



ARTS & CULTURE

France Launches Effort to Right Classical Music's Gender Imbalance

September 21, 2020

Very few women occupy leadership positions in the world of classical music. In fact, only about six percent of **professional** classical music **orchestras** are headed by women.

Now, in France, there is an effort to increase the number of women leading orchestras. It is an international competition in Paris called La Maestra. The event gives women conductors a chance to show off their skills.

Over 200 women -- from Asia, Europe and the Americas -- are taking part in the competition. The winner will be announced later this month.

Laurent Bayle is director of the Paris Philharmonic. He says the winner and those who place highly will get two years of intensive **mentoring** and other support.

Many observers say there is a need for that kind of support. Women head nearly 40 percent of orchestras in Belgium, but only three percent of French orchestras have female **conductors**. In the United States, only eight percent of orchestra conductors are women.

The Paris Philharmonic, known in French as the Philharmonie de Paris, is doing better. About 30 percent of its visiting conductors this season are women, an increase from a few years ago.

A mix of reasons, from historical to cultural, are said to be responsible for women's lack of **advancement** in the classical music field. Bayle noted that in France, for example, the country's **egalitarian** system disapproves of actions designed mainly to help women and minority groups.

Claire Gilbault is one of France's few female conductors. She heads the Paris Mozart Orchestra, which helped to organize the competition. She told VOA that men head all major musical organizations and like to share power among themselves.

La Maestra changes that. Its jury has an equal number of men and women and is led by a female conductor.

But for this all-women competition, performance is the most important **criteria**.

Twenty-nine-year-old Sara Caneva from Italy was the first candidate to perform. She noted that the coronavirus pandemic has made the competition more difficult.

"It's the first, it's after a long time without conducting because of the **lockdown**, she said.

Holly Hyun Choe from the United States felt better about her performance. She currently works as a conductor in Switzerland.

"Of course, that has to come with a lot of luck and a lot of hard work, and your own talent."

The Philharmonic's Bayle said the goal of the event is to get other European orchestras to invite these conductors to perform.

I'm Susan Shand.

VOA's Lisa Bryant reported this story. Susan Shand adapted it for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Words in This Story

professional – *adj.* not amateurs, those with the highest skills

orchestra – *n.* a group of musicians who play compositions

mentor – *v.* to teach and assist

conductor – *n.* the leader of an orchestra

advancement – *n.* to move forward or higher in a system

egalitarian – *adj.* the idea that all should be treated equal

criteria – *n.* the skills that are judged in a competition

lockdown – *n.* forcing people to stay indoors to avoid a contagious disease
