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## Marin Alsop: Dream job or nightmare?

In 2005, the board of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra appointed conductor Marin Alsop as the orchestra's next Music Director, to begin in the 2007 season. It was the culmination of Alsop's lifetime of commitment to both classical music and conducting, and it was historically significant as it was the first time that a major US orchestra had appointed a woman leader. Alsop said it was "a defining moment for me, both as a human being and as a conductor."

Alsop had been offered her dream job. Accepting it seemed the obvious thing to do – until a very public, and very unexpected, backlash changed the dynamic.

### Women in classical music

Alsop achieved her success in a profession that has historically been dominated by straight, white men. Prominent male conductors routinely made public comments about why women were unfit to lead orchestras. The rationales ranged from the idea that it was unnatural for women because women are inherently weak<sup>1</sup> to the conviction that women conductors were inappropriate because "a sweet girl on the podium can make one's thoughts drift towards something else."<sup>2</sup> For decades, these views played out in concert halls across the globe: the Vienna Philharmonic did not officially admit women musicians until 1997 – and did not actually select a woman until 2003 because the male musicians insisted doing so would require them to "lower their standards." (Female harpist Anna Leikes, a paid member of the orchestra for years, had her name excluded from printed concert programmes, was not shown on television, and had only her hands glimpsed in video coverage).<sup>3</sup> The Berlin Philharmonic did not admit a woman musician until 1982; 20 years later, only 12 of its 128 players were female.<sup>4</sup> Of the 94 musicians in the London Symphony Orchestra in 2012, only 29% were women. Across world orchestras, the number of women musicians ranges from the Vienna State Opera Orchestra's 7% to several US orchestras that hover around 40%.<sup>5</sup>

It was against this backdrop that Alsop nurtured her dream of leading a world-class orchestra.

### Building the dream

Born in 1956 the only child of two classical musicians, Alsop does not remember a time when music wasn't part of her life. "I was so young when my parents steered me toward music," she reflected." At the age of two she began to learn piano. By seven, she was a violin student in the prestigious pre-college programme at the Juilliard School in New York. At nine, after seeing Leonard Bernstein conduct a Young People's Concert in New York, she decided she wanted to be a conductor herself. Her (male) violin teacher promptly told her that girls don't conduct. Alsop relayed his opinion to her parents – and came down to breakfast the next morning to

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