

*Harmony*TM

FORUM OF THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA INSTITUTE

NUMBER 6 • APRIL 1998

A Quantitative Analysis of Women in Leadership Roles in Symphony Orchestra Organizations



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A Quantitative Analysis of Women in Leadership Roles in Symphony Orchestra Organizations

From various sources, the Symphony Orchestra Institute has collected data measuring the participation of women in leadership roles in symphony organizations. The Institute maintains a database with selected information on about 225 organizations. In addition, we have analyzed the personnel rosters of various symphony organizations as published during the last two years, determining the number and, by judgment of first names, the gender, of persons participating in various organizational components and roles. We have collected data from various other sources, particularly from publications and reports of the American Symphony Orchestra League (“League”).¹ Although none of our data are as exact as those which could be gained through person-by-person surveys, we believe the gender patterns and trends reported below are reliable within a small margin of error.

Boards of Directors and Board Chairs

What is the participation of women on symphony boards of directors? The Institute examined the 1996–1997 rosters of 19 of the largest symphony organizations, noting the number of women, and the total number of persons, involved in “active governance.”² For these organizations, the proportion of women in this role ranged from 18 to 49 percent, with an average participation of 31 percent and a median of 30 percent. Of the approximately 1,350 persons in active governance on these 19 boards, 33 percent were women. Thus, it might be said that about 1 in 3 active governance members of the larger symphony orchestra organizations are women.

Although this participation is clearly below a general population distribution, it is well above the 11 percent of board seats held by women in *Fortune* 500 publicly owned companies, as reported for 1996 by Catalyst, a New York nonprofit research and consulting firm that focuses on gender issues in business and the professions.³ Women as board participants in symphony governance also apparently well exceed the 19 percent and 23 percent participation levels reported respectively for trade associations and nonprofit public interest organizations.⁴

As in many nonprofit organizations, symphony boards are large and their “real work” is carried out by executive committees or groups of board officers (sometimes one and the same). Quite understandably, service and experience

on the executive committee begins to qualify members as candidates for board chairperson. In the case of the 19 larger organizations we analyzed, the proportion of women in this “inner working group” ranged from 8 to 67 percent, with an average of 31 percent and a mean of 28 percent. Of the 340 persons involved in this role, 30 percent were women. Thus, women are represented in the inner governance group of larger symphony orchestra organizations to about the same extent as they are participants on the boards which elect this inner group, and from which the board chairperson is quite often chosen.

In a similar analysis of the board rosters of 13 smaller symphony organizations, the proportion of women in the active governance and the central working group was respectively 34 percent and 32 percent, essentially the same proportion as in the 19 larger organizations.

The board chairperson is a very significant participant in the leadership group in most symphony organizations. Quite often, symphony organization bylaws provide that the board chairperson is the organization’s “chief executive officer.” Whether holding that title or not, the board chair sets the pace for overall board member enthusiasm, support, and involvement. Working with management and an inner circle of board members, the chairperson has singular influence on the leadership and membership of board committees, including the executive committee, and on the overall agenda, productivity, and effectiveness of the board. To what degree is this role occupied by women?

For a group of 25 of the largest size symphony organizations, 5 have women board chairpersons, or 20 percent—1 in 5—a smaller proportion than that of women on the executive committees of these organizations. Of the boards of the 24 organizations generally next in size within the industry, 22 percent—or also about 1 in 5—are headed by women. On the other hand, for 169 generally smaller organizations in the Institute’s database, women lead their boards in about 27 percent of the cases. Overall, it would appear that there is a slight glass ceiling—perhaps “cellophane” should be the description—for women moving through board service and gaining executive committee experience in preparation for being candidates for the top volunteer role in symphony organizations, especially the larger organizations. But this cellophane ceiling would appear to be much more penetrable than the solid barrier women face in becoming chairpersons in publicly owned for-profit corporations, and probably also the top volunteer roles in a wide range of other nonprofit organizations.

Starting in 1989, the League began to publish the gender and names of board chairpersons in its annual directory of member organizations. The Institute analyzed the gender of board chairpersons for 175 of these organizations which are independent entities supporting professional orchestras. For this group of organizations, the proportion of women filling the role of board chairperson rose from 20 percent to 30 percent over the 8-year period ending in 1996. This universe of symphony organizations includes a larger portion of smaller organizations than the group in the Institute’s database.

