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On Female Subjectivity and Power: Gender Politics and Occupational Sex Segregation in *The Conductor*

Hung-Chang Liao[1] & Ya-huei Wang[2]
yhuei@csmu.edu.tw
[1] Department of Health Policy and Management, Chung Shan Medical University;
Department of Medical Management, Chung Shan Medical University Hospital, TAIWAN
[2] Department of Applied Foreign Languages, Chung Shan Medical University;
Department of Medical Education, Chung Shan Medical University Hospital, TAIWAN

Abstract

Research has shown that gender inequality persists at managerial levels, with an increasing number of women occupying middle and lower managerial positions while men dominate higher managerial roles. This phenomenon, often referred to as the "glass ceiling," represents an invisible barrier characterized by gender biases that prevent women from attaining high-level positions within organizations. A notable gender gap remains in the professionalization of the classical music field, particularly in orchestral conducting. To understand how gender politics and occupational sex segregation affect women's career development, workplace relationships, and gender relations, this study conducts qualitative research using latent-content analysis of the film The Conductor. It examines *how women experience occupational sex segregation under gender politics and societal norms. The findings reveal that deep-rooted gender norms and biases within male-dominated professions not only limit women's access to leadership roles but also reinforce occupational segregation. By highlighting the struggles of women in breaking barriers, the study explores the potential for women to cultivate their own female subjectivity, empowering them to overcome occupational sex segregation and affirming their significance in male-dominated professions. This research has some limitations as it focuses on the narratives of an individual female in the film and hence cannot adequately represent the diverse experiences of women in different occupations. Future research may compare and analyze real-life cases from different occupations and cultural backgrounds to gain a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics.*

Keywords: *gender subjectivity; gender politics; occupational sex segregation; glass ceiling*

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Introduction

Research indicates that relative inequality persists at both higher and lower levels of managerial power, with increasing numbers of women in lower and middle management positions while men maintain dominance (Khwela et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2012). This reflects the existence of a glass ceiling in the workplace (Cotter et al., 2001; Pai & Vaidya, 2009), an invisible barrier characterized by gender biases that hinders women from attaining high-level positions in organizations. However, this gender bias or discrimination is not always immediately recognizable except to those affected (Smith et al., 2012).

In a male-dominated culture, men possess inherent authority, deeply rooted in our economic, political, and social systems (Kaufman, 1994). This power extends across various spheres, including religion, family, and the workplace. The patriarchal system that supports these institutions reinforces the misconception that men are inherently suited for leadership and decision-making roles, whereas women are relegated to submissive positions (Walby, 1990). Much of what is traditionally associated with masculinity—such as authority, dominance, and assertiveness—contributes to the perception of male superiority over women. The power dynamics favoring men are legitimized by this patriarchal framework, which frequently minimizes the voices and experiences of women. For centuries, the connection between masculinity and power has been used to depict and justify male dominance and perceived superiority over women (Kaufman, 1994). Specifically, the persistence of patriarchy establishes social norms that uphold gender inequality by elevating male authority to the status of the norm (Connell, 1994).

Under patriarchal social norms, men are supposed to be rational, determined, and independent, while women are supposed to be sympathetic, indecisive, and dependent. Men must display masculine behaviors, while women are compelled to exhibit feminine traits (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Zahra et al., 2013). Stereotypes regarding gender roles have become ingrained in our lives, influencing career choices, workplace relationships, and gender dynamics (Jarman et al., 2012). Consequently, men tend to pursue careers deemed more masculine, such as doctors, engineers, and soldiers, while women gravitate toward roles perceived as more feminine, such as nurses, secretaries, and teachers (Ellemers, 2018; Trevino et al., 2015). This gendered occupational segregation reflects existing gender culture and social norms, resulting in a significant gender gap remains in the occupational hierarchy.

The glass ceiling is one manifestation of this gap, illustrating the unseen obstacles that prevent women from achieving the highest levels of professional success, regardless of their qualifications (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). It represents deeper systemic challenges where gender biases and stereotypes impede women's opportunities for growth and recognition in their fields. This phenomenon is evident across various sectors, including classical music. There is still a clear gender gap remains in the professionalization of classical music, especially in orchestral conducting. In the current orchestral field, although women have made significant progress made by women in performance roles, the conductor's podium remains a visible representation of the glass ceiling in orchestral music, with women still marginalized in this prominent position (McClary, 2002; Pachtrack, 2024; Ravet, 2016).

