

Sprinkle some newness!

After twenty years as a professional choir singer, I am no longer surprised when works by female composers are staples in the repertoire. At Gehrman's I see our catalogue growing with music of quality by both male and female composers. How do we work at Gehrman's – and what is it like on the international scene?

In 2018 Gehrman's celebrated its 125th anniversary by offering one video per month presenting one choral work from every decade of the publishing house's history. We discovered that there were not enough female names to include – in fact, before 1980, it was difficult to find any music composed by women at all. This insight resulted in our efforts to encourage female composers to come forward under the heading #swedishchoralmusic 2022. The response was an abundance of music with works of varying difficulty, expression and compositional techniques, exactly as we had requested. And what a treasure trove!

From a conductor's perspective

For the process of selection we engaged an external script committee including composer and professor **Karin Rehnqvist**, the choir conductors **Bengt Ollén** and **Simon Arlasjö**, as well as the winner of the Eric Ericson Award 2021 and recently appointed principal guest conductor of the Swedish Radio Choir, **Krista Audere** from Latvia.




Photo: Karina Kamniska

Krista Audere

Audere has spoken about the expectations resting on her as a young female conductor. To be sure, she makes higher demands on herself than the world around her does. At least when it comes to inclusion and diversity.

–I work hard on my programming, and nowadays I do have a lot of freedom in choosing the music. My suggested repertoire often includes music by new, young and/or female composers. The response is sometimes, “It’s nice, but we’re


afraid we can’t sell it. Could you add some Mendelssohn?”

And she does so gladly. Her approach is to try to “sprinkle some newness” into programmes like the Bavarian Radio Choir’s a cappella concert of this season, where Mahler and Brahms blend easily with **Nana Forte**’s *Four Sacred Pieces* . Audere realises that the high thresholds of the concert halls are not always just about female composers, but are also about a cappella music, or simply new music. There are also many choirs and orchestras that still give one big concert per year with female composers on the programme, on 8 March, (The International Women’s Day) and then think they can tick the box. But she sees nonetheless a trend towards a greater diversity.

–We are allowing more individual voices to be heard. I know that I am not doing enough, but I am trying. As long as we have that aim the future is bright.

The composers

Six works were chosen by the script committee in an anonymous selection process. The composers were presented on film and the works have now been published by Gehrman's.

Birgitta Flick is active as a jazz trumpet player and improvisation researcher in her home country of Germany, but she devotes herself to choral composition mainly in Sweden. Her participation in #swedishchoralmusic with *Nocturne* for women’s choir  has led to collaboration with a number of well-known Swedish choirs, including the vocal ensemble VoNo. In April 2024 a



Anna Cedeberg-Orreteg



Marie Sandell



Birgitta Flick



Linda Alexandersson



Susanna Lindmark

new work will be premiered, in which the music is partly based on improvisation.

Kristin Warfvinge's *Une charogne* 🎧 was one of the advanced works that both the publisher and the jury decided on immediately. **Charles Baudelaire's** poem is a depiction of a decaying carcass, in horribly explicit detail. Despite the high quality of the music we hesitated – perhaps the text would prove to be a bit too coarse? But *Une charogne* has already been performed by the Mikaeli Chamber Choir under **Anders Eby** and by the Eric Ericson Chamber Choir conducted by **Fredrik Malmberg**.

Another unusual work in the series is **Marie Sandell's** setting of some Dadaistic poems by **Aase Berg** from the collection *Indifferent Fauna* 🎧. Here we encounter a group of hens in the form of a solo trio with a mezzo-soprano, a countertenor and a tenor, who infiltrate and influence the flock/the choir – or is it the society?

“Children can learn just about anything”, says **Linda Alexandersson**, who has chosen box notation as a method in her work *Önskenatt (Wish-night)* 🎧, for SSA in various groupings, to bring out the web of voices that she wants. It was commissioned for the series “100 women 100 years”, in which Körcentrum Syd and Malmö Live observed the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in Sweden.

Tschitta saltunza 🎧 was commissioned by a Swiss vocal ensemble that provided **Susanna Lindmark** with a poem in Rhaeto-Romanic. It proved to be a pleasant challenge to set to music a language she had never before encountered,

and the piece bears clear traces of her joy in composing and the rhythm of the language.

Sweden's Youth Choir and **Erik Westberg** had commissioned and recorded *That Night of Falling Stars* 🎧 by **Anna Cederberg-Orreteg**. Still, participation in the series meant a great deal to Anna, perhaps mainly because she knew that the selection had been done anonymously. It was really her music that won, not the fact that she is a recognized composer. For the idea of affirmative action is still not too far-fetched for a female composer, however well-liked she may be by singers and conductors.

Statistics

Through organisations such as Donne, Women in Music, we can keep track of the situation for the world's big orchestras. In 2021/22 merely 7.7% of 111 orchestras' repertoire were composed by women. In the field of choral music we have less statistics, but considering the quantity of works by composers such as **Karin Rehnqvist**, **Agneta Sköld**, **Anna-Karin Klockar**, **Ulrika Emanuelsson**, **Susanna Lindmark** and **Anna Cederberg-Orreteg**, I feel that the situation looks better (at least in Sweden) for choral music than it does for instrumental music.

In the USA the choral conductor **Brian Stevens** is active as a co-author of a substantial anthology entitled *Women composers in choral art* (to be published in 2025 by GIA Publications). He is also engaged in the series #swedishchoralmusic. He notes that an interest in diversity in the USA has opened up for female composers, who are now being allowed to breathe instead of being pushed down.

- We have a thousand years of (Western art) music with masters like Bach and Mendelssohn, and we can't help the fact that pre-1980 there was little diversity. But I think the music that's going to come out of the next twenty-five years is going to change the world, he says.

As for myself, I look forward to the day when we will no longer have to label composers according to sex, skin colour or age. Until we get there, we will continue with projects that promote high-quality music by female composers. And then we will simply have to help each other out to “sprinkle some newness” into our programming.

Janna Vettergren

Project manager for #swedishchoralmusic – a collaboration with the Swedish Society of Composers made possible by the generous support from the Swedish Music Publishers' Association.



Kristin Warfvinge