
When Repertoire is Curriculum: What We Do Not Teach in Collegiate Orchestras

By

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Abstract

While programming and repertoire selection form the majority of a conductor's artistic duties, collegiate orchestra directors have an additional consideration as to how orchestral experiences shape and inform students' music education—repertoire choices determine what students will not learn in their college training years. The current study surveyed the 2016–17 collegiate orchestra concert programs of 53 US institutions. The findings suggest that college orchestras were more like to program American composers than professional orchestras. However, women composers and living composers were drastically under-represented. Modeling Rob Deemer's proposal for well-balanced programming with factors influencing orchestral programs, I propose a practical repertoire recommendation for fellow collegiate orchestras, to include around 20% of works by living composers and 6–8% by women composers annually.

Keywords: women composer, orchestra, programming, collegiate ensemble

Introduction

Programming and repertoire selection form a significant part of the conductor's artistic duties. Many musical and non-musical factors influence concert programs of ensembles of various types and levels, such as instrumentation, the size, and strength of the group, the length of the concert, the soloists, cost of rental music, performance venue, audience taste, and marketing strategies. Several scholars have examined programming factors and the repertoire choices of community and professional orchestras: Tamburri, Munn, and Pompe conducted a few studies investigating the relationship between programming, ticket sales, and management of US professional orchestras; their studies found some correlations between repertoire selection and business management.¹ On the other hand, researchers, including Dowd, Kremp, and Matthews focused on the selected repertoire itself instead of the factors influencing such choices. Their surveys of symphonic canon performed by professional orchestras reveal how some composers and works remain popular over the decades, while individual composers gradually gained more visibility.²

In higher education, selecting repertoire for collegiate ensembles is unique because these ensemble directors also wear the hat of music educators. While choosing appropriate repertoire to meet the technical and musical abilities of students is important, the selections must also fit the overall artistic goals and curriculum trajectory of students' collegiate education, both within and beyond the orchestral or ensemble programs. Many studies on collegiate ensemble repertoire selections focus on collegiate wind band programming. Collegiate orchestras pose a specific challenge due to the establishment and preservation of the symphonic canon, and the nature of orchestral ensembles.

Research on collegiate orchestra repertoire has been sparse. Goodman's 1962 survey examined the general status of orchestras in higher education, including orchestra personnel, community participation, tenure-status of the conductor, concert activities, rehearsal structure, concert planning, and budget.³ (Though participating conductors were asked to submit concert programs, Goodman did not present his findings as a repertoire study.) Dixon conducted a similar study in 2002, with more emphasis on the repertoire, orchestra membership, and information of the conductors—their academic rank, educational background, primary instrument, and so forth.⁴ Although these two studies do not examine college orchestra repertoire choices exclusively, they provide insight into resources for the background and historical materials of college orchestral program development.

In the past decade, more scholars have focused on repertoire selections and influencing factors of college orchestra concert programs. Smith's study is perhaps the most comprehensive to date,⁵ while Neves limited his study on the most-performed works,⁶ while Ladd, Tedford, and Taylor chose to investigate the contemporary repertoire performed by college orchestras.⁷

As Smith's study showed, two major trends are in a constant debate in college orchestra programming, including a variety of repertoire, or focusing on the standard repertoire.⁸ I am a strong advocate for diverse programming for two reasons. First, the argument of preparing students for the professional field only with standard repertoire is not valid. The current call for diversity in the orchestral program has led to a more inclusive orchestral literature in professional orchestral realm. Moreover, not all music major graduates will enter professional orchestras as a career choice. The majority of the students have a variety of career choices, and they require exposure to diverse musical styles. Second, as Robert Reynolds pointed out in his oft-cited article, the core question in selecting repertoire concerns what students will learn, and perhaps

more importantly, what students will *not* learn.⁹ By selecting certain pieces from the canon, we eliminate opportunities for students to learn and perform other works during their college training, causing a “missing piece” in their education.