To understand this dynamic, it is important to look at the root causes, especially gender stereotypes that influence perceptions and expectations in the workplace. A stereotype is an assumption made about a group that is applied to specific individuals solely based on their group membership. Gender stereotypes encompass both descriptive and prescriptive norms, which are generalizations about male and female roles (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). These stereotypes and the expectations they create profoundly impact women's professional development (Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007).

Descriptive gender stereotypes define women's and men's norms, while prescriptive gender stereotypes set forth the norms that

women and men should possess. Among descriptive gender stereotypes, agency is often viewed as a masculine trait, while communality is considered a feminine trait. Masculine traits, known as "work-oriented" traits, facilitate job efficiency, while feminine traits, referred to as "relationship-oriented" traits, foster interpersonal relationships. While agency is associated with work or achievement orientation, responsibility, autonomy, and rationality, communality is linked to caring, cooperation, reverence, and emotional sensitivity. These traits are not only different but also contradictory, with women perceived as lacking the masculine trait of agency and men seen as lacking the feminine trait of communality (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007). Prescriptive gender stereotypes not only specify the traits for males and females but also dictate which traits they should or should not possess (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2001). These prescriptive stereotypes establish which characteristics are deemed appropriate or inappropriate for men and women. Women, expected to embody communality, are not only required to exhibit socially sensitive and nurturing traits but are also prohibited from displaying masculine-agentic traits and behaviors. Women who do not conform to these stereotyped feminine-communal traits face social rejection and denial (Costrich et al., 1975; Haddock & Zanna, 1994).

Since gender politics upholds traditional power dynamics and reinforces occupational sex segregation, restricting women's opportunities for career advancement (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), this study scrutinizes how gender stereotypes, culture, and politics have influenced women's career development, workplace relationships, and gender relations. By doing so, the study aims to empower women to exercise their own female subjectivity and freedom in their professional development.

While previous research has investigated the impact of gender norms on professional contexts (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Diekman & Eagly, 2000), limited attention has been paid to how media representations reinforce or challenge these norms within male-dominated professions. Moreover, much of the study on occupational segregation and glass ceiling on leadership on broader professional domains have been extensively studied; there is little research on the connection of gender politics and orchestral conducting. Hence, there is a research gap for the study. To provide readers with a clear understanding of how women experience occupational sex segregation and the glass ceiling, this study uses *The Conductor*, directed by Dutch filmmaker Maria Peters (2019), as a case study to explore gender politics on the conductor's podium, primarily focusing on the fictionalized portrayal of a Dutch-American conductor Antonia Brico. Given the social and cultural constraints faced by women in a male-dominated profession, deep-rooted gender norms and subjectivity may significantly influence women's professional experiences and career development (Butler, 1990).

Methodology

The researchers examine the fictionalized portrayal of Antonia Brico, a Dutch-American conductor (1902–1989), in *The Conductor* (Peters, 2019) as a case study. Utilizing latent-content analysis (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Creswell, 2000) as a qualitative method, the study systematically interprets and analyzes narratives, dialogues, and visual elements in the film to understand how they reflect and represent gender issues. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized. Key scenes are identified based on their relevance to the gender-based discrimination or challenges in the workplace and Brico's female agency and subjectification to be against the gender politics. The narratives, dialogues and scenes are reviewed, with instances relevant to the study's objectives systematically collected and analyzed.

The researchers further look into gender issues through the lens of female subjectivity, using the feminist literary approach to critique gender politics. This approach employs feminist theory to criticize existing power structures, highlighting the social characteristics and challenges that women face and resist in the film, in order to investigate how female subjectivity can empower women to overcome the constraints

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imposed by these stereotypes and politics, allowing them to explore new possibilities for themselves and others.