Table 1 summarizes the number of women serving as board members and board chairs.

Table 1

Role	Percent Women (Year Noted)	
<i>Board of Directors (Active Governance)</i>		1995–1996
19 large organizations		
overall		33
executive committee		30
13 smaller organizations		
overall		34
executive committee		32
<i>Chairperson, Board of Directors</i>		1997
25 large organizations		
		20
24 next largest		
		22
169 smaller		
		27
	1989	1997
175 organizations over time	20	30

Executive Directors and Staffs

Now let's turn to the role of executive director, the top compensated management position in an orchestra organization. As of recent date, 4 of the 25 largest symphony organizations had women executive directors, or 16 percent. Of the executive directors of the next largest 24 organizations, 6 of 22 (there were 2 vacancies), or 27 percent, were women. Looking back to a common date, 7 in 24 of these positions were filled by women, or 29 percent. Notwithstanding how the vacancies are filled, the proportion of women executive directors in this size group will be clearly higher than in the largest organizations. In a next smaller-sized group of 52 organizations, women executive directors make up 35 percent of the total. For a group of 55 organizations yet smaller in size, the proportion grows to 47 percent. And for the group of 52 of the smallest organizations, 72 percent have women executive directors. Overall, 1 out of 2 executive directors in 158 symphony organizations next in size after the largest 49 are women, and of all 207 such organizations, about 45 percent have women executive directors.

The proportion of women in the top management role in the symphony world clearly exceeds that in the for-profit world, where according to Catalyst, only 3 percent of persons with the title of executive vice president or above are women (never mind being *the senior executive*), and only 11 percent of all corporate officers are women.⁵ In the world of trade associations, 15 percent of executive directors are women, ranging from 8.5 percent for the largest organizations to

23 percent for the smallest, thus comparing with 16 to 25 percent and 47 to 72 percent in the case of symphony organizations.⁶ In a further comparison, about 19 percent of nonprofit public interest corporations are reported to have women executive directors, about one-half the proportion found in symphony organizations.⁷

The League began to publish the gender and names of executive directors starting in 1980. Based on an analysis of 175 independent professional orchestra organizations, the proportion of those organizations with women executive directors grew from 41 to 46 percent between 1980 and 1989, but rose only slightly to 47 percent by 1997. This suggests that the elevation of women to this leadership position has leveled out over recent years.

Since an executive director of a symphony organization generally obtains development training and experience by working for a number of years on the staff of one or more symphony organizations, what is the gender constitution of such staffs, including supervisory levels? The Institute analyzed the staff rosters of 15 of the larger symphony organizations, and found that the proportion of women on staff ranged from 35 to 82 percent, with an average participation of 60 percent and a median participation of 63 percent. Of the 870 staff persons listed, 59 percent were women—about 6 out of 10. In supervisory positions, as indicated by the presentation format and titles in the rosters, women filled about 50 percent of the roles, measured various ways. For a group of 13 smaller organizations, the staff rosters showed 53 percent to be women, and women apparently occupied 42 percent of supervisory positions. These data suggest that women are recruited into staffs, and promoted or recruited into supervisory positions in symphony organizations, substantially in line with their distribution in the general population.

Even though it is apparent that positions on symphony organizations' staffs are very much open to women, it is also clear that, at least in the largest organizations, there is something of an "industry glass ceiling" to women acceding to the role of executive director. This limitation starts to a degree at the board level, where, on average, only one out of three board members is a woman. That limitation appears then to be transmitted a little more heavily into the role of executive director. On the other hand, the top management position in smaller organizations is clearly open to women on a basis which equals or exceeds their proportion of the general population. Perhaps over time, as more and more women acquire experience in managing smaller organizations and become trained in supervisory functions in organizations of all sizes, a larger percentage of the executive directorships of North America's leading symphony organizations will be filled by women.

Table 2 summarizes the number of women serving as orchestra staff members and executive directors.

