



Conductors

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In spite of the presence of many gay, lesbian, and bisexual figures in the field of classical music, it is difficult to identify more than a handful of self-identified, openly gay or lesbian conductors even in the early years of the twenty-first century. As well, it is difficult to find much explicit discussion of the relationship between homosexuality and conducting. Yet the invisibility of sexual minorities on the podium should in no way diminish their very real, if often overlooked, contributions to classical music.

As they gain a more secure place in the profession and more visibility, openly gay and lesbian conductors no longer fear explicit persecution, and a few have begun to enjoy a tentative and gradual acceptance. In the last twenty-five years, gay and lesbian conductors have used their success both to broaden classical music to speak to gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and to use music as an artistic activity around which to organize, strengthen, and heal glbtq communities.

The Rise of the Conductor

Conducting is a relatively new practice in the history of classical music. As the eighteenth century came to a close, a new role and persona developed for music directors. Before the 1780s and 1790s, the words *conductor* and *conducting* had little or no connection to music. Gradually, the meaning of the words grew to encompass musical direction; and the words acquired new nuances of meaning to coincide with the birth of the modern conductor.

Prior to this development, orchestral and choral directors existed, but they served more as timekeepers than interpreters and often played or sang in the ensembles that they directed. Generally speaking, prior to the late eighteenth century, the job of the musical leader was to maintain an even tempo and mark the beat.

The role was far from consistently fulfilled, and it involved a number of practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that appear quite foreign--and even humorous--to our notions of conducting. Musicians often rapped large wooden canes, waved handkerchiefs, or stomped loudly before the baton was introduced in the 1820s and became a standard conducting tool in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In musical periods before the Romantic Era (roughly 1820-1900), the composer typically found himself directing his own works, especially if he served as an official court or church musician. In this tradition, the *Kapellmeister* (literally "chapel master," or provincial conductor) served in many different musical capacities--composer, orchestral organizer, and conductor. Well-known composers such as Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven often led performances of their music from the keyboard.



Top: Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Center: A portrait of Dame Ethel Smyth by John Singer Sargent.

Above: Leonard Bernstein in 1971. Image of Leonard Bernstein courtesy Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, U.S. News & World Report Magazine Collection [LC-U9-24858-17].

As the very structure of classical music began to change, both in terms of the music itself and how it was produced, the roles of composer and conductor grew apart and the conductor began to take on new functions as interpreter of the score and performance coach of the orchestra and choir.

The need for a professional conductor partially grew out of the rhythmic innovations of the music itself. Composers such as Mozart and particularly Haydn and Beethoven began to introduce rhythmic irregularity into their music, altering one of the chief characteristics of the prevailing classical style. As composers experimented more with syncopation (the accenting of "off beats") and rubato (flexibility of tempo), ways of achieving rhythmic unevenness in a work, ensembles had greater need for a director not only to maintain an even tempo and steady beat, but also to guide them through the new style of musical expression that such innovations required.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, musicians also began to rely less on the aristocracy and the church and more on public audiences and concerts for support. The new market for music created new professional and artistic independence from the previous system of patronage, but it also demanded higher standards for musicians and greater accountability. The conductor gradually assumed responsibility for the musicianship of the ensembles he directed. (He, for until recently almost all conductors were male.)

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the conductor became increasingly more influential and powerful. He grew into a celebrity in his own right. He was expected to be a charismatic leader who inspired the orchestra, interpreted the music, and attracted audiences to his ensemble's performances.

The Emergence of Gay Conductors

Prior to the consolidation of the role and identity of the conductor in the nineteenth century, many musicians who organized and directed choruses, orchestras, and other musical ensembles, were also composers. Several of these composer-conductors were known for their involvement in same-sex sexual activity.

The clearest example of such a figure is Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687), who was a central figure in French music in the late seventeenth century. In addition to being Louis XIV's royal composer, many critics consider him primarily responsible for the development of French opera. Even though he married Madeleine Lambert and fathered six children, he created a number of scandals because of his sexual relationships with men.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries scholars have much more easily identified conductors who would now be classified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, even though their sexuality often imperiled their conducting careers or required them to exercise great discretion.

The life and career of Dimitri Mitropoulos (1896-1960) highlights the difficulties gay conductors faced in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1930s he caused a sensation when he debuted at the helm of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. His intensely physical conducting style, ability to conduct from memory without a score, and refusal to conduct with a baton marked him as an innovative and talented conductor. He assumed his first major position as conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and after twelve successful years there, he became the musical director of the New York Philharmonic in 1950.

But Mitropoulos' tenure at the New York Philharmonic was troubled. In *The Maestro Myth*, Norman Lebrecht argues that not only did his critics dislike his musical tastes, but they also despised him for his homosexuality, which was an open secret in the musical world. As Mitropoulos' popularity waned, critics used his bachelor status and implicit homosexual sensibility against him.

Mitropoulos was ultimately replaced by a man who more adeptly cultivated the proper masculine,

heterosexual image that audiences required of their conductors. Ironically, that man was Leonard Bernstein, himself a deeply closeted homosexual.