Results and Discussion

1. Sexism and Gender Politics in Western Classical Music

The persistent sexism that has shaped patriarchal norms in Western civilization for centuries is reflected in the gender bias found in Western classical music. Sexism in this context is the ideology that one sex is fundamentally superior to the other, stemming from biases regarding biological differences. In a patriarchal society, all men benefit when women are oppressed (German, 1981).

Gender discrimination has existed across various industries since ancient times, including classical music, as depicted in *The Conductor, where* all the musicians in the orchestra are male. Women face significant disadvantages in the music field. Various factors contribute to the historical exclusion of women from specific positions in music, but the most critical reason is the lack of respect and opportunities afforded to them in comparison to their male counterparts (Citron, 1993). The underrepresentation of female musicians is because they were excluded from professional training in the past. For instance, professional music schools historically did not recruit women, refused to grant degrees to female students, and mainstream symphony orchestras systematically excluded female members and conductors (Glickman & Schleifer, 2003; Citron, 1993). Additionally, music criticism has historically been rife with gender stereotypes, employing gendered aesthetics to discriminate against women and undermine those with notable musical talents (McClary, 2002).

Prior to the 20th century, it was rare to find great female composers or conductors in classical music, rendering the field predominantly male (McClary, 2002). This cultural context frames Brico's long journey to becoming a professional conductor. Brico faces significant discrimination and challenges as a female conductor, as her piano teacher Mr. Goldsmith reveals his gender bias, stating that women are relegated to the bottom and can only progress so far (Peters, 2019, 00:51:51 – 00:51:56). In addition, her family's lack of support for her ambitions culminates in the destruction of her cherished piano, compelling her to confront social norms and pursue her dreams of becoming an orchestral conductor.

2. Gender Bias: Women's Struggles in Male-Dominated Orchestral Conducting

In patriarchal societies, men are praised for masculinity and dominate public roles, while women are confined to femininity and the domestic sphere, reinforcing gender stereotypes and patriarchy (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Phillips, 1991; Vogel et al., 2003). Consequently, if women aspire to succeed in senior work environments—public realms—they must overcome gender stereotypes and actively fight for opportunities. However, these actions often violate established gender role norms. When women exhibit stereotypically male behaviors, they may face criticism, retribution, and unfavorable outcomes (Bartleet, 2008; Phillips, 1991).

Given this social context, when the female protagonist, Brico, a talented musician, determines to break barriers in the male-dominated classical music profession, expresses her desire to become a conductor at a banquet, the attendees, including celebrities and nobles, erupt in laughter, and Frank (later becoming her boyfriend) appears embarrassed, as it was believed that a woman could never be a conductor in the music industry.

Conductor Mengelberg:	*Aren't you the girl that sat down in front of my concert?*
Brico:	*Yes, that's me.*
Frank's Mother:	*You?*
Frank:	*We don't need to talk about that.*
[…]	
Mengelberg:	*Why did you read along with the score?*

Frank's Mother:	*What did she say?*
Mengelberg:	*She wants to be a conductor.*
Frank's Mother:	*I know a lot of world about music, but I've never heard of a female conductor.*
Frank:	*Have you ever met one?*
Mengelberg:	*I have to admit to the best of my knowledge, they are not any.*
Brico:	*But women could be just as good as men.*
Mengelberg:	*Perhaps she's right. My wife was a very able singer before we got married.*
Frank's Mother:	*Yes, but the conductor... How on earth are you going to succeed?* (Peters, 2019, 00:28:37 – 00:31:41)

However, one man, Robin, consistently supports her. He provides Brico with job opportunities, offers her shelter when she is homeless, and quietly supports her while she studies in Europe. Ironically, Robin is actually a woman who has spent years disguising herself as a man to secure a position in the band. This portrayal underscores the barriers and discrimination women have historically faced in the music industry. It highlights the extreme measures women have had to undertake to obtain professional opportunities in male-dominated fields.

The role of a conductor plays a crucial role in orchestral performance. As the orchestra's interpreter and musical leader, the conductor must unify the ensemble by guiding musicians to complete the performance through setting rhythms, ensuring correct entries, and defining the piece's overall tone. This role requires both technical skills and acumen as the interpreter of the orchestra. This involves giving directions on timing, dynamics, and phrasing utilizing exact gestures, facial expressions, and a relay baton. In addition to technical skills, they must possess strong leadership and communication abilities to create an environment in which musicians can perform to their fullest potential (Koenig et al., 2011).

