

# SHORT STORIES: 200 YEARS OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC

## Episode One: Women of the Academy

**Natalie Steed:** This is Short Stories, 200 years of the Royal Academy of Music. Presented by Anna Picard. In this episode all the music you hear is performed by students of the Royal Academy of Music. Episode One: Women of the Academy

Anna Picard: There's something wonderful about the way that sound inhabits every corner of the Royal Academy of Music.

In the first year after the Academy opened there was a discussion, noted in the Annual Report, about the way that students practised all at the same time, all in one room. Far from being a problem, it was asserted, this practice was highly beneficial – forcing the students to pay better attention to their notes.

**Anna Picard:** The Academy was founded in 1822 but the first set of 20 pupils began their lessons on March 24, 1823. With a further 16 students arriving a fortnight later. Including Fanny Dickens, Charles Dickens' elder sister.

The intention was to create homegrown English musicians who could rival the natives of other countries, notably Italy, and make a living from their music-making.

Unlike now, the students entering the academy were between the ages of 10 and 14. And unusually, by the standards of the day, there were equal numbers of girls and boys.

**Kathy Adamson:** My name is Kathy Adamson. I was librarian at the Academy for 24 years and I worked at the Academy in total for 31 years. And I am trying to finish a PhD on the Academy's minute books, transcribing the minute books from 1822 through to about 1877, 78.

For the first 20 years or so, they spend a huge amount of time just buying carpet, for instance, and that gets minuted along with students who are misbehaving or the amount of building work that has to be done to the premises.

I think the Academy should be justifiably proud of having accepted female students from the very beginning. Right back in 1822 there was no question that female students should ever be excluded when that clearly wasn't the case in other educational institutions and female teachers as well were included from the very beginning. The first scholarships were set up in 1834, I think, in the name of the King, William IV, and they were declared to be for two female and two male students each

time they were awarded. So, the Academy has a long history of being very equal in its treatment of men and women. In the terms of the day, I think. It wasn't entirely equal. The female and male students were taught in separate parts of the building and never the twain shall meet. And the female teachers were only teaching on the female side, whereas the men could teach on either. So it wasn't entirely equal. But it was, it was pretty good for the standard of the day, I think.

**Anna Picard:** One major difference between the boys and the girls in that early intake is the instruments they were allowed to learn. Briony Cox-Williams is a postgraduate tutor and lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music. She also runs a historical blog about women musicians and composers called Salon Without Boundaries.

**Briony Cox-Williams:** Certainly, in the early years of the Academy, the girls have an entirely different syllabus and an entirely different timetable to boys. It's much reduced both in content and in time. They have more rest time in there. They can only do singing, piano and harp and organ comes a little bit later, whereas the boys, of course, had all the instruments of the orchestra. They didn't have harp because that was seen as a bit frowned upon for boys to play at that point.

**Anna Picard:** Phyllis Weliver is a Professor at St Louis University and has written on representations of music in 18th century and Victorian culture.

**Phyllis Weliver:** At the time that the RAM started, young women were playing the piano, the harp, possibly the guitar. They were singing. Early in the 19th century. They could also play the organ; these were instruments that were all thought to be associated with grace. And grace was one of those words that gets used right through the century. What's interesting is what instruments are associated with grace change over the century.

**Phyllis Weliver:** The violin's a really interesting example. The flute is an interesting example because these are both instruments that in the 18th century in portraiture were associated with masculinity. And so, for a woman to be playing these instruments meant that she was not only playing a symbol of masculinity, but she also sounded masculine because she was playing the repertoire associated with masculinity.

**Anna Picard:** There were no women playing orchestral instruments at the Royal Academy until 1872 when the first three female violinists arrived.

Frederick Corder, a student, and later Professor of Composition, of whom we'll be hearing more later, recalls seeing his first 'lady violinists' in the Academy orchestra in 1873. Although he seems most struck by his fellow students' long hair and good looks.

**Michael Bertenshaw as Frederick Corder:** The front portion of the drawing room was filled with rows of common wooden school benches on these, sat intermittently, while, waiting for their individual lessons, a hundred or so of remarkably good-looking young ladies (the Academy standard of female beauty has always been high). The orchestra included two lady violinists who must have been nearly the first of their sex to appear - in public - Miss Gabrielle Vaillant (the plait of whose hair, I remember, touched the floor) and Miss Julia de Nolte.