In order to understand this missing piece of collegiate orchestral programs, I conducted a Repertoire Survey, analyzing 2016–17 collegiate orchestra concert programs of 53 US institutions, and found that women composers and living composers are most under-represented groups. In response to these findings, I propose a practical repertoire selection standard for fellow collegiate orchestras, to include around 20% of the works by living composers annually, and 6–8% by women composers.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question of what collegiate orchestras do *not* perform. To gain a deeper understanding of the "missing piece" of collegiate orchestra programs, I analyzed repertoire selections of 310 performances by 97 orchestras from 53 institutions in 2016–17. The repertoire collection came from two primary sources: 1) a Repertoire Survey participated in by 33 member schools of the College Orchestra Directors Association (CODA), and 2) the concert programs of the 20 leading institutions I had collected from a previous study.^{10 11}

The CODA Repertoire Survey

In May and August 2017, I sent two e-mails to the CODA Member List, a group email service where CODA members can opt to sign up for information exchange. I invited member school directors to participate in an online 2016–17 Repertoire Survey. As a Google Form, I presented the survey, and I later merged the collected data into excel sheets for further analysis. It was not possible to determine a response rate since 1) the statistics were not available showing

the number of subscribers during the time of the email circulation, and 2) the CODA Member List subscribers are not exclusively member-school directors—any interested parties, such as composers, retired directors, conductors of other types of orchestras could subscribe to the list as a means of information exchange.

In total, 33 CODA member schools responded to the survey, and I collected 170 concert programs of 41 orchestras. Respondents were asked to provide:

(1) Basic information, including:

- a. Name of school
- b. Name of orchestra(s)
- c. General string count
- d. Number of concerts performed each year
- e. Number of rehearsals per week
- f. Total hours of rehearsals per week

(2) A list of concert programs performed by all orchestras within the school during the 2016–17 year.

Survey of 20 Leading Institutions

Between February and May 2017, I surveyed orchestra concert programs of 20 leading US academic institutions of the 2016–17 year. To determine the 20 leading institutions subjects, I compiled three Top US Music Schools lists from 2012, 2014, and 2015, by US College Ranking, and selected the 20 institutions that appeared in all or most of them.¹² I took the concert program information from each school's official website, with exceptions of that provided by the concert offices of the University of Southern California and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. In total, I collected 140 concert programs by the 56 surveyed orchestras.

Analysis

In analyzing the data, I first organized all collected concert programs through the two sources (CODA and the Top Music Schools list) into an Excel sheet, then used a *pivot table* to

filter information to obtain statistics such as most performed works, most performed composers, nationality representation of concert programs, and the percentage of works by women composers and living composers. I did not include repeated performances of the same concert. Since the repertoire selection of fully staged opera or ballet productions involve more than the orchestral department, I also excluded those performances, except for operatic excerpts presented as gala concerts.

Findings

The findings revealed that current collegiate orchestra repertoire selections generally conform to the trends of professional orchestras, and such practice has changed little in past decades. Beethoven and Mozart were among the most mentioned composers in both Goodman's 1965 research and Dixon's 2002 survey and remained the most performed composers in the current study (Table 1).¹³

Table 1: Dixon 2002 Survey Results with 2016-17 Repertoire Survey Finding: Most Performed Composers

Composer	Dixon's 2002 Study	Current Study	
	Number of Mention	Number of Pieces Performed	Number of Concert Performances
Beethoven	18	26	72
Mozart	17	48	67

By nationality, works by German, Austrian, Russian, and French composers formed half of the collegiate concert programs, a bit less than the 60% of professional orchestra programs, as found in O'Bannon's 2016–17 repertoire study of US professional and community orchestras (Figure 1).¹⁴