Women are frequently excluded from conducting roles in classical orchestras due to the field's long-standing male dominance. Gender discrimination against female conductors arises from gender role expectations rooted in patriarchal culture (Bennett, 2008). Eagly and Karau (2002) identified two types of gender discrimination against women in leadership roles. The first type involves negative evaluations of women, rooted in descriptive norms of gender roles. The second type reflects the perception that women possess less leadership potential, which is associated with men rather than women. Gender role norms do not anticipate female conductors to exhibit traits such as authority, dominance, or masculinity (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

According to gender norms, conducting is more than just a technical skill; it also involves leadership—a role traditionally associated with men (Koenig et al., 2011). Additionally, conducting is a physical act that represents power and authority, as one leads an orchestra (Hansen, 2009). The initial concerns regarding female conductors centered on authority, a trait associated with masculinity. Research indicates that people tend to accept leaders who are stronger, louder, or more aggressive than themselves, placing women at a disadvantage (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Besides, social and cultural norms about femininity severely limit women's chances of becoming successful conductors. Women have been socialized to be in harmony with others, while conducting is an assertive profession, exerting control through body movements and gestures that are more in line with men's natural aggressiveness. When men make powerful gestures, they exude a strong sense of masculinity. However, when women adopt similar attributes, they do not receive the same respect as men because, in a patriarchal society, women are expected to refrain from positions of authority beyond reproduction (Galkin, 1988).

In addition to social and cultural norms regarding femininity, the physical fitness of the conductor also highlights gender challenges.

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Conductors emphasize the physical needs of presenting music and the importance of the body in musical communication (Busch, 1984; Decker & Kirk, 1995; Phillips, 1997). Social gender stereotypes have an impact on women's conducting skills and postures, forcing female conductors to exhibit their bodies on stage in specific ways, such as regulating their self-confidence to avoid being perceived as overtly macho or aggressive. To address these challenges, some female conductors adjust their techniques to meet societal expectations. Some female conductors have noted that many women are conditioned to conduct like men or to incorporate male cues into their conducting (Rao, 2009) because conducting requires a great deal of leadership ability, typically attributed to men.

This situation arises from the fact that male musicians have historically been responsible for the creation, practice, and implementation of Western classical music. Consequently, men have defined Western classical music and professional qualifications for orchestral conducting (McClary, 2002), reflecting societal prejudices of women in the conducting profession.

3. Occupational Sex Segregation in the Field of Orchestra Conducting

According to Pujar (2016), women have historically been excluded from prestigious creative professions in the cultural sectors because artistic creativity is often perceived as a masculine trait in the public sphere. Men are seen as possessing more desirable traits, including leadership qualities, allowing them to secure more prestigious positions, while women are excluded from significant creative roles and leadership positions, resulting in gender-based occupational segregation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015).

Under gender stereotypes, the image of the orchestra conductor is portrayed as authoritative, grand, and perfect, which sharply contrasts with the feminine qualities attributed to women. Consequently, women have long been denied opportunities to serve as orchestra conductors, and public perception has failed to recognize the existence of female conductors (Cheng, 1998; Skelly & Johnson, 2011). This is because conducting practices and traditions have been developed by men, leading to the identification of the position with "masculine traits" (Bartleet, 2008). Thus, women are perceived as lacking leadership skills and are not expected to possess what are traditionally considered "masculine" leadership qualities, resulting in occupational sex discrimination. This discrimination is evident in the scene where Brico asks her piano teacher, Mr. Goldsmith, why women cannot be conductors:

Brico:	*I say it because I want to be a conductor.*
Goldsmith:	*That's impossible. Women don't become conductors.*
Brico:	*Why not?*
Goldsmith:	*They can't lead.*
Brico:	*But you could teach me.*
Goldsmith:	*A woman with a baton in her hand? Making extravagant movements to a bunch of men? I hardly find that becoming.* (Peters, 2019, 00: 51:06 – 00:51:26)

Being prescribed to be caring and nurturing, women have historically been confined to the home or marginalized in the workplace. This dynamic results in men occupying managerial or leadership positions while women are predominantly employed in clerical and service roles, creating a segregated workforce (Anker et al., 2003). Those who reenter the workforce are frequently limited to take low-status, low-paying, and part-time jobs (Connolly & Gregory, 2008).