**Phyllis Weliver:** The 1870s began to be the decade for the violin. And Wilma Norman Neruda was a great violin virtuoso. She later married Hallé of Manchester's Hallé Orchestra. She debuted in London in 1849, but really, as of 1869 began to play quite a lot in London. And she influenced women of all classes wanting to play the violin. There's an article from the Sewanee Review of 1893 that reflects back on this, and it says, 'even 20 years ago...' (so that would have put it at the early 1870s) '... even 20 years ago, it was an odd sight and one that rarely failed to elicit visible and audible comment, not always charitable, when a girl or young woman carried a violin through the street. Today, we can see in the cities of this country, as well as in those of Europe, long lines of girls and women of all ages carrying their violins to or from a lesson, a rehearsal, or a concert.'

**Anna Picard:** By the 1890s the proportion of string players in the Academy was two thirds female.

**Phyllis Weliver:** What's changing is that very famous women are making it possible for girls to follow their example. By the end of the century, you've got women of the highest social classes beginning to take violin lessons. At the same time, you get the appearance of amateur women's orchestras that are spreading through the provinces, and that's in the 1880s. So, it's a direct response to this rise of lesson taking in the violin. And then you also get all female string quartets in London at the same time.

**Anna Picard:** The idea of certain instruments being appropriate for a particular sex lingered long into the 20th century. Jonathan Freeman-Attwood is Principal of the Royal Academy of Music.

**Jonathan Freeman-Attwood:** I would say that the department that has changed most radically during my time here has been brass. When I arrived, it was almost entirely a male domain, with the exception possibly of a couple of horn players. Now, it's pretty even and there was one stage, I think, a few years ago where there were more women trumpet players than men trumpet players. And you know, if you look at the trombonists now, I can think of, you know, the top clutch of them. There are just as many women as men and they're fantastic players, and you could put them in any professional situation and they would just fly.

**Hannah Stell:** My name is Hannah Stell. I'm a tenor trombonist in my fourth year of study at the Royal Academy of Music.

**Anna Picard:** When you were warming up just now, I was struck by how close that process is to the way that one would warm up a voice. Do you think of it as your voice?

**Hannah Stell:** Yeah, I do think of it as an extension of the human voice. I mean, there's so many similarities in the way that you sort of have to breathe to play an instrument. It's very physical. And you can get these very sort of lyrical, melodic sounds out of not just the trombone, but brass instruments. So yeah, I think there's a lot of similarities.

**Hannah Stell:** I grew up in West Yorkshire and I'm part of a big brass band tradition. My whole family on my dad's side play brass instruments.

**Anna Picard:** In the brass band tradition that you grew up with, how many female players were there?

**Hannah Stell:** Actually, there were a fair amount of female brass players, especially in Yorkshire. I mean, I sort of grew up with a lot of female role models. I was taught by a female trumpet and cornet player. I sort of was always surrounded by female brass players in the brass band tradition, which I think has come a long way with its history of being very male dominated.

**Anna Picard:** Back in the late eighties, when I was a student here, the brass players, I think, were exclusively male. So how many female brass players are there at the Academy now, would you say it's pretty much 50/50?

**Hannah Stell:** It's not 50/50. We have five female trombone players out of the classical department, which staggeringly, is the most amount of female trombone players in any London conservatoire at the moment. Which seems unbelievable. I mean, we were celebrating when there were there were only three of us. And we were, we still had more female trombone players than, you know, the other London conservatoires. There has been times, I mean, since I've been here. At one point the trumpet department was 50/50. It was fantastic. I think there was 10 female trumpet players and that was amazing. There are no female tuba players at the Academy. But yeah, the low brass is sort of lacking at the moment.

**Anna Picard:** I like the idea of the tuba as the final frontier.

**Anna Picard:** The brass section has been, sort of been, the last to fill up with female players. And I wonder if part of the resistance to that is the fact that it is so like a

voice, but it's, it's loud, you know, it takes up a space that is not traditionally associated with femininity.