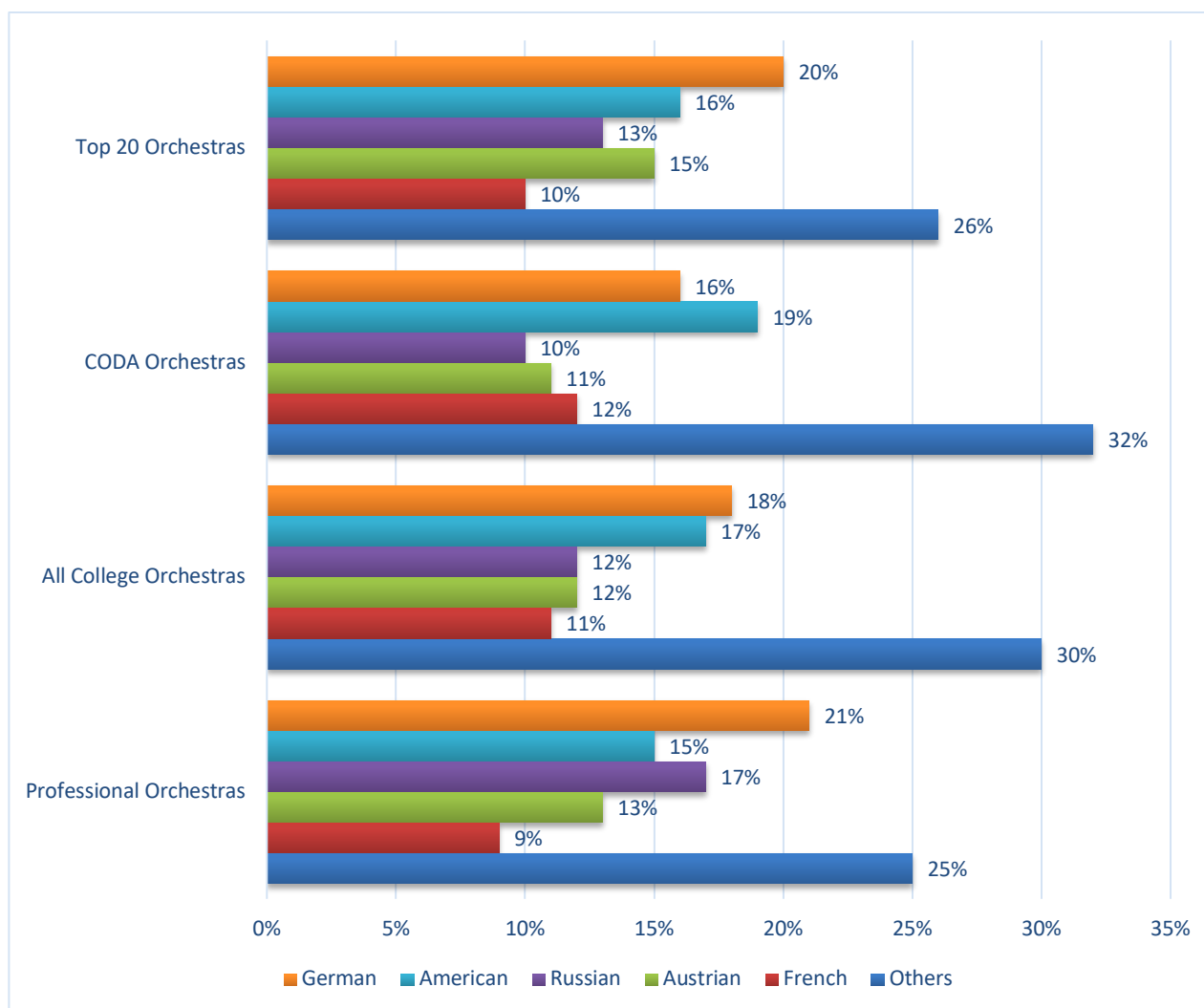


Figure 1. Composer Nationalities in 2016–17 Concert Performances.

However, the results of my Repertoire Survey demonstrated that collegiate orchestras, as compared to professional ensembles, were more likely to perform works by American composers. American composers were the most performed group for CODA member orchestras, representing 19% of all concert programs. Additionally, among all surveyed institutions, American composers accounted for 17.6% of all performed repertoire, only slightly behind German composers, at 18.2%. On the other hand, women composers remained dismally underrepresented in collegiate orchestra concert programs. Among all surveyed schools, only 3.1% of all performed works that women composed, and they accounted for 8.7% of all

programmed composers. As for living composers, even though they accounted for nearly a third of all performed composers (27.7%), their compositions made up only 14.9% of all the performances (Table 2).

