big Five": New York Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All three women have been appointed within the last 30 years even though most of these orchestras were founded near the start of the 20th century, which begs the question: is the orchestral percussion audition process fair and unbiased, or are there discriminatory factors that have led to such a significant gender equality imbalance amongst these orchestral percussion sections? In my preliminary research, I have discovered a long history of inequality surrounding the amount of female musicians in the orchestra and especially among the historically-perceived "masculine" instruments like percussion.<sup>1</sup> This research will explore and expand on the following questions: Why have women been discouraged from studying percussion, has the situation gotten better in the last decade, and what does the future look like for women who want jobs in the US's orchestras?

### **Who are the "Big Five"?**

About one hundred years after the creation of the United States of America, there was a new discussion on American sound. How can America be just as high brow as its rivals in Europe? The result of this philosophical inquiry was the creation of several orchestras. The goal of these orchestras was to expose American elites with classical music rather than what was becoming popular at the time.<sup>2</sup> The New York Philharmonic

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<sup>1</sup> Jason P Cumberledge, "Instrument and Gender as Factors in the Perceptions of Musicians and Musical Performance," *Contributions to Music Education* 43 (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre-Antoine Kremp, "Innovation and Selection: Symphony Orchestras and the Construction of the Musical Canon in the United States (1879-1959)," *Social Forces* 88, no. 3 (2010): 1051-082

(NYPO) was founded in 1842 and is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States.<sup>3</sup> According to its website the organization has always been “a champion of new music of its time”. The Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) was founded in 1881 by Henry Lee Higginson.<sup>4</sup> Just 10 years later, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) was founded in 1891.<sup>5</sup> For a long time, the NYPO, BSO, and CSO were considered the “Big Three” until Leopold Stokowski started leading the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1912.<sup>6</sup> The Philadelphia Orchestra was founded before that date, but was not considered a “great orchestra.” The final member of the “Big Five” is the Cleveland Orchestra which was founded in 1918.<sup>7</sup> Although there are many orchestras in the US that can be considered “top tier,” like Detroit and Los Angeles, this research only focuses on the original “Big Five.”

### **What is an Orchestral Job?**

Obviously there are not as many percussionists in an orchestra as there are violinists or other strings. Playing percussion in the orchestra is a separate job from playing timpani. In a typical 100 member orchestra there will be 3 full-time

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<sup>3</sup> New York Philharmonic, “History.” [https://nyphil.org/about-us/history?clicklocation=main\\_nav\\_history](https://nyphil.org/about-us/history?clicklocation=main_nav_history) (accessed Dec. 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Boston Symphony Orchestra, “The History of the BSO.” <https://www.bso.org/brands/bso/about-us/historyarchives/the-history-of-the-bso.aspx> (accessed Dec. 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Chicago Symphony Orchestra, “About the CSO and Symphony Center.” <https://cso.org/about/> (accessed Dec. 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, “Philadelphia Orchestra.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia\\_Orchestra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philadelphia_Orchestra) (accessed Dec. 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Cleveland Orchestra, “About the Cleveland Orchestra.” <https://www.clevelandorchestra.com/discover/about/> (accessed Dec 2020).

percussionists and maybe 1-2 substitute players who come in when they are needed.<sup>8</sup> Out of these 5 orchestras there are maybe 15 full-time positions.<sup>9</sup> That's not a lot considering there are thousands, if not millions, of percussionists entering the workforce each year. Even though orchestral jobs are not lucrative, they are still very sought after because musicians who play in a top orchestra are considered elite and masters of their craft.<sup>10</sup>

### **What is the Audition Process?**

It is often said that a person will take almost 5,000 auditions before they win the one they really want.<sup>11</sup> That is a lot of auditions for just one job. These jobs are very hard to come by because there are only a certain number of musicians in the orchestra and once that position has been filled, it is unlikely it will open again for many years, especially at top orchestras like the "Big Five".<sup>12</sup> Most of the time, in these bigger orchestras, musicians only leave if they retire or die. They hang onto these jobs because it took them so long to finally reach this level of their career. The process is rigorous. Some orchestras do what is known as an open call audition. This means that anyone can register for an audition, regardless of education and previous experience. However, in the "Big Five", applicants are invited to audition. General percussion

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<sup>8</sup> The Idiomatic Orchestra, "Orchestra Size and Setting." <http://theidiomaticorchestra.net/14-orchestra-size-and-setting/#:~:text=Plus%204%20harps%2C%20a%20keyboard,and%20a%20separate%20male%20choir>. (accessed Dec 2020)

<sup>9</sup> As of December 5, 2020, there are no open positions in percussion in any of the "Big Five".