Exposing the homophobia that pervades the conducting profession, Lebrecht argues that the world of classical music fiercely protects the virile, masculine, mysterious image of the conductor. "Gay conductors," he writes, "are advised to hide their presumed vice as timidly as any country vicar." Often gay conductors have been free to pursue their sexual inclinations in private, but they have been required to maintain the image of the powerful, heterosexual maestro.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) had a relatively easier time succeeding as a conductor than did Mitropoulos, but that was probably due to the fact that he was a composer-conductor. Although best known for his work as *the* American composer, or "Dean of American Music" as he came to be known, Copland also spent roughly the second half of his career actively conducting.

Early in his education, he studied conducting for a short period of time with Albert Wolff, but most of his training in conducting came informally through the opportunities he had to conduct his own early compositions.

During the 1950s, Copland began to pursue professional conducting more actively and expanded his repertoire to include works by other composers, mostly other twentieth-century figures. In January of 1958 he conducted the New York Philharmonic, and this performance led to an engagement with the London Symphony Orchestra later in the month, a symphony he would work with over the next twenty-five years. From this point, Copland's career as a conductor took off, and he began to tour around the world as a guest conductor.

Most critics agree that Copland accepted his homosexuality and was able to live his life in relative openness, even if he would not be regarded as publicly "out" by today's standards. Copland refrained from commenting explicitly on his sexuality and its relations to his work as a composer. Although the subject of the relationship of sexuality to music is now open to discussion, nothing has yet been written on Copland's sexuality in relation to his conducting.

Interestingly, critics generally tend to describe Copland's music as "masculine" and "manly," yet his presence on stage conveyed a subtly different impression. As his biographer Howard Pollack notes, "For all his restraint, he cut a boyishly vigorous figure on the podium." Other critics have noted his "verve," "élan," and "zest" while conducting.

Given the difficulties Copland experienced in garnering respect from some of the American orchestras that he worked with, it is tempting to speculate on the impact his sexuality--implicitly communicated or otherwise--may have had on his reception by the conservative classical music establishment.

Whereas Copland may have come to terms with his sexuality relatively quietly and discreetly, Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) arguably never fully solved the torturing puzzle that his homosexual desires presented him. Married to actress Felicia Montaleagre in 1951, he was well aware at that time of his sexual attractions to men.

Unable to reconcile them with his desire to be heterosexual, he remained committed to Montaleagre for most of his life, even as he pursued relationships with men. He remained conflicted over his homosexuality throughout his life.

If Bernstein's response to his sexuality was different from his one-time mentor Copland, so, too, was his conducting career. Known for his dramatic presence in front of the orchestra, he was undeniably the most successful American conductor of the twentieth century, despite the belief of critics that his style was overly extravagant.

Bernstein's accomplishments were many. In succeeding Mitropoulos as music director of the New York Philharmonic in 1958, he became the first American-born conductor to lead one of the premier orchestras of the United States. Scholars credit him, along with other American composers and conductors, including Copland, with transforming classical music by creating a distinctly American idiom within a musical tradition that had been up to that time largely dominated by Europeans.

After assuming his role at the New York Philharmonic, he also used his position as conductor to create innovative musical programs that emphasized the conductor's role as teacher. His mission, as he put it, was primarily educational. His televised series of Young People's Concerts was a landmark in bringing music appreciation to the masses. The recipient of numerous national music awards, he also recorded prodigiously and reached a level of popularity and cultural visibility unprecedented for an American conductor.

Thomas Schippers (1930-1977) also had a distinguished career before his untimely death at the age of 47. Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, he reportedly began studying piano at the age of four. At age 20, he made his Broadway debut conducting Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *The Consul*. At 21, he became the youngest conductor to appear at the New York City Opera, and at age 25 he became the second youngest conductor to debut at the Metropolitan Opera.

In 1958, Schippers conducted the open air concerts at the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds, founded by his mentor Menotti. He also conducted the ill-fated premiere of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1966), written to celebrate the opening of the Metropolitan Opera's new home in Lincoln Center. In 1970, he became conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, a position he held until his death in 1977 of lung cancer.

Talented, stylish, youthful, and handsome, Schippers attracted admirers of both sexes. Although he married in 1965, he reportedly maintained a long relationship with Menotti.

The Overlooked History of Lesbian Conducting

Even though the history of conducting is almost entirely a history of a male-dominated profession, there is also a history of lesbian conducting. In medieval and early modern Europe, convents were central sites of music making for women. In these same-sex institutions, women were responsible for all aspects of music, and from this rich history, scholars have identified female musical directors who were likely involved in sexual relationships with other women.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Madalena Casulana (ca 1540-ca 1590), Francesca Caccini (1587-1641?), and Isabella Leonarda (1620-1704) are examples of women who composed and probably conducted works that invite lesbian interpretation and suggest the sexual interests of their composers.