However, when Brico leads the orchestra, conductor Mr. Muck states, "When I close my eyes, I can't tell it's a woman conducting" (01:47:22 – 01:47:26). This statement downplays the significance of the conductor's gender, aligning with Brico's assertion: "Music doesn't know sexes" (01:55:05). This implies that the conductor's gender does not intrinsically affect the quality of the conducting, supporting the notion that women's contributions are frequently marginalized or disregarded due to sexism and

gender discrimination in the workplace. This illustrates a gender bias in which women's achievements are measured against a standard set by men (Koskoff, 1989). It emphasizes the common misconception that women must prove their worth in industries historically dominated by men, ignoring how gender influences opportunities and recognition in the workplace. In *The Conductor*, the resistance from the symphony orchestra members against Antonia's leadership stems not from her lack of professional and leadership skills but primarily from the bias against women that leads to occupational sex segregation in top positions.

Occupational sex segregation, a form of gender discrimination, has long been foundational in the Western classical music tradition; women's participation in education and orchestras has been severely restricted (McClary, 1990). Historically, women were barred from music academies because it was believed they were unsuitable for learning more rational, rigorous, and complex compositional techniques (Howe, 2009). Professional music colleges did not recruit women or award them degrees (Citron, 1993). Although girls and women now have opportunities to enter this music field, symphony orchestras still tend to refuse to hire female musicians and conductors (Citron, 1993)—women comprise only about 10 percent of contemporary music composers and 25 percent of musicians, while two-thirds of dancers and one-third of performers are women. This reflects a gender division of labor in contemporary music and jazz, where women often become singers rather than instrumentalists; they rarely achieve the status of professional orchestral soloists or section leaders in orchestras (Ravet, 2016). The consistent exclusion of women from music academies and professional opportunities in orchestras is a crucial factor in shaping occupational sex segregation in Western music traditions (Goldin & Rouse, 2000).

Of all types of workplace discrimination, gender discrimination is the most prevalent. When Brico first arrives to study with a piano teacher, he advises her to abandon her dream of attending conservatory:

Goldsmith:	*Forget about the conservatory.*
	Your chance of getting accepted is none.
Brico:	*Can you teach me?*
	I will study hard. I will do everything to get better.
Goldsmith:	*Allow me to get you one piece of advice?*
	Get married and have children.
Brico:	*Like you wife?*
Goldsmith:	*Yes.*
	(Peters, 2019, 00: 14:45 – 00:16:34)

This advice reflects the persistent occupational sex segregation in classical music.

Men are seen as suitable for professional roles as composers, conductors and soloists, while women are seen as suitable for music teaching. Learning the piano is seen as preparation for teaching and enhancing marriage prospects, rather than the pursuit of advanced performance skills (Citron, 1993). Moreover, due to societal expectations regarding marriage and motherhood, women often leave the workforce (Connolly & Gregory, 2008). As depicted in the film, Mr. Goldsmith's wife, though brilliant in her music performance, after getting married, is confined to managing a chaotic household with five or six children after marriage. She is also pregnant again and preparing for the arrival of another child. This scene underscores how women are often confined to the private realm, burdened with family responsibilities that limit their participation in the public or professional sphere. Moreover, ironically, Brico's first orchestral conducting performance coincides with the marriage of her boyfriend, Frank, to a wealthy woman. The alternating camera shots between these two scenes serve as a reminder of the gender roles of that era, suggesting that women often must sacrifice love and marriage to pursue their ambitions.

Historically, conservatories did not admit female students because they believed women were unsuitable for learning more rigorous, rational, and complex creative techniques.

