

Does Arizona need an all-woman orchestra

KERRY LENGEL
THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

Does Phoenix need an all-female orchestra — in 2017?

That's debatable, but it is happening nonetheless. The freshly minted Women's Orchestra of Arizona will give its debut concert on Sunday, Feb. 26, at Lincoln Heights Christian Church in Phoenix. (That's Oscars night, but the show is at 4 p.m. and will run for only about an hour, so nobody has to miss Jimmy Kimmel's opening sketch.)

The community orchestra features volunteer musicians ranging from talented teens to retired professionals. They will be playing selections by Vivaldi ("The Four Seasons"), Grieg, Elgar and the French composer *Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre*.

The group's founder is conductor Livia Gho, who moved to the Valley in 2015 to serve as artistic director for the Phoenix Women's Chorus.

"I always had the idea of starting a women's orchestra for a variety of reasons," Gho said. "One is to provide opportunities for women. Especially for young soloists, this will be their first big performing opportunity with an orchestra."

There is no question that classical music for centuries was largely a playing ground for upper-class white males — you know, just like every other major cultural institution in Western civilization. But times have changed.

Over the past several decades, major American orchestras (including the Phoenix Symphony) have adopted the practice of blind auditioning, evaluating potential members based only on their sound and not on their sex, race or appearance — at least in the initial rounds of tryouts. Minimizing discrimination, often based on subconscious bias, has resulted in a huge increase in women on concert stages, although not yet equal representation.

"When you get to organizations like the Phoenix Symphony where there are full-time jobs, it's more men than women," said Carl Reiter, executive director of the Scottsdale Philharmonic, which relies on professional musicians who volunteer their time.

However, "In most of the community groups, you will find more women than you do men."

You will also find more young women than men training for classical-music careers at colleges, universities and conservatories these days — as is true for higher education as a whole.

For example, this reporter recently visited Arizona State University's School of Music, where orchestra students were helping Phoenix Symphony maestro Tito Muñoz work out the kinks in a world-premiere concerto by Earl Maneein, scheduled for an April concert featuring violin

Arizona Women's Orchestra: 'Women of Note'

When: 4 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 26.

Where: Lincoln Heights Christian Church, 2121 E. Lincoln Drive, Phoenix.

Admission: Free.

Details: Register at eventbrite.com.

star Rachel Barton Pine. And most of those students were women — although there was a lot more testosterone in the percussion and brass sections, to be sure.

All of this may argue for the idea that an all-women orchestra is a solution in search of a problem. However, a scan through the names of sources quoted in this story hints at a more complicated reality. Just mentioned were a conductor, a composer and an orchestra executive who are all men. And that is definitely representative of those respective fields.

And that's why Gho's mission with the Arizona Women's Orchestra is also to cultivate female conductors and, in future concerts, to highlight the work of female composers.

"We are also looking to redefine what classical music concerts mean to us," Gho said. "Instead of a typical two-hour-long program, we're having a much shorter program. And we're doing away with this whole audience versus performer perspective. So for this upcoming concert, we are getting the orchestra to be in the center of the room and having the audience sit around us, because I feel that a concert shouldn't be passive listening. There should be some form of audience engagement, learning out to get the audience to be part of the process."

Serving as Gho's associate conductor with the orchestra — and as her mentor — is classical-music veteran Cindy H. Petty, who currently leads the East Valley Youth Symphony and the Oregon Arts Orchestra, among many other gigs.

"The Women's Orchestra of Arizona is about empowering and supporting women, not about competition or exclusivity," she said.

"Is there a need to make a political statement? Probably not a huge need, because there's not as big a chasm. (But) we're still in a time where the empowerment of women is very important. Roles are vastly changing in the world with men and women, but there is still unity in a female bond, and making music is wonderful.

"Regardless of how we try to level the field, there's a different quality that males and females bring to the table. I don't know that music will define that, but I think that will be interesting to explore. What does an all-female orchestra sound like? Does it sound different? Does it matter?



The brand-new Women's Orchestra of Arizona is lead by cond

"I see it has bringing out women's talent as they try to excel in all areas of their lives. What we hope to do is empower women in all areas."

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PATRIOTS DAY (R) 2:35, 7:45	ASSASSIN'S CREED (PG13) 11:50AM
WHY HIM? (R) 11:40AM, 7:40	DOCTOR STRANGE (PG13) 2:25, 7:25
UNDERWORLD: BLOOD WARS (R) 4:50	COLLATERAL BEAUTY (PG13) 2:15
NOCTURNAL ANIMALS (R) 12:15, 5:15	TROLLS (PG) 12:05, 5:05
SILENCE (R) 4:30	ALLIED (R) 11:45AM

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