Table 2: Representation of Women Composers and Living Composers Among Surveyed College Orchestras

Percentage of Works	Number of performances	Number of Pieces Performed	Number of Composers
by Women Composers	3.1%	4.3%	8.7%
by Living Composers	14.9%	18.7%	27.7%

In the Discussion below, I describe the survey results more fully within these two categories.

Discussion

New Music and Living Composers

In reviewing the relevant literature on collegiate orchestra programming, I found several dissertations used various terms to describe recent compositions, including “contemporary music,” “new music,” or “newer music.”¹⁵ Each study defined its time span differently, some—following the League of American Orchestras’ suggestion—describing contemporary music as “orchestral music of our time composed in the past 25 years.”¹⁶ Rather than attempting to define “new music” and running up tallies on dates of compositions, I had chosen to focus on recent compositions as defined by the composer being alive at the time of this study, as these artists continue to influence contemporary aesthetics and performance practice in the broader genre of orchestral music. To present the current study, I use the term “contemporary music” when referring to these composers’ orchestral outputs.

Examining the 2016–17 concert programs of the 56 surveyed colleges revealed that almost a third (27.68%) of performed composers were living at the time of the performances, but their programmed pieces accounted for only 18.7% of all performed works, and 14.9% of all collegiate concert programming (Table 2). Out of the 176 works by living composers, only 11 were performed more than once in the year. In other words, living composers held an inferior status to the historic masters, whose works were performed repeatedly across organizations. A calculation of all performed works showed that Mozart had 48 pieces performed on 67 concerts, and Beethoven had 26 pieces performed on 72 concerts, for instance (Table 3). Most living composers only have a few works performed in a given year, and these compositions are less likely to be programmed across various orchestras, as the statistics revealed (Table 4). No doubt, this programming phenomenon would be expected for the music of our time, as we are still shaping and forming our opinions towards modern compositions, and establishing the status of contemporary composers and their works.

Table 3: Most Performed Composers

Composer	Number of Performances	Number of Pieces Performed
Beethoven, Ludwig van	72	26
Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus	67	48
Brahms, Johannes	46	17
Dvorak, Antonin	40	18
Strauss, Richard	29	19
Tchaikovsky, Pyotr Ilyich	27	12

Composer	Number of Performances	Number of Pieces Performed
Mendelssohn, Felix	27	14
Stravinsky, Igor	26	14
Haydn, Franz Joseph	26	21

Table 4: Most Performed Living Composers

Composer	Number of Performances	Number of Pieces Performed
Williams, John	17	10
Adams, John	15	9
Theofanidis, Christopher	5	3
Rutter, John	5	5
Bates, Mason	5	3
Marquez, Arturo	5	1
Higdon, Jennifer	4	4

As shown in Table 4, two living composers were widely performed by collegiate orchestras in 2016–17: John Williams (17 performances of 10 pieces) and John Adams (15 performances of 9 pieces).¹⁷ Four composers ranked third, with five performances of their compositions: Christopher Theofanidis, John Rutter, Mason Bates, and Arturo Marquez. The Pulitzer-winner Jennifer Higdon remained slightly behind with four performances of four of her works. Although most living composers had a few compositions performed only once by a

particular orchestra, a few exceptions appear as popular contemporary works among collegiate orchestras: Adams' *The Chairman Dances* and Marquez's "Danzon No. 2," both performed by five different ensembles, and Theofanidis' *Rainbow Boy*, performed by three ensembles. The various arrangements and excerpts from Williams' *Star Wars* sequel were also much loved and performed by four institutions.

Two researchers, Taylor and Tedford, discussed possible factors of orchestra directors choosing (or not) works by living composers in their dissertations.¹⁸ They cited budget restrictions, difficulty level, instrumentation, duration of the concert program, artistic considerations (such as timbre and harmonic design of the piece), and audience and student tastes. Of all stated concerns, budget restrictions emerged as the most significant issue in both studies; in particular, rental fees and sheet music purchases would in cases be prohibitively high, preventing ensembles from performing more contemporary music.