This bias has limited women's performance in classical music (Heilman, 2001). Additionally, different musical genres imply gender hierarchies, with art songs and instrumental pieces regarded as "small-scale" genres with feminine qualities, while symphonies, operas, and concertos viewed as more "advanced" and technically demanding, possessing masculine qualities (Bowers, 1990; Das & Kotikula, 2019; Koskoff, 1995). Deep-rooted gender norms have conditioned girls to favor smaller, higher-pitched instruments over larger, more powerful ones (Hallam et al., 2008). The first opportunities for women to get into the professional symphonic scene were as harpists and violinists, with female harpists sometimes employed only when a male harpist was unavailable. Female violin soloists often made guest appearances in orchestras, dressing elaborately and performing in front of the orchestra, as bringing in female guest performers enhanced the standing and reputation of Western classical music (Dunbar, 2020), such as with The Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. However, due to the Vienna Philharmonic's occupational sex segregation, based on discriminatory views regarding women's biology, particularly their reproductive capacities, female musicians were not granted permanent participation until 1997 (Haloman, 2012). Members of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra expressed that occupational sex segregation in musical institutions is most clearly articulated through the male perspective (Osborne, 1996).

Male members of the Vienna Philharmonic believed that women's musical identities and energies were incompatible with their own, leading them to feel that women should not interfere with their artistic expression. This viewpoint emphasizes the gender-specific elements in Western classical music and reinforces occupational segregation by sex. Such segregation, deeply rooted in societal stereotypes about men and women, has been particularly prevalent in creative industries, including music (Pujar, 2016). In Brico's case, the most significant challenge was overcoming the entrenched sex segregation in classical music, which was highly visible and difficult to dismantle both horizontally and vertically (Coulangeon et al., 2005).

Horizontal sex segregation classifies occupations into male- and female-dominated spheres based on gender. Vertical sex segregation is the unequal distribution of men and women within the hierarchy of a specific area or industry (Charles, 2003; Meulders et al., 2010). Regarding horizontal sex segregation, a scene in *The Conductor* illustrates that, at the time, only men were permitted to join the symphony orchestra. The film employs numerous panning shots to create a visual impact, allowing the audience to perceive an entirely male orchestra. This visual representation reinforces the gendered boundaries in this profession, where women are often excluded. Simultaneously, Brico, as a female conductor, stands alone before an entirely male orchestra. It is easy to understand the psychological pressure she faces as the only woman leading over 100 male musicians.

In terms of vertical occupational segregation in classical music, the exclusion of female musicians from the highest positions—where men occupy higher roles and women lower ones—negatively impacts women's work opportunities and career development. Vertical occupational sex segregation typically results in men holding higher positions in the workplace, illustrating the unequal power relationship between men and women. When discussing vertical occupational segregation in classical music, it is also essential to consider sexual harassment, which arises from the unequal power dynamics between men and women. Women are often seen as sexual objects, with their bodies valued more than their intelligence. According to Pentreath's report (2021), 81 percent of women indicated that sexual harassment hindered their careers in the music industry. One example of this unequal power dynamic is the sexual harassment depicted in the film. When Brico found a piano teacher, Mr. Goldsmith, whom she respected, he began to sexually harass her.

Goldsmith:	*Are you afraid of me?*
Brico:	*Oh no, sir. I feel like we've known each other for years.*
Goldsmith:	*Well, I have the feeling that you admire me very much.*

	Am I right, Willy?
Brico:	*Well, I admire you because I want to be what you are.*
Goldsmith:	*What? Teacher?*
Brico:	*No, conductor.*
Goldsmith:	*You're only saying that because you are in love with me.*
[…]	
Brico:	*Who cares what I look like?*
Goldsmith:	*I do.* *I want you to look pretty. Is it because you want to be in control?*
Brico:	*Control? No.* *I'd rather lose myself in music.*
Goldsmith:	*And I'd rather lose myself in you.*
[…]	
Brico:	*Please…* *Please. Stop it!* *Stop… Stop!*
Goldsmith:	*You broke it.* *Get out.* (Peters, 2019, 00: 50:39 – 00:52:15)

The issue of men sexually harassing women is not an isolated incident; rather, it is a consequence of unequal gender norms and power dynamics. The audacity of certain men to harass and disrespect women stems from their belief that these women are weaker, granting them the freedom to act as they please (Pentreath, 2021).