**Hannah Stell:** Yeah, I totally agree. I mean, it's quite a powerful instrument. And I mean, I think that's the issue is that, you know, you're told not to play loud or you're not encouraged to play loud, 'oh, you can't play that...That's a, that's a manly instrument.' I mean, I remember when I first started studying in London, someone coming into a room and going, 'oh, wow, a female, *female* trombone player'. And I was like, yes, I exist. I've been told in an orchestra to play more masculine before... and it's like, well, I can play loud. I can play exactly like all of my other colleagues, that are male. And there's no reason why I can't play loud. There's no reason why I can, you know, not make the sounds and the same character that they make.

**Elizabeth Kenny:** I'm Elizabeth Kenny. I am a lute player as a musician. And here at the Royal Academy, I'm the Dean of Students.

I would say in our Baroque world, there was a time where the string players were predominantly female, for a while. And looking at the Academy, the profile of the Historical Performance Department and the symphony orchestras, I'd say the strings are very balanced and you don't get the expectation of how a woman will sound, for example, compared to a man but it's quite interesting in fairly recent days, I've had feedback from lute recitals, from audience members saying, 'you don't play like a woman', and then other people saying, 'how great to hear a female voice on the lute'. Yeah, that's quite interesting.

**Anna Picard:** What, what, what does playing like a woman mean?

**Elizabeth Kenny:** In that conversation? I did ask. I said, 'do you mean quiet?' I'm not sure. I have no idea. I asked that question. I didn't really get a reply.

**Anna Picard:** These ideas do still crop up, though, occasionally. You do have these words like sort of virile or tender or delicate or whatever that get apportioned according to somebody's sex on various instruments. My feeling is that this is dying out. But what I have noticed is that people still use it when they're talking about compositions.

**Elizabeth Kenny:** Yes, that's very true. Because I think then that idea of voice and your own creativity is so, it's so tempting to link that with who you are and what we can impose on your identity.

The word that drives me a little bit up the wall is feisty because for me, hamsters and women in a certain vein are feisty. So, I've had several reviews talking about feisty strumming. I'm probably reading too much into it. But feisty to me does suggest surprisingly vigorous, small, furry....

**Anna Picard:** It's tempting, when looking back, to think that things just gradually and progressively improve over time. But the history of women at the Royal Academy at least, tell us that's just not the case. Briony Cox-Williams.

**Briony Cox-Williams:** In the 1890s and up till about World War One, women are winning composition prizes in far greater numbers and the Academy is known for performing works by women composition students alongside the male composition students in its public concerts, which not every conservatoire was doing. In fact, some were actively refusing to do that. So, there was a lot more exposure for women students, and that's one of the reasons they came to the Academy to do composition, because they knew they'd get that public exposure of their works.

**Anna Picard:** But things changed for women after the first world war and the evidence of those changes is written on the walls of this building. Jonathan Freeman-Attwood.

**Jonathan Freeman-Attwood:** It's really quite embarrassing but if you look at the competition boards at the Academy from 1919 well into the 1960s that are hung around the corridors of this institution, you see very very few women on those boards, they're almost all men.

**Briony Cox-Williams:** I think the First World War was a time of really big change of how women were generally in music. And so, the Academy was a microcosm of that because, of course, you had all the men coming back and they needed a place to be and a reason to be. So, in a way, the fact that women's spheres of influence and spheres of doing had basically expanded to cover everything they had to contract. And I think for a while it contracted to smaller than it had been pre-war just because people were trying to find that balance again for everybody who was suddenly, you know, the men were back, the women had to make room for them as well.

**Anna Picard:** It is just a few years after the end of the First World War that Frederick Corder wrote his history of the Royal Academy of Music, celebrating, in 1922, its first 100 years. This is the man we met earlier, who remembered his fellow students' beauty and surprisingly long hair.

In Corder's history, he too deals with the early years and sets out the names of those first 36 students. Of the original 20 he says:

**Michael Berthenshaw as Frederick Corder:** 'Nearly all the boys distinguished themselves in after life, but not one of the girls, a fact for which I offer no explanation.'

**Anna Picard:** Kathy Adamson.

**Kathy Adamson:** I think his view is very subjective, probably, understandably so. He was he was writing about the 100-year-old Academy and trying to portray it in its best light. And unfortunately, the way he does that, often, is to compare the past unfavourably with his present. So, there's a flavour all the way through that book of 'gosh, look, how they did things in the old days, isn't that quaint?' So, I'm not sure how much his views can be trusted. And I wonder sometimes whether he might have used the available facts to bolster his view.