The Repertoire Survey of this current study included no questions about budget issues in choosing repertoire, but a quick survey of sheet music costs verified the finding that budget concerns prevent ensembles from programming contemporary music. For example, purchasing the Hal Leonard edition of the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* suite for orchestra costs \$745 for the set of parts and \$85 for the full score.¹⁹ The same composition arranged for concert band by Jay Bocook (also published by Hal Leonard) costs only \$90 for both the full score and set of parts.²⁰ Similarly, rental and license fees (not just purchases) from big publishers can add up to prohibitively high costs, which become challenging for universities with fewer resources.

Even so, when programming contemporary works, ensemble directors could balance repertoire selections between established living composers and emerging talents, hosting concerts including the music of our time can be achieved without much financial burden. In my

experience as a conductor, some living composers handle their own rental business and are willing to charge a nominal fee, or even no fee, to have a performance of their works—as also noted by Taylor. Furthermore, the Women's Philharmonic Advocacy offers annual performance grants for American orchestras performing works by women composers, both historical and living.²¹

The Missing Half: Women Composers

Among the 942 pieces performed in 310 collegiate orchestra concerts in 2016–17, 40 were composed by 31 female composers. Eight composers were historical figures: Anna Amelia of Prussia, Grazyna Bacewica, Lili Boulanger, Cecile Chaminade, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Louise Farrenc, Clara Schumann, and Maria Theresa de Paradis. Four of the remaining 23 composers were current composition students of the performing school, leaving only 19 established living women composers. None of the living women composers had any piece performed more than once across all surveyed collegiate orchestras. Among all women composers, Jennifer Higdon led with four performed pieces, followed by Joan Tower, with three programmed works. Four other composers (Nkeiru Okoye, Hilary Purrington, Caroline Shaw, and Augusta Read Thomas) had two pieces performed. The majority of female composers had only one piece performed once in the year.

Table 5: Status of Women Composers

Percentage of Works by Women Composers	Number of performances	Number of Pieces Performed	Number of Composers
All Surveyed Schools	3.1%	4.3%	8.7%
Top 20 Music Schools	2.6%	3.6%	7.5%
CODA Member Schools	3.6%	4.4%	8%

The issue of women composers' underrepresentation in the orchestral realm has received little research and only gradually beginning to receive public attention. In 2016–17, women composers accounted for 2.6% concerts of top 20 music schools, and 3.1% of all surveyed collegiate orchestras (Table 5).²² In the professional field, a survey of the 2018–19 repertoire choices of 15 orchestras worldwide showed that only 2.3% of performed works were by women, and 95% of the concerts consist of music composed only by men.²³ The Cleveland Orchestra, celebrating its 100th year in the upcoming 2019–2020 season, includes only one female composer, Higdon, in its centennial program.²⁴ The Philadelphia Orchestra inserted two works by women into its 2018–19 season, only after criticism of a non-inclusive concert programming.²⁵

Table 6: Status of Women Composers Among Living Composers

Percentage of Works by Women Composers Among Living Composers	Number of Performances	Number of Pieces Performed	Number of Composers
All Surveyed Schools	16.1%	18.2%	18.3%
Top 20 Music Schools	16.4%	17.7%	18.4%
CODA Member Schools	15.8%	18.3%	19.4%

Although one might argue that fewer historical women composers have works entered the standard orchestral literature, women are also drastically underrepresented among living composers. Only 18.3% of all programmed living composers were women in the surveyed year, accounting for 16.1% of total concert programs (Table 6).²⁶ With more attention and research in this area's gender imbalance, many college orchestral directors have begun to include works by women intentionally. The New England Conservatory (NEC) pledged to include one work by a female composer at every orchestra concert for the 2016–17 year. The NEC also performed the

most works by living composers and women composers during the year, among all 53 surveyed higher education institutions, with 16 pieces by living composers and seven works by women. In the same year, Cornell University, led by director Chris Kim, performed six works by women, while the Mount Holyoke College orchestra performed five compositions under the direction of Ng Tian Hui. With more higher education institutions joining this wave, I am optimistic about seeing more innovative orchestral programmings from fellow directors.

