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Women* Orchestra Conductors and the Embodiment of Music – Performative Subversions of a Gendered Professional Practice

A new generation of female conductors is emerging, but they are still rarely appointed music directors of professional symphonic orchestras. This persistent underrepresentation of women conducting is conspicuous and has been little researched so far. Worldwide, women orchestra conductors occupy a space which was exclusively designated for men within the emergence of professional conducting in 19th-century Europe. As a consequence, conducting was solely shaped by men and became an embodied and gendered practice, as studies on perceptions of this specific leadership behavior have shown. The traditional figure of the conductor is connected to the idea of power, assertiveness, leadership, and authority – culturally masculine connotated attributes. The authoritative conducting style is increasingly replaced by more cooperative relationships with the orchestra. Moreover, the performative character of conducting as an individual embodiment of music holds potential for subversion, and alternative performances. My master thesis discusses to what extent women orchestra conductors today performatively subvert the gendered professional practice and create new perspectives of music interpretation. Drawing on Butler's performativity of gender, as well as Puwar's concept of Space Invaders and Braidotti's approach to nomadic subjectivity their bodily inscriptions within white and male-shaped structures are traced. Through qualitative interviews with aspiring conductors of the International Competition for Women Conductors "La Maestra", in Paris (March 2022), the explorative study sheds light on how they inscribe themselves into the professional practice with their entire bodies, focus on collaboration and shift traditional norms. Gendered power relations at the intersection with sexual and racial discrimination can be observed, which the interviewees counter with their own strategies and designs for equality. In addition, the paper formulates practical measures for structural gender equality and diversity in conducting education and profession.

Charlotte Muller, M.A. Sociocultural Studies, is a research associate in musicology with a focus on music-specific gender research at the Nuremberg University of Music. Her interdisciplinary work explores cultural practices and participation at the intersection of gender, race, and music, particularly in orchestral conducting. Charlotte's dedication extends to her own orchestral practice, where she actively champions compositions beyond the traditional canon. Recognized with the 2nd prize at the GMM Best Paper Award, she has presented at international conferences and advocates for inclusive approaches to music-making and culture.