**Anna Picard:** And what about Corder's view that not one of the girls distinguished themselves?

**Kathy Adamson:** I don't think that's true. There's a publication in 1837 of the first students at the Academy, and I think it's done as a promotional booklet, it's done to say, 'look, these are the people we've had. This is what they're doing now. These are the subscribers we've had. These are, these are our supporters'. It's almost like an invitation of, you know, next time we do one of these booklets, wouldn't you like your name to be in here too? And there are plenty of women who have against their names, 'celebrated performer', a professor of the institution, associate or made an honorary member. There are plenty of women like that, so I don't don't know what Corder was particularly referring to. It does seem like he hadn't, possibly hadn't done his homework for that, for that bit, or he was trying to make a point.

**Anna Picard:** So, I'm looking at this pamphlet now. Miss C Bromley, now Madame Brizzi, singing. A distinguished vocalist and piano player, now retired, an Honorary Associate Member. Miss C Smith, singing. A distinguished vocalist, engaged at the St James's Theatre. Miss Dickens, now Mrs Burnett, singing. A distinguished Vocalist, a Professor of the Institution, and an Associate Honorary Member. Miss S Collier. Piano. Distinguished as a composer, also in other professional acquirements; an Associate Honorary Member...

One of the names featured in this list is Fanny Dickens, Charles Dickens's older sister. And it's partly because she has such a famous brother that we know so much about her. Fanny was the eldest daughter of Elizabeth and John Dickens, a clerk who had fallen on hard times. Despite living in a tiny flat in Camden the family somehow found the money and space for a piano so that Fanny could practise. And she was recommended as a pupil to the Royal Academy in 1823.

**Lucy Powell:** The incredible nature of this tale really becomes apparent in 1824.

**Anna Picard:** Lucy Powell is a research fellow at Trinity College Oxford with an interest in Fanny Dickens' story.

**Lucy Powell:** At that moment, the Dickens family, their fortunes fell even lower to the point where they had to remove themselves to the Marshalsea to a debtor's prison, which was in Southwark, just south of the river Thames. And at that point, they sent Charles (now famously but this was a secret for his entire life – he told no one, not even his children) to work in a blacking factory, so he had to. Blacking was sort of a sooty preparation that you rubbed on things like leather shoes to make them look blacker. And it was dirty work, and it was uncomfortable work, and the working conditions were abysmal and he boarded with a woman who was so cruel to him. He later recalled that she was an ogress and a child queller. And while Charles was having this experience, the rest of the family were holed up, all living together in the debtor's prison in the Marshalsea. Somehow, they managed to continue to find the money to send Fanny to the Royal Academy, and it is one of the most painful recollections of his early life that Charles remembers going to watch his sister perform in June of 1824 at the Royal Academy, and she was awarded a prize for her performance and for her musical talent by a sister of the King, Princess Augusta. While he was, you know, trekking across the river on his own to go in and sort of try to support the family by sticking labels on bottles of blacking.

**Anna Picard:** In 1827 the Dickens family were no longer able to pay Fanny's fees but she was taken on as a sub-professor teaching singing to fund her own tuition. When she left, she was given an Associate Honorary Membership and had a short but very successful career on the London stage.

**Lucy Powell:** She was praised universally for her ability to convey 18th-century music from German and Austrian composers like Haydn and Mozart. And she was. She was renowned for her purity of style. She was. These are the two words that always come up in reviews of Fanny Dickens – 'purity' and 'grace'. And she was also praised for being emotionally moving by dint of being simple and unadorned in her musical style. She was much admired, and these phrases come again and again, 'warmly encored with the warmest expressions'.

**Anna Picard:** Fanny's career was cut short. She married a handsome singer she'd met at the Academy, Henry Burnett, who was a deeply religious man.

**Lucy Powell:** Soon after he married Fanny, he began to feel uneasy about the morality of performing on the London stage. And it's not clear to me whether what he was uncomfortable about was men looking at his wife or his own earning of money by entertaining people with non-religious music. Either way, he hoiked her off the stage, took her to Manchester, they became music teachers and occasionally put on performances. But their main musical sort of connection became teaching children, and Fanny's career just sank. That was the end of it.

