



Sexism with strings attached

With women in the classical world ignored or treated as objects, Jessica Duchen says it's time for a new prize solely for them

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Recently I went to the Gramophone Awards, the Oscars of classical music. Every prize-winner was excellent and deserving. But only one award out of 21 went to a female musician, the violinist Isabelle Faust. Women who participated in other winning recordings – like Nina Stemme, the lead soprano of the opera category's triumphant *Fidelio*, or cellist Tanja Tetzlaff in the chamber music one – were relegated to the shadow of male colleagues.

This week we've had the Classic Brit Awards. It has a Female Artist of the Year category: the nominees were three fantastic musicians who happen also to have film-star looks. But women were outnumbered by eight to two in the Album of the Year category and by nine to one in Single of the Year (I count the *Military Wives* as a male contribution – the only named artist is the choirmaster Gareth Malone). That was that. Six nominations among 37. And these events came hot on the heels of the Leeds International Piano Competition, in the final of which there was not one woman.

Classical music is a meritocracy, theoretically. The best musician wins. If only this were true. It isn't. It is deeply, appallingly sexist. This sexism is so ingrained that it's part of the industry furniture, taken for granted beyond the point of fight-back. We've been in denial about it for too long, and the problem is growing worse in today's climate of retrenchment.

Don't even pretend that female solo musicians are not judged by their appearance. Of course they are. A young woman soloist can be the finest pianist on Earth, but will get nowhere unless she also looks good – and if she puts on weight, she sinks. A man of equivalent skill can reach the top if he resembles a bear.

Think of the patronising judgments that attend young women stars in their twenties and thirties. Think of the furore over pianist Yuja Wang's short skirt at the Hollywood Bowl last year – the issue eclipsed the fact that on artistic merit alone she's a firebrand who could blast certain others clean out of the water –

including, in my opinion, her prominent male compatriots Yundi Li and Lang Lang.

The violinist Nicola Benedetti was interviewed in *The Sun* last month – but the article was little more than a series of sexual innuendos. Benedetti may be "easy on the eye", but she is also a strong-minded, articulate, idealistic musician with an exceptional commitment to education. Her words deserve to be heard. Instead, all we got was the interviewer's euphemisms for "phwoar!".

At the Gramophone Awards, the prizes were presented by the soprano Danielle de Niese, an international star with terrific charisma and a versatile vocal technique. She treated the guests to a rendition of Lehar's aria "Meine lippen, sie küssen so heiss" (My lips, they kiss so hot). The host, Gramophone's editor-in-chief, James Jolly, introduced the number with the quip: "I bet they do".

Young female musicians are in a double bind. Those responsible for "packaging" and "selling" them doll them up to look sexy. But the stuffier elements of audience and critical fraternity often experience a knee-jerk form of prejudice, assuming that this artist is successful because she looks good, therefore she can't possibly sound good too. Often they're wrong. Sometimes, regrettably, they're right: some careers have advanced too far on the basis of image. To override that prejudice, women have to work five times as hard as men.

There's worse. Conductors are influential in the selection of soloists. They're powerful men and there will always be a few who misuse that power. If a maestro pursues a young female soloist for extra-musical reasons, she faces a dilemma: satisfy his demands, or lose the concert.

Today, women musicians have to reach advanced middle age before escaping the image trap and being elevated to the status of grande dame. Many music-lovers, asked to name the greatest living pianist, will choose Martha Argerich (71). Mitsuko Uchida (63) could be a close runner-up. The violinist Ida Haendel is a living legend in her eighties. But in between twenty-something lusciousness and matriarchal grandeur, there are years of hard graft, disappointment and inordinate struggle compared to many men of comparable age and musical worth. It took pianists Imogen Cooper and Angela Hewitt decades to build up the reputation they enjoy today.

Where does the rot set in? After all, it seems that more girls than boys of school age take up music. Most orchestras, with the notorious exception of the Vienna Philharmonic, are around 50:50 men to women.

So, in selecting individuals for stardom, what's going wrong? How are the decision-makers choosing them? Sometime the question has to be tackled head on. Of course the glass ceiling applies right through society. The difference with music is that it still pretends to be a meritocracy.

I have a suggestion. It won't be popular with women musicians, because they don't want to be judged as "women musicians" – and quite right. But something needs to shift attitudes and allow women's achievements in music to be properly celebrated. An all-female awards ceremony in the classical world would be controversial, but might help: the equivalent of the Orange (as was) Prize for Fiction. And you know something? It would have a heck of a lot of fantastic winners.