When Goldsmith's attempts to sexually harass Brico fail, he becomes enraged and expels her from the conservatory. This scenario mirrors workplace sexual harassment, where Mr. Goldsmith uses his authority to control Brico's career development. This power structure in the workplace, where women are disadvantaged and men often hold power, affects not only whether women are treated equally regarding employment or promotions but also whether they receive respect at work (Pentreath, 2021).

4. Breaking Barriers: Empowering Female Subjectivity to Shatter the Glass Ceiling

In light of the gender barriers in classical music, Brico's achievements are particularly remarkable, as she not only assumes the role of conductor—a position traditionally held by men—but also leads the Berlin Philharmonic in 1930, the New York Philharmonic in 1938, and the National Symphony Orchestra in 1940. However, her career as a conductor was heavily influenced by the gender culture of her time. The deeply entrenched occupational sex segregation has significantly hindered women's opportunities to assume leadership roles, particularly in mainstream orchestras (Schein, 2001). In the late 19th century, several female orchestra conductors, such as French composer and conductor Louise Heritte-Viardot (1841–1918) with the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra and the American violinist and conductor Caroline B. Nichols (1864–1939) with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted amateur orchestras but were not afforded opportunities in professional settings (Neul-Bates, 1987; Reich, 1991).

Even as women like Brico have managed to overcome sexism in the workplace, an imperceptible barrier known as the "glass ceiling" continues to obstruct their ascent to top leadership positions, a key indicator of gender discrimination. The glass ceiling represents a specific phenomenon that influences women's opportunities to advance to senior management, depriving qualified women of the top positions they deserve based on their performance (Cotter et al., 2001). It manifests as an invisible gender-based barrier unrelated to the job conditions faced by middle-management women aspiring to become upper management. In orchestral conducting, women were historically prohibited from leading symphony orchestras, reflecting the perception of conducting as a male domain requiring talent and opportunity (Pendle, 1991). Although professional music education is now accessible to all, gender discrimination and oppression persist, particularly in the conducting field (Howe, 2009). Despite the significant progress of women in classical music performance, the

podium in front of the orchestra remains one of the most unequal spaces in classical music. Even today, female conductors are often questioned based on their gender, and their qualifications and effectiveness are frequently challenged (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

According to Bachtrack's 2023 report (Bachtrack, 2024), 36 of the top 100 living composers are women, up from 11 in 2013. Seven of the 20 best-performing living composers are female; in 2013, there were no female composers in the top 20. Among the 102 busiest conductors (with over 26 conducting performances), only 14 are women, whereas in 2013, only four of the 102 busiest conductors were women. Among the 102 orchestras identified worldwide, with 95 principal conductors, only seven are female.

Thus, at the end of the film, accompanied by the melodious music conducted by Brico, a few lines express the deep-rooted vertical isolation in classical music industry:

> *The New York Women's Symphony Orchestra performed 4 successful years. When Antonia began to accept male musicians, the public's interest disappeared and the orchestra ceased to exist.*
> *Antonia devoted her entire life to music, and remained active as a guest conductor for famous orchestras. However, she never attained a permanent position as chief conductor. In 2008, the well-respected magazine Gramophone published a ranking of the 20 best orchestras in the world. None of these orchestras has ever had a female chief conductor. Gramophone published another ranking in 2017, now with the 50 greatest conductors of all time. 0% are women.* (Peters, 2019, 0 2:13:33 – 02:14:22)

These lines clearly illustrate that the proportion of male to female conductors remains significantly imbalanced. Women struggle to break the glass ceiling, facing limited opportunities to secure full-time positions as conductors in mainstream orchestras due to their gender. Similar to common gendered references in other fields, women are often labeled as "feminine" while men are labeled as "masculine" (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Zahra et al., 2013).