**Lucy Powell:** I find her story really interesting, because there are various reasons why we don't know about women from the past. Some of it is to do with history. It's to do

with whose story we think is worth archiving. You know, it's really, really difficult. We know about Fanny Dickens, basically, because everything to do with Charles Dickens has been archived. As a result, we can find her. There would have been hundreds of women like her whose stories have sunk. It's very, very hard to untangle them because even if they were famous at the time, the idea that they might be interesting in 100 years' time or 150 years' time or 300 years' time is not one that has until very recently been held by contemporary scholarship.

**Anna Picard:** As Lucy points out, the wealth of information we have about Fanny Dickens is not typical of women musicians of her era.

In the case of female composers, one route was to perform their own music or write material that would sell commercially – exploiting the burgeoning market of music for amateur musicians. In the middle of the 19th century, the Royal Academy's Clara Macrione supported a family of five in this way.

For women with ambitions to direct music the options were generally limited to the Church or educational establishments. As with the lower brass instruments, progress has been slow for women conductors.

Sian Edwards is Head of Conducting at the Royal Academy and runs the annual programme for aspiring women conductors now known as the Glover-Edwards programme, it was until recently called the Sorrell Programme.

**Sian Edwards:** Lots of women are seeing that it's possible to be a conductor. And now we're just working on how do you make those steps to actually train? And the reason for the Sorrell course here at the Royal Academy is because I've been here, I think nine years, and it's become apparent to me that we get a lot of really interesting women auditioning for the Master's course here, which is tiny. In this Academy. We've only got places for two people in the first year, two people in the second year and possibly one or two people who are doing a one-year, very specific course. And I've got 70 people applying for two places. Quite a lot of women are applying, but they're often when they get on the podium, not cutting it with the men in terms of their competitiveness.

**Sian Edwards:** And I feel very strongly at Master's level that I cannot discriminate. I think it's very important. I don't think the women want me to discriminate either. I think they want to feel that they're absolutely there because they're as good as anybody else and they're as interesting as anybody else musically. So it's very important to me then that the women are competitive, you know, on all levels with the men because they're often just as good, but they often don't put themselves there in a way that the men do.

**Peggy:** My name is Peggy. I started my musical life as a pianist. And then now I'm making the transition to being a conductor. And one of the main reasons I came for this course is because it's just such an invaluable opportunity to be in an environment surrounded with other women. Not only do we get to study with Sian and, you know, she's a powerful woman conductor, that's like a role model we can look up to, but also seeing our peers, like just the imagery of like only women on the podium throughout the course. I think that in itself is very powerful and very important for women to experience wanting to go through that hurdle of feeling comfortable on the podium and owning it.

**Beth:** My name's Beth. I'm on the Sorrell conducting course. In rehearsal or sometimes people don't take you as seriously, or sometimes you apologise too much, even though it's their fault and entry's gone wrong or something like that. But you apologise. That's something that we need to break the habit of.

**Beth:** The way women are taught to kind of present themselves in society. That idea that we are not as confident in ourselves can sometimes translate onto the podium. But this really allows you to become that performer where your gender goes out the window and you can be just as confident and powerful as a male person.

**Sian Edwards:** I think this course is a way of saying to women, 'come on', you know, 'have a go, you can really do this', and then encouraging them to really be the power that they need to be on the podium in terms of what do they want from the music and how are they going to show it? And how are they going to involve the players? 'Cause I think often they don't feel they can do that.

**Anna Picard:** What we tend to forget when considering conducting is that the profession itself barely existed when the Academy was founded. Performances of work such as this – Schubert's Fourth Symphony, written in 1816 – were instead led from within the orchestra. Instead of conductors there were violinists, keyboard players, cellists and lutenists before them.

Historically, with notable exceptions, these leaders from within the orchestra would have been male. Today that is not the case, there are significant role models for today's students to learn from and work with at the Academy. From Elizabeth Kenny directing Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna* from the lute to Lorenza Borrani, Visiting Professor of Chamber Orchestras, directing this performance by the Royal Academy of Music Chamber Orchestra from the violin.

Inspiring, enthralling, empowering.

**Natalie Steed:** That was episode one of Short Stories: 200 years of the Royal Academy of Music. It was presented by Anna Picard and was produced by Natalie Steed. The full list of music featured in this episode can be found in the episode

description. To hear more short stories, subscribe to the podcast or search for podcasts on the Royal Academy of Music website.