<sup>10</sup> Donald Bick, "So You Want to Be a Symphony Orchestra Player?" *Percussive Notes* 22, 2 (January 1984): 28.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Reynolds, "Take Your Seat," *Oberlin Conservatory Magazine*, 2019, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Claudia Goldin and Cecelia Rouse, "Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians" *American Economic Review* 90, 4 (September 2000) 715-744.

auditions require more than just snare drum. Applicants are required to play technical passages on xylophone, snare drum, glockenspiel, crash cymbals and sometimes tambourine.<sup>13</sup>

Much like casting a movie, orchestras have multiple auditions for the same role. There are usually three rounds of auditions. The first two are behind a screen, then the final round is often face to face.<sup>14</sup> The panel will sit on one side of a sheet and the applicant plays on the other. There is a proctor who introduces the applicant by a number and not a name. This has become the norm to allow women and black, indigineous, people of color (BIPOC) a fairer shot at winning auditions by reducing bias based on gender or race and only focusing on the sound being made by the performer.

Now, orchestra auditions are done through a screening method, but it was not always the case. The BSO was one of the first organizations to implement the screen method in 1952.<sup>15</sup> The NYPO, Philadelphia Orchestra, and the CSO updated their audition process between 1970-1980. The Cleveland Orchestra did not adopt the first round screen until 2007, making it the last member of the “Big Five” to do so.<sup>16</sup> Since the adaptation of the screen method for audition, more women have been hired by the “Big Five” over time.

### **Female Percussionists Currently in “The Big Five”**

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<sup>13</sup> This comes from personal experience and knowledge of the audition process.

<sup>14</sup> Bick, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Goldin, 716.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Shihoten, “Cleveland Orchestra to Use First-Round Screens During Auditions,” *Playbill*, October 10, 2007, <https://www.playbill.com/article/cleveland-orchestra-to-use-first-round-screens-during-auditions> (accessed Nov 2020).

While the number of female musicians increased by 20% from 1970-1997, the number of female percussionists has remained untouched.<sup>17</sup> This makes sense as there are only about 15 full-time positions total over 5 organizations and percussion is a male dominated field. So how many women are in each percussion section of the “Big Five”? Right now, three. In the history of these organizations? Three, the same three.\* There has never been a female full-time percussionist in the BSO, Cleveland Orchestra, and NYPO.<sup>18</sup> The first woman to earn a percussion position in the “Big Five” is Patricia Dash. Patricia won her position with the CSO in 1986.<sup>19</sup> Angela Zator Nelson won her position at the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1999.<sup>20</sup> The newest woman in these organizations is Cynthia Yeh, who won her position with the CSO in 2007.<sup>21</sup>

### **Why Have Women Been Discouraged From Studying Percussion?**

For decades, young girls were not encouraged to play percussion. A 2010 survey done by Megan Aube found women make up about 25% of each percussion studio in universities in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Those numbers vary and it has been 10 years since,

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<sup>17</sup> Goldin, 720.

\* There may have been more part-time or substitute players over the course of history but there are no records to show.

<sup>18</sup> Musicians of Leading United States Orchestras, “All Musicians”  
[https://www.stokowski.org/Principal\\_Musicians\\_American\\_Orchestras.htm](https://www.stokowski.org/Principal_Musicians_American_Orchestras.htm) (accessed Nov 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Percussion, “Patricia Dash”  
<https://cso.org/about/performers/chicago-symphony-orchestra/percussion/patricia-dash/> (accessed Oct 2020)

<sup>20</sup> The Philadelphia Orchestra, “Angela Zator Nelson”  
<https://www.philorch.org/your-philorch/meet-your-orchestra/musicians/angela-zator-nelson/> (accessed Oct 2020)

<sup>21</sup> Chicago Symphony Orchestra: Percussion, “Cynthia Yeh”  
<https://cso.org/about/performers/chicago-symphony-orchestra/percussion/cynthia-yeh/> (accessed Oct 2020)

<sup>22</sup> Meghan G. Aube, “Women in Percussion: The Emergence of Women as Professional Percussionists in the United States, 1930s-present.” (D.M.A. Diss., University of Iowa, 2011), 108.

but the numbers most likely have not drastically changed. Even though gender norms are being broken more and more in society today, the idea of masculine and feminine instruments still exists and it starts as early as beginning band in middle school. MORE. Young girls have been told to play the flute or clarinet because it is more “lady-like” and not brass or percussion.<sup>23</sup> This has left a lasting impact.