The most prominent lesbian composer-conductor in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is Dame Ethel Smyth (1858-1944). Best known for her compositions, especially in opera, she also conducted occasionally. Most of the critical work thus far on Smyth that considers her lesbianism relates it to her compositions rather than to her conducting. In addition to living openly as a lesbian, she was also actively involved in the British suffrage movement and served a short sentence in prison for her radicalism.

Dutch Jewish lesbian Frieda Belinfante (1905-1995) was another pioneer. In Amsterdam, just prior to World War II, she became the first woman to conduct her own orchestra. Belinfante began her musical career as a cellist, but the onset of the war postponed her career.

Active in the Dutch resistance and in helping other Jews escape the Netherlands, she was forced to flee after she participated in the attack on the Amsterdam population registry in 1943. After the war, she emigrated to the United States and settled in Orange County, California, where she founded and conducted

the Orange County Philharmonic Orchestra.

Openly Gay Conductors

In the last twenty-five years, a few openly gay and lesbian conductors have been able to crack open the conducting closet and use their authority and experience to bolster the gay community and transform the heterosexism of the world of classical music.

Kay Gardner (b. 1941) entered the world of classical music as a flutist, but from a young age aspired to orchestral conducting. Keen to the challenges that women face in such a traditional field, she declared, "Conducting, especially orchestral conducting, is the last stronghold of the musical patriarchy."

Her early career involved researching and playing in women's folk music, and even though she married in 1960 and had two children, she remained interested in women's music and community, both folk and classical. In the late 1960s, she formed her own chamber orchestra, and eventually left her husband to pursue her musical studies full time at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

In the early 1970s she became active in Lavender Jane, a radical feminist music group, while she continued to work on her degree. In 1973 she helped produce the first openly lesbian classical LP called *Lavender Jane Loves Women*.

In 1977 she decided to pursue her dream of conducting and moved to Denver, Colorado, to study under Maestra Antonia Brico. In 1978 she co-founded the New England Women's Symphony and became its principal conductor. The symphony lasted only briefly, but its commitment to showcasing and supporting women composers and conductors had a powerful impact on the growing role of women in classical music.

Since then, Gardner has grown less interested in conducting traditional classical music and has focused more of her time on conducting her own work and using her influence as a conductor to support other female musicians.

Conductor, teacher, and administrator Jon Reed Sims (1947-1984) is best known for his work in founding a number of gay and lesbian music organizations in the late 1970s, including the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corps, the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, the Golden Gate Performing Arts, the orchestra Lambda Pro Musica, and the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Men's Community Chorus. His contributions to building gay and lesbian musical networks are regarded as fundamental to the creation of post-Stonewall gay communities in the United States.

In the more traditional world of classical music, English conductor Jeffrey Tate (b. 1943) has achieved an impressive career in conducting, even though he started relatively late. Despite his passion for music as a child and young adult, he initially chose not to pursue it professionally. Instead he completed his doctorate in medicine, qualifying as an eye surgeon at London's St. Thomas's Hospital.

In 1970, though, he took the répétiteur's course at the London Opera Centre, where he worked as a type of conductor's understudy, teaching the main conductor's interpretation of a work to individual singers. A year later, he joined the staff of Covent Garden Opera and over the next six years worked with conductors Carlos Kleiber, Sir Colin Davis, and Sir George Solti. He has also assisted Herbert von Karajan, James Levine, and John Pritchard.

Tate made his conducting debut in 1978 with *Carmen* at the Göteborg Opera in Sweden. Since then he has risen steadily in the conducting world, despite being born with *spina bifida occulta* and a two-way curvature of the spine. Tate has never allowed his condition, which requires him to sit while conducting, to interfere with his work, but in recent years he has acknowledged that he has to pace himself more carefully as he grows older.

Tate is best known for his work on operas by Mozart, Strauss, and Wagner, as well as with Mozart symphonies. Over the course of his career he has held numerous positions and made well-respected recordings. In 1985, Tate became the principal conductor of the English Chamber Orchestra, and starting in 1986, he was principal conductor at Covent Garden for five years. In 1989, he also became principal guest conductor of the French Orchestre National.

One of the few openly gay conductors on the international scene, Tate has spoken openly in interviews about his partner, Klaus Kuhlemann, a German geologist, whom he met in 1978 in Cologne, when he was at the Cologne Opera.

Considered by some in the music industry to be somewhat of a maverick, Michael Tilson Thomas (b. 1944) has had a notably successful classical music career, as pianist, conductor, and, lately, composer. He became assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra at 25 in 1969. Subsequently, he held positions as music director of the Buffalo Philharmonic, principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

In 1995, he assumed his current position as music director of the San Francisco Symphony. In this role, he has commissioned a number of important works by openly gay composers, including Lou Harrison and David Del Tredici.

Tilson Thomas's support of Del Tredici allowed the composer to create "Gay Life," a series of pieces based on poems by Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, and Paul Monette. In so doing, the composer and the conductor have helped broaden the range of classical music by allowing it to address explicitly gay issues and gay lives in music.

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