Table 2

Role	Percent Women (Year Noted)		
<i>Organization Staff</i>	1995–1996		
15 large organizations			
total			59
supervisors			50
13 smaller organizations			
total			53
supervisors			42
<i>Executive Director</i>	1997		
25 largest-budget orchestras			16
24 next largest			29
52 next largest			35
55 next largest			47
51 smallest			72
207 organizations			45
	1980	1989	1997
175 organizations over time	41	46	47

Orchestras and Orchestra Committee Chairs

Now let's turn to the administrative leadership within the orchestra itself, and in particular, to the role of orchestra committee chairperson. As the Institute has pointed out since its inception, orchestra organizations are unique and complex, and the sociology of the central organizational component—the orchestra—is equally, if not more, complex. It is clear that the orchestra, as a unit, has various leadership roles. In the area of artistry, players in principal roles provide direct musical leadership, under the overall guidance of the immediate conductor and more broadly, the music director, with some principals having more weight than others. In some orchestras, there are players who are not principals who strongly influence artistic standards. But all artistic leaders may only coincidentally be involved in the administrative leadership of the orchestra. The orchestra committee's interface with the management/governance group is usually handled through the orchestra committee chairperson, who typically establishes the agenda for the orchestra committee, and generally provides senior administrative leadership to the committee and to the orchestra as a whole. The committee is often elected by the orchestra on a staggered-term basis, but the chairperson is typically elected annually by the committee.

Data about orchestra committees and their leadership are more difficult to obtain than about boards and staffs. On the other hand, data about orchestras overall—their size and gender makeup—are fairly readily available. So let us start with that broader base of information.

According to data provided to the League by its members, the average percentage of women players in 109 professional orchestras over a 12-year period are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Group⁸	# Orchestras	1984	1990	1996
1	25	27	29	30
2	20	42	43	44
3	13	46	44	47
4	19	52	51	49
5	15	47	45	50
6-8	17	52	53	53
All	109	43	44	44

As these data disclose, the proportion of women players increases as the budget decreases. The percentage participation of women in the larger orchestras (top 2 groups) has increased slightly during the past 12 years. The underlying data show that the percentage of women players by orchestra in the top group ranged widely, from 16 to 48 percent, and the orchestras with the 10 largest budgets have, on average, women as 27 percent of the players, whereas for the other 15 smaller-budget organizations, the average was 35 percent. It is interesting to note that the overall proportion of women in this universe of 109 orchestras has remained in the 43 to 44 percent range over the 12-year period.

Based on the reports to the League by 135 orchestras with respect to gender makeup only for 1996, the percentage of all player positions filled by women was 45 percent, slightly more than the overall percentage in the table above because of the inclusion of a greater proportion of smaller orchestras. At the level of 45 percent, the percentage of orchestra players who are women now closely approaches the 46 percent of the nation's work force made up of women, as reported by Catalyst.⁹

As in the case of orchestra boards and staffs, one might assume that the proportion of women in the elected role of orchestra committee chairperson might reflect the gender composition of the underlying electing body. Here again, there appears to be a "glass ceiling" on access by women to this role, especially for the larger organizations, and perhaps synchronized with and related to the ceiling on women executive directors and to a lesser extent, women board chairpersons.

For instance, for 23 of the 25 largest-budget orchestras, only 13 percent have

women orchestra committee chairpersons (compared with a women player proportion of 30 percent). For 18 of the 24 next largest budget orchestras, 22 percent of orchestra committees are chaired by women (compared with a women-player proportion of 44 percent). Of the next largest group of 54 orchestras, for which the Institute has data for 23, women occupy 10 orchestra committee chairs, or 43 percent (compared with a woman-player makeup of some 48 percent)—a much reduced “ceiling” effect. But for 22 smaller U.S. orchestras, women occupied 32 percent of orchestra committee chairs (compared with a women-player percentage of 50 percent)—a clear differential. Women orchestra committee chairs represented about the same proportion, 38 percent, of 13 smaller Canadian orchestras. For Canadian orchestras as a whole (including four orchestras included in the two larger groups described above), women occupied 29 percent of orchestra committee chairs, the same percentage as in the U.S. orchestras for which the Institute has data. Thus, based on a gender count of 100 North American orchestras, it is estimated that about 30 percent of orchestra committee chairpersons are women, compared with a player proportion of 45 percent.

Table 4 summarizes the percentages of women serving as orchestra committee chairs.

