



# A voice for change

Brazilian soprano Gabriella Di Laccio is pushing for gender equality with her initiative DONNE: Women in Music. **Melissa Bradshaw** finds out more

The feeling of being an outsider is one that resonates with Gabriella Di Laccio. Since moving to the UK from Brazil, the soprano explains how she immediately felt a sense of needing to fit in. 'As a foreigner here I was very different... I made the terrible mistake of trying to blend in, and that's very hard because you go against who you are as a person and as an artist,' she reflects. 'Your voice becomes confused.'

It is this exact feeling that Di Laccio wants to eradicate from music – instead, she hopes we can cultivate an industry where everyone feels that they are equally represented. Collectively, we all have our own part to play in this. Hers was the creation of *DONNE: Women in Music*, an online platform showcasing the works of female composers all over the world.

The concept came to Di Laccio while researching repertoire as part of her career as an opera singer. 'I feel like every time I go on stage, I think, "I can't take this for granted". And I really want to create a special experience for the people there, and I think this means researching a lot, really taking care of the time you're going to perform something, and doing your part well.' The singer was struck by how many cycles by women composers she came across that she'd never come across previously. 'I knew there were many, but not as many as I found out later.

And then it was almost by chance, I came across the Encyclopaedia of Women Composers by Aaron Cohen, and in there he lists 6,000 women – he ended in 1984, so that really put a question mark in the back of my brain.'

Di Laccio's discomfort at this is clear: she describes feeling ashamed at first, a feeling of ignorance at not having thought about the imbalance sooner – but she soon realised she wasn't alone. 'There are people who have been doing this work for decades, since the 70s you have musicologists and people really trying to put the word out there and I was quite surprised that it didn't really come across to me in my studies and in my time here. It wasn't made clear to me about the existence of so many women in music, and that made me a bit angry.'

It was then that the idea came to the singer: she felt her duty to help spread the word, beginning with listing all of the composers online. She set about making the *DONNE* Big List – a project that keeps increasing by the day as more composers come to her attention – and from here on out the seed was planted. She began interviewing composers such as Rachel Portman, Charlotte Bray and Nicola LeFanu, and creating educational videos (of which there are six so far), telling the stories of historical composers including Fanny Hensel and Ethel Smyth. 'My aim is to continue that, so that we can engage schools and educational institutions,' Di Laccio points out. In addition to the main website, a daily blog has been set up titled *DONNE365*, where something new is published about female composers daily. This is continued with the help of researcher Eric Ruijsenaars, based in the Netherlands, and editor Julia Manzano who lives in Brazil – the blog's dedicated volunteers.

'On Mondays and Tuesdays we publish a written interview with a living composer, and to do that has been amazing,' Di Laccio smiles. 'I send the invitations and they all respond so quickly because they all want to be a part of it.' On Wednesdays they pick a CD for Album of the Week, on Thursdays there's a focus on a woman in history – 'Herstory' day – and on Friday a recap is posted of all the weekly composers. Alongside this, *DONNE* has


begun publishing regular mixtapes curated by different people sharing their favourite recordings of works by women – keep an eye out for *CM*'s!

One of the best things about the project for Di Laccio is the opportunity to be introduced to so many amazing composers and hear their stories. She speaks passionately about her current work with Brazilian pianist-composer Catarina Domenici, who has written a new arrangement of the song *Wiegala* written by Jewish poet and writer Ilse Weber during her imprisonment at the Theresienstadt concentration camp. 'They were very simple songs, but very moving,' Di Laccio says of the works by Weber. 'Catarina is extremely talented, a completely different voice mixing classical music with jazz and other Brazilian traditions in music, and minimalism, so it's very exciting to work with her.' She also tells me about her excitement at working with composers Nicola LeFanu, Anna Appleby, Joanna Ward and Kristina Arakelyan on *DONNE*'s New Music 2020 project funded by the PRS Foundation, which will see them collaborate with pianist Clélia Iruzun and flautist Lukas Jordan. 'I'm having a piece written for myself and Clélia by Nicola LeFanu,' Di Laccio explains. 'Nicola is like a mentor to the project, and it's going to be a laboratory of us all exchanging ideas.'

Di Laccio finds inspiration and comfort in the many other projects supporting the cause within the industry. 'Vanessa Reed, PRS KeyChange; Chi-chi Nwanoku and Chineke!; Helen Wallace, curator of the series *Venus Unwrapped* at Kings Place last year... there are so many good initiatives out there,' she says warmly.

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'Trinity Laban is doing a fantastic job, Susanna Eastburn at Sound and Music, Dr Kate Kennedy and the *Re:dress* project, Southbank Sinfonia... Odaline de la Martinez has been doing this since the 70s, she is one big force! There is a movement out there clearly, and it still surprises me that it's not loud enough. Sadly, you will still see resistance and in this world there is still prejudice, and I think what we have to do is really grow, we should be asking people in our life to be doing it. People think their voice is so small but it's not.' Di Laccio points out there is no longer any excuse not to include at least one piece by a woman in every concert. 'I don't accept the excuse "we need to sell tickets". If you're playing a Beethoven symphony, and everyone will go because of that, you've no excuse not to include another piece which will have people leave the concert thinking, "wow, I didn't know that one". It's a wonderful way of generating awareness.'

So what's the ultimate vision for *DONNE*? 'I want us to leave a legacy of inspiration, doing that by making a real shift on how we include, promote and support women in music. And not only women,' Di Laccio adds, 'because women are only one part of this equation. Diversity is so important and we all have our part to play in making everybody included. I invite everybody to be more curious... any artist should be able to go on stage and feel that they belong there. We have to try to do our part as artists, to engage audiences, create curiosity... I want this to be so obvious that everybody will be a part of it, because there will be no other way. The ultimate ambition is that: be who you are, inspire other people, give voice to other people. It becomes a simple equation.' 

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