Girls do not have the opportunity to see themselves as drummers because there are not many popular bands with women behind the drum set. Many women who study music often become music teachers instead of performers because it is the more accepted career for a female musician. Even when a girl makes it to high school, she is probably one of two or three percussionists in the band program. Oftentimes, girls are not given the opportunity to shine when it comes to battery instruments like snare drum and cymbals.<sup>24</sup> Throughout history, they have been seen as “too weak” to hit a drum hard enough to create the proper sound needed.<sup>25</sup> Even if a girl got to the level where she was in college and wanted to study drums of any kind, her male teachers would encourage her to play marimba instead. For years women were not able to shake the title of “woman drummer” not just “drummer”. They were seen as women first and drummers second.<sup>26</sup> These bad experiences are not encouraging which causes many women to leave the instrument.

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<sup>23</sup> Cumberledge, 160.

<sup>24</sup> Aube, 86.

<sup>25</sup>Dempf, Linda. “The Woman’s Symphony Orchestra of Chicago.” *Notes* 62, no. 4 (2006): 857;

<sup>26</sup> Aube, 88.

The orchestra can be a toxic environment for women, not just percussionists. Trombonist Abbie Conant won a position with the Munich Philharmonic in 1980 and then spent almost 15 years battling in court for equal pay and treatment from the organization.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Elayne Jones famously battled with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in 1974 for discrimination after she did not receive the tenured timpani position. There was no reason for her to not receive the promotion. She did not settle with the orchestra and left to play with the San Francisco Opera where she remained for the rest of her career.<sup>28</sup> A career that is not inviting and rewarding is not appealing to most people so women leave. They would rather do something else.

Another reason for the absence of women in percussion is the classic conundrum of family or career. Music is an intense career. A performer at the highest level must practice a certain amount of time every day in order to maintain their skills. Children often get in the way. Marimbist She-E Wu famously said she does not want to have children because her “focus in life is on music” and if she has children she cannot keep playing at the same level of intensity.<sup>29</sup> This is more so in the orchestral world. It is very hard to have a successful career in classical music and have a family.

It takes a special kind of woman to be a professional percussionist. She has to have an unwavering sense of self and confidence. Historically, young girls have been torn down because they were not meeting the expectations of society. Percussion has not been a career that is friendly for women.

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<sup>27</sup> James Bennett, “A Trombonist Got a Job with the Munich Philharmonic. Then She Fought Them in Court for 13 Years,” *WQXR*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.wqxr.org/story/trombonist-got-job-munich-philharmonic-then-she-fought-them-court-13-years/> (accessed Nov 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Duston Harvey, “People in Percussion- Elayne Jones- Timpanist.” *Percussive Notes* 12 (1993).

<sup>29</sup> Aube, 99.

## Has the Situation Gotten Any Better in the Last 10 Years?

The movement for girls to play and stick with percussion has taken off in the last decade or so. There has also been an effort by organizations like the Percussive Arts Society to feature more women in their publications and annual conference known as Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC). By featuring more women they are giving girls, and boys, the chance to see that women can be and are good drummers. Social media has also given women the platform to showcase their skills. Never before has it been so easy to connect with others. Pamela Tichenor, founder of Facebook Group “Women/Womxn Percussionists”, created the page in summer of 2015 while working on a difficult passage of music and came across a problem only a woman could have: her body got in the way. In an interview with the author, she stated:

“I didn’t know who to ask for help. My teacher was a woman but she was very tiny and very skinny so I didn’t feel comfortable asking her. I thought it was kinda funny that there are so many Facebook groups for specific subsets of percussion, but none for women. I didn’t feel comfortable asking my question in any of the existing groups. I didn’t want gross and unhelpful comments from men about my breasts. Since I didn’t have a safe space to talk about my body in the way it relates to percussion, I created a safe space.”<sup>30</sup>

Even though this is not orchestra related, seeing women be successful drummers will lead more to the instrument. Social media has become a place for “women [...] to connect with like minded individuals of varying ages. It’s really important for [female percussionists]

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<sup>30</sup> Pamela Tichenor, interview by author, December 8, 2020.

to have a safe space to talk about the unique issues that pertain to us”.<sup>31</sup> The future is bright for women to dominate the world of percussion. Dominating the “Big Five” will take a lot longer as there are not many job opportunities but as long as young girls find passion in percussion, they will certainly be able to win jobs and knock down those barriers.

## **Conclusion**

Getting a full-time position in an orchestra is hard and for women percussionists it is even harder. Deep rooted sexism has allowed women to be viewed as less than their male colleagues. The audition process has evolved to be more fair but there just are not enough women applying for the job. Although the world is changing, women are still less likely to play percussion at a young age and continue it through to a career. Winning a job in the orchestra is a combination of preparation and luck. The performer has to spend hours practicing and be the best on that day. The lack of women in the “Big Five” percussion sections stems from the belief that women are not suited to play percussion. Once the world understands women can play whatever instrument they want, more and more women will be in the percussion section of the orchestra.

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<sup>31</sup>Tichenor interview.

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