Table 4

Chairperson, Orchestra Committee	1997
25 largest-budget orchestras	13
18 of 24 next largest	22
23 of 54 next largest	43
22 smaller	32
16 Canadian orchestras	29
100 North American orchestras	30

No data are presently available to the Institute as to the gender makeup of orchestra committees. As in the case of board executive committees, the participation of women in orchestra committees might well closely reflect the percentage of women in orchestras as a whole, with the ceiling effect taking place in moving from orchestra committee participation into committee leadership.

As noted earlier, our analysis of orchestra rosters did not include a count and a gender judgment of orchestra principals. Although vitally involved in the artistic leadership of an orchestra, principals do not, per se, participate in the orchestra’s elected governance. It is interesting to note, however, that a recent analysis of the rosters of 19 Canadian orchestras (including a few opera/ballet orchestras)

revealed that the percentage of women in these orchestras was 43 percent (about the same as for the 109 North American orchestras cited above, which included only 3 Canadian orchestras), and that women occupied 36 percent, or just over 1 in 3, of the concertmaster chairs, but only 24 percent, or 1 in 4, of other principal chairs.¹⁰

Music Directors and Conductors

Finally, the analysis of gender representation in key leadership roles in orchestra organizations should include some measures of women as music directors and conductors. It is generally held that women occupy very few of these roles, the measure often mentioned is “less than 5 percent.” In fact, the proportion varies by size of orchestra, just as in the case of other leadership roles.

For the largest 49 orchestras, there is only 1 woman music director—about 2 percent. In the analysis of personnel rosters of 21 of the largest-budget orchestras, the conducting staff (persons listed as music director; associate, assistant, resident conductor; or other conductorial titles) included 83 persons of whom 2, or 2.5 percent, were women. For the 98 next largest orchestras in the Institute’s database for which we have the name of the music director, 4 are women, or 4 percent in that group of orchestras. For the 175 orchestras in the League’s directory which we have analyzed, of which 168 reported the music director/principal conductor’s name and gender, the proportion of women was 6.5 percent. And it is quite interesting that this proportion has increased in this universe of organizations from 4 percent in 1989 and 2 percent in 1980. Finally, a count of music directors for some 425 independent U.S. professional orchestra organizations of all sizes and shapes in the League directory for 1997 develops a list of 29 women music directors or principal conductors, or about 7 percent of all such positions.

Table 5 summarizes the percentages of women serving as music directors and conductors.

Table 5	
Music Directors/Conductors	1997
49 largest budget organizations	2
98 smaller	4
	1980 1989 1997
175 organizations over time	2 4 6
425 organizations	7

Notes

- ¹ The member directory of the American Symphony Orchestra League for 1997–1998, 1988–1989, and 1979–1980, along with certain statistical data based on member organizations' reports to the League. The Institute thanks the League for its publication information and for certain data from which the Institute developed some of the findings in this analysis.
- ² In determining the “active governance” members of a board, we excluded in our count persons listed as honorary, emeritus, or similar designations, and any persons who were members of large “governing member” or other broad-based descriptions, such persons appearing to be inactive in governance decision making.
- ³ Catalyst. 1996 Census of Women Board Directors of the *Fortune* 500 Companies. New York: Catalyst.
- ⁴ Shaiko, Ronald G. 1997. Female Participation in Association Governance and Political Representation: Women as Executive Directors, Board Members, Lobbyists, and Political Action Committee Directors. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership* 8 (2): 121–139.
- ⁵ Catalyst. 1996 Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners. New York: Catalyst.
- ⁶ Female Participation in Association Governance.
- ⁷ Shaiko, Ronald G. 1996. Female Participation in Public Interest Group Nonprofit Governance: Yet Another Glass Ceiling? *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 25 (3): 302–320.
- ⁸ The American Symphony Orchestra League groups data collected from its members based on the artistic and total expense levels of each organization as of the recent season. As to overall expense budget, these groupings are as follows:
- | Group | Total Expense (\$000) |
|------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | \$9,500 and above |
| 2 | \$4,250–\$9,500 |
| 3 | \$2,350–\$4,250 |
| 4 | \$1,100–\$2,350 |
| 5 and over | Less than \$1,100 |
- ⁹ Daspin, Eileen. 1997. Number of Women Among Top Earners in Big Companies More than Doubles. *The Wall Street Journal*, December 12: B9.
- ¹⁰ Ewen, James, ed. 1997. *Una Voce: Quarterly of the Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians* 4 (4).