

Looking for music by women composers? Here's an entire festival.

The Boulanger Initiative's annual WoCo Festival returns to Strathmore with three days of music – and a mission



By Michael Andor Brodeur

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Illustration by Andrea Vercetti (Video: Andrea Vercetti)

It's the season of season announcements in the classical world, when orchestras drop large PDFs detailing their forthcoming slate of programs, premieres, commissions and other major orchestral to-dos. It's a quick way to survey how the classical world is responding to demands of the real one. Or not.

For instance, scanning the National Symphony Orchestra's announcement of its [2024-2025 season](#), I noticed a promising feature that also struck me as curious. Over the course of the coming season, the NSO will play works by composers Jessie Montgomery (two, actually), Jennifer Higdon, Cindy McTee and Gabriela Ortiz and a new oratorio commissioned from Julia Wolfe.

Notice anything these composers have in common? If you said "women," you get half a star. If you said "living women," you get the whole thing. Not that there's anything wrong with living women — but isn't that odd? In one sense, an increase in the presence of both women and living composers signals an orchestra updating its proverbial firmware, living up to all those diversity initiatives and audience strategies pitched during the pandemic.

But it also points blankly backward at an incorrect history lesson we've spent centuries teaching ourselves — that music from women is something categorically new.

This isn't to pick on the NSO, whose iffy percentages when it comes to programming women composers roughly match those of its counterparts in other major American cities. It's just one reality standing in the way of a much more interesting reality.

Boulangier Initiative co-founders Laura Colgate and Joy-Leilani Garbutt are hoping to change this state of affairs with WoCo Festival, an annual multiday festival co-presented by the Boulangier Initiative and Strathmore that assembles a pop-up community of women composers for three days of performances, workshops, discussions, musical exhibitions and installations. The festival takes place at multiple venues at Strathmore from April 12 to 14.

Colgate and Garbutt have observed more work by living women composers finding its way onto programs since the pandemic but insist the scope of the problem demands more sweeping corrective action — along with a grander historical perspective.

As Garbutt put it in a phone interview, “Focusing on gender-marginalized composers doesn’t mean only doing new music.”

“You have to go back to the starting point,” Colgate adds. “You have to look at the contemporaries of Beethoven and these other composers and find what else was out there. That’s how you diversify. You correct the problem by doing the work, and nobody is doing that work because those numbers are hovering around 2 percent. That’s the amount of programming that’s getting put toward nonliving historical women composers. Two percent!”

The most recent report on repertoire diversity from the League of American Orchestras shows slight improvement. Of 5,407 pieces programmed in the 2022-2023 season, only 12.2 percent were composed by women, living or dead (the number split about evenly between White women and women of color). Works by deceased men represented 73.6 percent of those programmed that season, with deceased women accounting for just 3.8 percent.

What’s more, Colgate has found that the bigger an orchestra’s budget — i.e. the more established the orchestra — the lower that number went.

“They’re scared that people won’t come, but they’re not giving any trust to their audience,” she says. “You’re telling me that if you put Augusta Holmès or Louise Farrenc on your season that they’re not going to buy a subscription? That’s absurd.”

This resistance to more aggressive corrective measures toward representation comes from all over the orchestra — music directors who don’t program works by women; long-tenured musicians who are none too eager to learn “new” repertoire; marketing departments with no sense of what to say about composers that history has kept hidden.

“Any programming that’s happening now that is not representative is a choice,” says Garbutt. “It’s a conscious choice to exclude composers that we know exist and we have the scores for.”

The Style section

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The mission of the Boulanger Initiative, which Colgate co-founded with Garbutt in 2019, is the promotion of music composed by “women and all gender-marginalized composers” through “performance, education, research, consulting, and commissions.” In doing so, the organization (which takes its name from the French composer Lili Boulanger) aims to dispel “a damaging myth that women have historically created little of artistic merit,” according to its website.

One important aspect of the initiative’s work is curriculum guides for educators, introducing students to the history of women composers before conventional music history can teach them otherwise.