Suggestions for Curricular Change

In 2018, Rob Deemer, composer and founder of the Composer Diversity Database, proposed a diverse and inclusive season goal for any ensemble to include 25–35% living composers, 15–25% women composers, and 15–25% composers of color.²⁷ He later reported that the 36 works planned for the Texas Women’s University’s Wind Bands 2018–19 year included 61% by living composers, 19% by women composers, and 17% by composers of color.²⁸ One does note that, currently, more works by living composers and composers of color are available for wind ensembles, and no symphonic canon has yet to appear in core repertoire like this for orchestras. Vocal and chamber ensembles, on the other hand, bear a different literature heritage, thus differing repertoire considerations. Therefore, I would propose the following programming recommendations, all of them feasible for collegiate orchestras.

Filling in the Missing Piece

A well-balanced concert season would include around 20% of the works by living composers and 6–8% by women composers. Translated into easily understood programming ideas, these figures mean that a small collegiate orchestra performing four concerts a season (or less than 20 pieces altogether) should include at least one work by a woman composer and at

least three pieces by living composers. This programming ratio would resemble the NEC pledge of including one contemporary work per concert. Orchestras performing 4–8 concerts (or 20–30 works) a year would include two pieces by women and six pieces by living composers. For large orchestra programs of more than eight concerts, or 30–50 pieces a year, three works by women and 10 by living composers should appear on the yearly roster.

Programming Longer Works

Additionally, since many contemporary pieces are shorter in duration, and can fit into a traditional concert program, students seldom learn and perform longer and substantial pieces that are important in modern music history. I encourage orchestra directors to perform at least one such work by living composers, such as a symphony or a large suite, every four years. This way, students can experience contemporary works of significant status at least once during their college training years.

Discovering New Works

As Taylor pointed out, it is important for orchestra directors to set aside time to learn and explore new repertoire, either from lesser-known literature in the past or the new creations by established and emerging talents.²⁹ The task of learning newly composed pieces and finding appropriate repertoire for their specific ensembles can be daunting for directors. From my own experience, I've found it is beneficial to network with directors who are also invested in contemporary music. Fellow directors of orchestras of similar size, strength, and stature are resourceful in providing useful information on appropriate repertoire selections. Seminars and conferences, such as the annual CODA conference and the Midwest Clinic, form great opportunities to meet composers, hear new music, and to expand one's knowledge of the literature. The Composer Diversity Database and the various repertoire study done by CODA are

also helpful for determining how and if contemporary music meets a particular orchestra's musical and technical levels.

Conclusions

Repertoire choices are very individual and involve factors such as the development of the ensemble, the level of players, instrumentation, rehearsal time, budget for rental music, audience attraction, and the director's personal vision and taste. I am by no means advocating to gradually replace the standard symphonic literature with new music or music by minorities, but it is important that collegiate orchestra directors present a wide spectrum of musical tastes, styles, genres, and languages to our students. One positive finding of the study was that almost half (47%) of surveyed universities performed at least one piece by a woman, showing that higher education institutions are becoming more aware of diversity in orchestral programs. Hence, I encourage collegiate orchestra directors to intentionally seek out works by women composers and living composers when programming for their new seasons and to continue sharing individual experiences on contemporary music suitable for collegiate orchestras.

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⁹ Robert Reynolds, “Repertoire Is the Curriculum,” *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 31-33.

¹⁰ Chaowen Ting, “The Data Speaks: Women Composer Representation in the 2016–17 US Collegiate Orchestra Repertoire Selection,” *International Alliance of Women in Music Journal* (2018): 14 – 19.

