

## Breaking barriers: More female conductors make their way to front of orchestra

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Estonian conductor Anu Tali returns to the Madison Symphony Orchestra for the second season in a row. In a conservative, male-dominated field, Tali is used to hearing surprise over her gender. She insists "I'm a very normal human being. I'm not a typical maestro." Jouni Harala  
Last season, a petite blond conductor with king-size gestures shook up the Madison Symphony Orchestra.

This week, that Estonian maestro, Anu Tali, will return to the MSO in an unusually close follow-up visit while John DeMain conducts the opera "Nixon in China" in Vancouver, British Columbia. Tali, 37, founded the Nordic Symphony Orchestra in 1997 with her twin sister, Kadri, and not long after began touring internationally as a guest conductor. Her affection for her roots is visible in the program she'll conduct this weekend, featuring "Dawn" by Heino Eller ("the father of Estonian symphonic music," Tali said), Symphony No. 1 by Sibelius, and Stephen Hough playing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. "It's very much my program, and I hope to do justice to that," Tali said. "I'm so pleased to come back."

In 2005, the New York Times identified Tali as part of a "new wave of female conductors" who, "with the notable exception of music director posts at the largest symphonies ... have vanquished nearly every major orchestral barrier worldwide." But when Tali appeared with the MSO in 2008, it had been more than eight years since the symphony had invited a woman to lead a program (Janna Hymes-Bianchi in 2000).

Female conductors "shouldn't be news anymore, since it's been happening for 20 years," said Beverly Taylor, head of the choral program at UW-Madison and conductor of the Madison Symphony Chorus, which performs with the MSO.

"Symphony music tends to be a bit conservative in its views," Taylor said. "But the face of leadership is changing. The thought of a woman running for president was unthinkable ... people would rather vote for a newcomer than a woman. There are a lot of old opinions held about what it means to be authoritative."

Stephen Hough, who will perform with Tali, is a well-known British pianist and polymath (someone with encyclopedic knowledge in several areas) in poetry, composition and religion writing. He said the rise in female conductors mirrors changing ideas about what a conductor does. "A female conductor is an interesting thing, because it first of all challenges the idea of a conductor as a dictatorial, dominant force," Hough said, "and maybe it reinforces the idea of a conductor as someone who is sharing a musical idea with people."

Tali is used to the focus on her gender, especially when she tours, and in conversation she's gracious about answering such questions.

"Instead of drawing these frames around either female, male, gay, non-gay, hetero ... it's all depending on personality," she said. "It depends on you, this person, maybe not today the same as tomorrow. If we find this connection on stage or with our audience, we can do wonderful things. "I would never ever limit myself to thinking of somebody based on sexual priority, or being a man or woman, or young or old. It's just not important. Music is as close as we get to God in this living world. This is an international language that everyone, somehow, understands."

Conductor Taylor became friendly with Tali last year when the latter visited. The professor recently co-authored a book with a dozen other women called "Wisdom, Wit and Will: Women Choral Conductors on their Art."

"There was a generation ahead who was shut out of music schools and training," she said. "That's where the problem occurs. It's the same with women and government. If you don't have access to the normal ways of rising through it's hard to see someone."

Ching Chun Lai, a doctoral candidate in orchestra conducting at the UW-Madison School of Music, started to conduct as a freshman in Taiwan.

Though Lai's mentors are all male, including James Smith of the UW Symphony Orchestra, she said it's rare for someone to comment that she shouldn't be on the podium because she's a woman. She compared it to female doctors and lawyers. While it was once a bit rare, now such women are judged on their skill.

"It's seldom the issue of female or male has come up to me," Lai said. "It's really the issue of, are you a good musician, do you work well with the musicians. But I'm a younger generation." "What matters is if you do the job well."

Lai agreed with Tali that personality is important when choosing a career as a conductor. But she thinks it's more than that.

"It's not only the personality, I really feel it's the music," Lai said. "If you don't have that kind of special relationship with the music, that you really enjoy it, that you really want to interpret that piece, that strong intention in your mind, I don't think it's going to work. You won't want to be a maestro."

"For me it is very natural," Tali said. "It's no big deal. It's not a masculine era in music or anything, it's just my instrument. I'm aware I'm very different, but so is everybody."

"If you have a calling and you're different than the other people are, don't ever try to fit into other people's shoes," she added. "Just go the way you feel is right, and you'll probably make it there."