

Femininity and Sensibility: Dr. Charlene Archibeque

Dr. Charlene Archibeque is a bit of an enigma in the choral world. Now in her eighties and standing amongst the male giants, she is a rare female conductor who basks in femininity without any sense of hiding herself behind a tuxedo jacket or a short masculine haircut. Unlike so many other female conductors of the generation following her, who wear their hair in tight ponytails and drab business jackets, almost apologizing for the appearance of their gender in a field which is still dominated by men, Dr. Archibeque seems to float through. She is unphased by her uniqueness. I have, in fact, never seen her without a bright accessory, often red, and frequently dripping in fringe, a feather boa or some other kind of bedazzlement. She holds herself like an Old Hollywood Movie Star. She is the Grand Dame of American choral conducting.

I first met Dr. Archibeque in 2010 during a masterclass at the University of Michigan, hosted for the benefit of the graduate and doctoral level conducting students. As the only Alto 2 in a small volunteer choir, I was suddenly joined by Dr. Archibeque who felt that one voice was simply not enough for the lowest female divisi. Together she and I sang, and I had no idea as to who she was, but I marveled at the fact that a female conductor was able to make even the most masculine of students in this most masculine of choral studios, tremble like a leaf. I remember little about her interactions with the students in terms of gesture, I remember instead the impact she had upon them. They were intimidated, and they had long since presented themselves to me as men not intimidated by anyone. At that time, there had only been one female student in the University of Michigan Choral Conducting studio in the past two years. As an undergraduate student newly interested in choral conducting, I was starting to form the opinion that women were quite an underrepresented minority. Dr. Archibeque became a powerful splash of color surrounded by men in black and white tuxedos.

Over the next three American Choral Directors National Conferences in Chicago (2011), Dallas (2013) and Salt Lake City (2015), I found myself looking for sightings of this woman who

just seemed, in my opinion, to embody feminine strength without compromise. I was able to speak with her at length in both 2013 and 2015 and found to my astonishment that she was the first woman to receive her Doctorate in Choral Conducting in the United States. Most shocking was the fact that she had received it less than fifty years ago. Until that point, I had not realized just how much work had been done by the women of generations past in regards to equality on the conducting podium. So much has yet to be done but we have progressed from a situation described by Dr. Archibeque in which she was told by the Head of a Music Dept that “as long as I am alive there will not be a woman in charge of choirs at this institute” to our current position where we are nearly sixty years past the hiring of the first woman ever to head up a major symphonic chorus (Margaret Hillis in 1957). An older study from 1991 found that 24.6 percent of college or university level choral conductors were female ¹. Recent research seems to be scarce at best but a quick scan through of faculty across the country would suggest that numbers are increasing in the favor of more women in choral conducting positions in higher education.

Dr. Archibeque has always intrigued me. Various members of our industry have often verbally (usually offhandedly) referred to the female choral conductors who earned their degrees during the 1970's and 1980's as battled warriors. At conferences, it is this group of women which are seen as fighters, the women who dealt with the outrage of male counterparts who saw a shift in power in what has predominantly been “An Old Boy's Club”. From my own experience, these are often the hardened women. Their hair is frequently pulled back into tight buns or ponytails, they conduct in black pant suits, all traces of femininity wiped away aside from their stilettos. These are the women who had to become men, in order to find their place in this field. These are the women who came after Dr. Archibeque became the first female to break the glass ceiling of male choral conducting.

I find something profoundly betraying about these women of the generation before my own. Femininity is, in my opinion, not something which should be hidden, but relished in whatever sense a woman sees fit. Therefore I was drawn to the rare older conductor who would waltz into a conference with her hair swept up like Ms Frizzle on “The Magic School Bus”, wearing a long burgundy wrap, and carrying a purse with a feather boa trim, giving off the appearance of a murdered muppet made into an accessory. In the simplest of phrases: she

¹ *Directory of Music Faculties in Colleges and Universities, U.S. and Canada*, 1990-92 edition (Missoula, MT: CMS Publications, Inc., 1990), vi.

looked like the person in charge. I've since found myself with a few feather boa accessories, myself.

As I began my graduate studies and began digging through old issues of the Choral Journal for research on a variety of topics, I found myself coming across Dr. Archibeque's name frequently. Often her work included her photo which showed a woman from thirty years ago. While so many female conducting students were fighting their way through the eighties, she was glorifying in a time of massive hair and jewelry. She truly bucked every single trend of women from her time. Having spoken with her in person on numerous occasions, I must come to the conclusion that she simply doesn't care what other people think, and never has. She lives to make great music and to teach others to make great music. She does not think of herself as the first woman to earn a Doctorate in Choral Conducting, she thinks of herself as a composer's advocate, a teacher and an artist.

I began this interview process with the expectation that I would be examining someone who was a pioneer for women. I wanted to learn about her experiences as a conductor several decades ago, in what was then truly a man's world. I had hoped to find something which younger female conductors such as myself could hold onto as inspiration against what is still a sense of discrimination against women being women while standing on the podium. Instead, I found a woman who embodied something even more feminine than I had expected: she simply did exactly what she needed to do to become the best teacher and the best creator of music possible. She did not consider herself as a trailblazer for women until a generation of young feminists such as myself came and inquired after her story. In Dr. Archibeque, I found a truly maternal instinct towards the music she preserves through gesture and rehearsal technique. She is protective of it, and strong her sense of guiding others towards the interpretation closest to that of the composer themselves. This was not at all what I expected. My "post-women's lib" mentality was left in the dust and I was reminded simply that one needs to be completely confident in themselves as a composer and completely confident in their knowledge of the score if they wish to be a good conductor.

My interview questions purposefully focused primarily on her early life and career. The purpose of our conversation was to learn more about her experiences as lone woman in the field of conducting and how the impact of such a position may have affected her career choices, and her overall approach to conducting and music as a whole. Indeed, her gender did play a major role but not as I expected. As a young teacher in the late 1950's, she was assigned to conduct choirs despite her extensive background in orchestral and band music because

instrumental leadership roles were extended only to male teachers. She found eventually that she enjoyed choral music but did ponder in our interview what could have happened had she been given a position in orchestral leadership as opposed to choral. Her gender also lead her to leave her beloved San Diego for a doctorate out of state in Colorado after she was told that San Diego University would never hire a woman to direct the choral program. She later settled in San Jose after completing her doctorate, following the untimely death of the previous Director of Choral Activities at San Jose University. Aside from these very crucial points, her gender did not come into play as something which had any effect on her career whatsoever.

From this process I have learned not to anticipate too greatly what someone will say. After reading her biographies and published works multiple times, I could not get past my own interpretation of her words until she said them to me over the phone. I unknowingly wanted to put a Feminist spin on something which did not require any spin at all. From this process, I have also learned to be very careful when trusting technology. Over a third of her interview is lost due to a faulty app on my phone which should have been recording and yet seemed to malfunction for no apparent reason. Thankfully, I had a back-up plan with my old iphone and had been recording a voice memo throughout the interview, but the storage on my old phone was too small to record the entire thing, and it too died at a certain point. When someone goes into an interview process like this, in which it will be difficult to reach the person again within a reasonable timeframe, it is best to have a very “tried and true method”.

In conclusion, I feel that this interview with Dr. Archibeque will shed some light on the mentality of a woman making strides in the field of higher education choral conducting long before other women did. She has been interviewed multiple times in the past, yet her words which resounded in a sense of pedagogical common sense and maternal care for her beloved masterpieces. Until interviewing her myself, I never read between the lines to grasp the deeper understanding which this woman has for choral music and conducting.