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The Maestro: Marin Alsop – leading “under a huge magnifying glass”

In January 2019, the World Economic Forum (WEF) presented Marin Alsop with its prestigious Crystal Award, describing her as “one of the greatest conductors of our time.”¹ This elite prize recognises the achievements of leading artists and cultural figures who serve as role models for all of society – not just those who lead within their own fields. Setting the stage for the opening meeting at Davos, the WEF announced that Alsop was among the “cultural leaders [who] will join their peers from business, government, the media and civil society to advance dialogue on how inclusivity and sustainability can be the pillars of change.”² Alsop’s participation in the Davos meetings wasn’t limited to her role as an award winner: she also conducted the opening concert, leading – for the first time in the event’s history – an all-woman orchestra.

Trailblazing in the elite (and, some would argue, insular) world of classical music is nothing new for Alsop. When honouring her with one of its prestigious fellowships (colloquially known as ‘genius awards’), the MacArthur Foundation lauded Alsop’s “masterful conducting technique and visionary artistic programming.” Identifying her as one of the most accomplished conductors in the world, the Foundation observed that, “through her musicality, her skill in making the unusual understandable, and her championing of contemporary music, Alsop defies stereotypes and offers a new model of leadership for orchestras in the U.S. and abroad.”³

Today, Alsop serves as the Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra (BSO), the Principal Conductor & Music Director of the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra, the Chief Conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (RSO), and the Director of Graduate Conducting Program at the Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute. With her eight-year tenure with São Paulo having ended in 2019, Alsop moved into the newly created role of Conductor of Honour and will return each year to work with the orchestra.

But, for most of her career, it was widely accepted in the orchestral community that someone like Alsop could not rise to the top of the profession.

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