Furthermore, music review publications have been filled with gender stereotypes, employing gender-based aesthetics to discriminate against women and undermine those with notable musical talents (Citron, 1993). For instance, Vasily Petrenko, chief conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the National Youth Orchestra, claimed that orchestras perform better under male conductors, asserting that female conductors lead musicians to think about something other than the music. He further stated that musicians experience fewer erotic distractions when conducted by men, suggesting that they can concentrate more on the performance. Additionally, he claimed that when women marry and have children, it becomes more challenging for them to be as dedicated as required in the conducting field. Petrenko's statements have sparked outrage (Higgins, 2013).

The image of the orchestra conductor is portrayed as authoritative, grand, and perfect (Citron, 1993), which conflicts with the stereotypical feminine qualities attributed to women. Consequently, women have historically been excluded from the role of orchestra conductor, reflecting the long-standing glass ceiling and vertical occupational sex segregation in classical music. During Brico's time (1902–1989), women were deemed suitable for playing "feminine" instruments such as the piano, woodwinds, and harp; thus, a profession like conducting, perceived as solemn, grand, and perfect, was not only incompatible with societal views of women's traits but also rendered the existence of female conductors unrecognized by the public. This may explain why throughout Brico's life, she was never invited to become a full-time conductor of any orchestra, despite many of her performances being well received.

This glass ceiling, rooted in gender bias, not only obstructs the recognition and success of female conductors but also reinforces the dominance of male conductors (Bartleet, 2008). Moreover, gender biases in leadership roles reflect deep-seated beliefs that men are better qualified than women for such

positions. This viewpoint is more strongly supported by men than by women, highlighting the influence of gendered barriers in shaping perceptions of leadership (Schein, 2001).

Deep-rooted gender barriers have marginalized women in leadership (Powell, 2011); however, by resisting the notion that management is inherently male, women can alter stereotypical gender subjectivity, using female subjectivity to empower themselves and promote gender equality in the workplace (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The term "female subjectivity" refers to women's unique experiences and self-perceptions shaped within social, cultural and historical contexts. It highlights the significance of using their unique experiences to understand gender dynamics (Beauvoir, 2010; Irigaray, 1985).

Although it is widely acknowledged that conducting is a male-dominated field, Brico broke this professional stereotype by becoming the first female conductor for many notable orchestras. Her career exemplifies the complex interplay and empowerment of female subjectivity within the traditionally male-dominated classical music industry. As a conductor, Brico's work reflects her struggle for female subjectivity and agency in an environment that often discriminates against women, impacting her sense of self-worth. According to de Lauretis (1987), women can recognize their agency, autonomy, and self-worth through the development of female subjectivity. Consequently, they can gain confidence in their ability to overcome gender bias and achieve self-affirmation by showcasing their ideals and abilities (Bandura, 1997; Correll, 2001). This recognition enables them to view themselves as equals in the workplace and to confront the obstacles arising from discrimination.

Brico's experiences with workplace discrimination and her quest for self-affirmation in classical music profession are crucial components of her journey toward female subjectivity, illustrating her desire for self-affirmation despite the challenges she faced. Her ongoing efforts to demonstrate her worth and navigate gender bias have significantly shaped her identity. Brico's journey as a conductor exemplifies a woman's struggle to assert her agency and self-worth in a profession that has historically excluded women.

Conclusion

This study examined how gender politics and occupational sex segregation have adversely affected women's professional advancement and workplace dynamics. By analyzing the gender gap that remains in the professionalization of the classical music field as depicted in the film *The Conductor,* the study advocates for a reevaluation of entrenched gender norms and politics in the workplace. Furthermore, it explores the potential for women to cultivate their own female subjectivity, empowering them to transcend occupational sex segregation and foster a society where both men and women can equally contribute to and benefit from shared professional success. Women, like Brico, can transcend gender stereotypes and segregation in workplaces to affirm their significance in male-dominated professions.

Addressing gender equality requires continuous advocacy, organizational change and the empowerment of women to challenge traditional norms. By fostering female subjectivity and agency and creating an inclusive work environment, society can achieve a balanced and equitable environment where everyone, regardless of gender, can achieve self-fulfillment in the workplace. This research has some limitations for it focuses on the narratives of an individual female in the film and hence cannot adequately represent the diverse experiences of women in different occupations. Future research may compare and analyze real-life cases from different occupations and cultural backgrounds to gain a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics.

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