



Theme & Variations

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Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions.

Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

About women in music

Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, Rebecca Clarke, Lili Boulanger and Maria Callas, among many other extraordinary women that the History of Music perpetuated are, even so, exceptional cases and above all minority, considering the social contexts of past centuries in which male talent had immensely more possibilities and opportunities to reveal and establish itself. How many fantastic women remained in the shadow – some of them have only been rediscovered in the last few decades – simply because they were women. The damage is incalculable. In the 21st century, the world continues to change at great speed, perhaps faster than ever, and there has been a lot of progress in relation to equality, parity and related concepts, also in the world of classical music. Until just over twenty years ago, it was normal to see and hear the traditional New Year's concert with a Vienna Philharmonic composed solely of men. At present, there are already (few) orchestras with a majority of women. Where do we stand and where are we going?

A text like the present one is certainly infinitely short to analyze such an important and comprehensive theme, with so many and delicate

FEATUREDGUEST

Tabea Zimmermann



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Violist Tabia Zimmermann is one of the most popular and renowned artists of our time. She won first prizes at the 1982 Geneva International Competition, the 1983 Maurice Vieux Competition in Paris and the 1984 Budapest International Competition, among others. Internationally recognized as one of world's leading soloists and chamber musicians, her recording of Hindemith's complete works for viola has been highly acclaimed. After holding similar posts in Saarbrücken and Frankfurt, she has been a professor at the Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler in Berlin since 2002.

dimensions and variations. To support some pertinent reflections, I asked for help from one of the most respected and consecrated women in the current music scene: violist Tabea Zimmermann. «I don't think women generally have more facilities or difficulties than men», she says in response to my question about equal opportunities in the present. The context is certainly different from the one lived around 40 years ago, when she started her international career, but she emphasizes that when she arrived at the University, she was treated like everyone else and never suffered any kind of prejudice. Even so, she remembers an episode in which her high school's principal claimed that finishing high school «wasn't that important for the girls»...

With extensive teaching experience and former students spread all over the planet, Tabea Zimmermann recalls that the most relevant difference between female and male students is that «both must overcome specific and common difficulties at different times». She stresses that everyone has a «distinct profile and potential» and that «elevating individual facets» is positive and essential, «as long as it does not become more important than musical masterpieces themselves».

Tabea Zimmermann was artist-in-residence at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam in the 2019-2020 season and at the Berlin Philharmonic in 2020-2021. She was recently awarded the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, an award that annually distinguishes the most important personalities in the classical world: the 47 winners since the award's creation in 1974 include Britten, Karajan, Bernstein, Ligeti, Abbado, Barenboim and many others... but few female others. Tabea Zimmermann was only the third woman to receive this distinction. I dare ask you if she thinks these extraordinary recognitions – including the artist residencies in Amsterdam and Berlin – could have happened before, if she were a man. Or does she think a woman has to give 120% to reach the top? Zimmermann responds modestly: «I regard the titles and awards mentioned as the highlight of my career and I am grateful that I was not confronted with them before!» On the other hand, she emphasizes that a woman is usually subject to «constant pressure to balance the tasks of a mother and a musician» and that, if she were a man, at certain stages «certainly would not have received so much advice and insinuations to back off» in her professional life.

Returning to the role of women in the orchestral context and how does an orchestra transforms itself as women gain more prominence and influence, Zimmermann insists on the feminine and maternal nature, characteristics that, in practice, she considers inseparable from the musical profession. Also bearing in mind that «working conditions are now often regulated in order to make it easier to balance work and family», her main motivation is to «transport the feminine and maternal point of view to music and carry listening and consonance for the family». The same logic certainly applies to stable chamber groups or to faculty of music academies and universities all over the world too, where the female presence is increasingly noticed and appreciated. In sufficient proportion to the male presence? Is it legitimate and fair to impose parity quotas? Complex issues that are extremely dependent on the geographic, social and political context in which they arise.

Looking at the music market on a global scale, the expansion of women in virtually all sectors and subsectors is equally evident. But not everything is rosy, especially when it comes to light that some orchestras put as a primary criterion

when choosing the next principal director that he/she must necessarily be a woman, excluding any male candidate from the outset. Of course, everyone is free to choose as they please, as long as they don't commit illegalities. But wouldn't it be important to keep *quality* at the top of the criteria?

In the same global music market, it is impossible not to notice a growing use of the female image, sometimes bordering on sexism or openly sexist – there are also male cases, but very few. In general, classical music is still, in this topic, light years from the level of musical sectors such as Rap or Hip Hop and it is opportune to denounce that the responsibility falls on both the organizers, the public or them themselves/soloists who intend to sell their image without great prejudice. In the midst of all this, where is the music? Is there a deliberate instrumentalization of women? Of the music itself? Tabea Zimmermann affirms that «we live in an era that emphasizes the individual in such a way that it has become very difficult for young musicians to find a place of their own.» It is not strange, therefore, that some musicians suffer more from the disease of being noticed, adored, famous, different, special... «Each individual must discover for himself what he thinks is right, enriching and worthwhile to fight for. Unfortunately, sometimes it's more about business than music and that's exactly what I regret and find embarrassing», laments Tabea Zimmermann.

These and other issues addressed in this text, or others whose format does not make it possible to address, certainly gain different dimensions according to the continent, country or city we are referring to. The findings and opinions will also be diverse and fluctuating, sometimes even completely opposite. It is certain that the particularities and specificities of being a woman or a man still seek the ideal balance in society in general and in the music world in particular. The last few decades have allowed important achievements, more balance and justice, but the road ahead is still long.