“I think these are huge,” says Garbutt by phone. “It shouldn’t be a shock that women have always been composing music. And by getting this into curriculums earlier and earlier on, it won’t be a point that we need to make in a few decades.”

But at the core of the initiative’s work is the Boulanger Initiative Database (BID), an open-access collection of over 8,000 works by more than 1,200 composers, made freely available to musicians, conductors, administrators and independent musical explorers.

They also offer consulting services for orchestras, helping identify works by women to complement canonical centerpieces — and avoid the “packing peanut” approach to programming, where short works by underrepresented composers are “sprayed in” to fill the remaining space.

But as Colgate sees it, the first step to change is a change to the first steps. As a longtime orchestra musician herself — she currently serves as concertmaster for the National Philharmonic — Colgate knows well the fundamental place in the classical music education of excerpts, the short passages of music orchestras require hopeful musicians to play (say, a bit of the first movement of Mozart’s Symphony No. 39 for violinists or the third movement of Brahms’s Third for cellists).

“The excerpts that I had drilled into my brain by the time I was a sophomore in undergrad? They’re all still there,” she says. “Our entire school structure is based on performing excerpts for orchestra auditions. But if undergrads today knew pieces by Florence Price or Margaret Bonds or Louise Farrenc at the same level as those that I grew up with, the world could change in 20 years.”

Through the initiative’s Redefining the Canon program, orchestras submit their current excerpt lists, and a team of “excerpt foragers” comb through compositions from the BID, searching for excerpts comparable enough in their technical demands to serve as substitutes for more common selections. Working with the Initiative, the National Philharmonic is now among the first orchestras employing an excerpt list featuring a majority of historically marginalized composers.

“The more orchestras we have on board,” she says, “the faster we’re gonna get there.”

Of course, a major part of increasing the presence of women composers is providing more space for their music to be heard. This is where WoCo Fest comes in.

Produced by Boulanger Initiative and co-presented by Strathmore, WoCo Fest represents an attempt to fill a weekend and several spaces with music from women composers of every era, musicians at the top of their game and listeners with a hunger for something new — partially to prove that it can be done.

A Friday kickoff party at AMP by Strathmore will feature performances by cello and bandoneon duo Arco &, songwriter and filmmaker Be Steadwell, Thalea Quartet (who will also host workshops over the weekend), Cajun-Persian viola duo Tallā Rouge, cellist Amanda Gookin and others.

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From there, the festival — themed “Evolve” for its 2024 iteration — seeks to pull a thread through multiple eras of music. The Baroque ensemble Musica Spira will perform a Saturday afternoon concert of music by Isabella Leonarda, Maria Perucona, Francesca Caccini, Antonia Bembo and Chiara Margarita Cozzolani.

This will be followed by Spanish cellist and composer Andrea Casarrubios performing her own works alongside music by Nadia Boulanger (Lili’s elder sister). Ghost Ensemble will perform a program celebrating its 12-year collaboration with composer/oboist/installation artist Sky Macklay (whose inflatable “Harmonitrees” sculptures will also be on display).

Pianist Sarah Cahill will close Saturday’s performances with “The Future Is Female,” a program that hopscotches from the Baroque (Élisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre) to the Romantic (Farrenc), to the 20th century (Margaret Bonds) to the present day (Theresa Wong).

The festival concludes Sunday with an appearance by four-time Grammy Award-winning jazz drummer and producer Terri Lyne Carrington, who will bring her New Standards ensemble to the stage, featuring guitarist Mary Halvorson, pianist Angelica Sanchez, trumpeter Milena Castado, bassist Isaac Coyle, dancer Christiana Hunte and vocalist Vuyo Sotashe.

In addition to a weekend of high-quality performances, Colgate and Garbutt hope to create with WoCo an immersive environment for women in every corner of classical music to gather, network, collaborate and, crucially, hear each other. Garbutt cites a favorite quote from Carrington as a something of a guiding light.

“She said our work is corrective and collective,” says Garbutt, “That applies to all of us. It feels very important.”

WoCo Festival: Evolve runs April 12-14 at Strathmore, boulangerinitiative.org.