¹¹ I included the following institutions in the current study: Abilene Christian University, Albion College, Arizona State University, Augustana University, Austin College, Baylor University, Bloomsburg University, Boston Conservatory at Berklee, California Polytechnic State University – San Luis Obispo, Clemson University, Cleveland Institute of Music, Columbus State University, Cornell University, CUNY Hunter College, Curtis Institute of Music, Drew University, El Camino College, Fresno City College, Georgia Institute of Technology, Grand Valley State University, High Point University, Indiana University, Johns Hopkins (Peabody Institute), Manhattan School of Music, Marshall University, Mercyhurst University, Mount Holyoke College, New England Conservatory, Northwestern University, Oberlin College, Oklahoma State University, Pomona College, Rice University, San Diego State University, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Smith College, St. Olaf College, SUNY Potsdam,

Texas State University, The Juilliard School, University of Alabama, University of Cincinnati (College-Conservatory of Music), University of Florida, University of Hawaii Manoa, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Michigan, University of North Texas, University of Rochester (Eastman School of Music), University of Southern California, West Virginia University, Wheaton College, Yale University

¹² “2012 Top 30 Music School Rankings,” *U.S. College Rankings*,

<http://www.uscollegeranking.org/music/2012-top-music-school-rankings.html#axzz5gm39Gmna>. “2014 Best America’s Top Music Schools Ranking,” *U.S. College Rankings*,

<http://www.uscollegeranking.org/music/2014-best-americas-top-music-schools-and-colleges-ranking.html#axzz5gm39Gmna>. “2015 Best Music Schools and Colleges,” *U.S. College Rankings*,

<http://www.uscollegeranking.org/music/2015-best-music-schools-and-colleges.html#axzz5gm39Gmna>.

¹³ Goodman, “The Symphony Orchestra,” 149; Dixon, “A Status Study,” 53.

¹⁴ Ricky O’ Bannon, “The Data behind the 2016–2017 Orchestra Season,” *Baltimore Symphony Orchestra*, <https://www.bsomusic.org/stories/the-data-behind-the-2016-2017-orchestra-season/>.

¹⁵ Neves focused his research on works completed before 1970, to eliminate contemporary works, as Smith defined works after 1980 as contemporary. Tedford specified contemporary works as pieces written between 1990–2015, while Taylor used a broader range of “newer music,” written between 1885–2015. Ladd was the only scholar who also focused on living composers at the time of the research.

¹⁶ League of American Orchestras, “ASCAP Awards for Adventurous Programming,”

<http://www.americanorchestras.org/conducting-artistic-programs/ascap-awards-for-adventurous-programming.html>.

¹⁷ Note that the data collection methods differed between the top 20 institutions and the CODA member orchestras. Only Classical concerts were included in the top 20 institutions data collections because the full repertoire for lighter performances was not usually available online. Repertoire submitted by CODA member directors, on the other hand, included performances of all types, from family concerts, holiday celebrations, classical series, to pops concerts.

¹⁸ Mark Taylor, “College Orchestra.” David Tedford, “Performing the Canon.”

¹⁹ See score for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Suite for Orchestra) by John Williams:

<https://www.halleonard.com/product/viewproduct.action?itemid=4491706&subsiteid=6&>

Set: <https://www.halleonard.com/product/viewproduct.action?itemid=4491705&subsiteid=6&>

²⁰ Band set of score and parts for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Symphonic Suite) by John Williams, arranged by Jay Bocook:

<https://www.halleonard.com/product/viewproduct.action?itemid=4004654&subsiteid=6>

²¹ Women’s Philharmonic Advocacy, “WPA Performance Grants,” <https://www.wophil.org/grants/>.

²² O’ Bannon, “The Data 2016–2017”; Ting, “The Data Speaks.”

²³ Mark Brown, “Female Composers Largely Ignored by Concert Line-ups,” *The Guardian*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jun/13/female-composers-largely-ignored-by-concert-line-ups>.

²⁴ Philip de Oliveira, “After 100 Years, the Cleveland Orchestra Continues to Ignore Women, Minorities and Living Composers,” *Cleveland Scene*, March 28, 2018.

²⁵ Tom Huizenga, “After Criticism, Philadelphia Orchestra Adds Female Composers to Its New Season,” *NPR Music*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2018/08/02/634864751/after-criticism-philadelphia-orchestra-adds-female-composers-to-its-new-season>.

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion on this issue, see Ting, “The Data Speaks.”

²⁷ Deemer, Rob, <https://www.facebook.com/robdeemer>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Taylor, “College Orchestra,” 86.

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