

A Trombonist on a Mission to Break Barriers in Classical Music

Hillary Simms is the first woman to become a member of the American Brass Quintet. She says the field needs more role models.



By Javier C. Hernández

July 30, 2023

As a child growing up in rural Canada, the trombonist Hillary Simms did not realize that women were scarce among players of brass instruments — the tuba, the French horn, the trumpet and the trombone. Her music teachers were largely women, and so were many of her peers.

But as she embarked on a global career, she soon noticed that she was working in a male-dominated field, one in which women faced routine discrimination and harassment. During auditions, for example, she was told to breathe more deeply to produce a more masculine sound.

Now Simms, 28, is making history: This month, she became the first woman to join the prestigious American Brass Quintet, founded in 1960. This fall, she will become the first female trombonist to join the faculty at the Juilliard School, where the quintet is in residence.

When her appointment was announced, Simms, noting the history of the moment, said she would continue the legacy of her male predecessor, “but in heels,” which she said she finds empowering to wear when performing.

Women have made strides in classical music in recent years; they now make up roughly half of orchestras in the United States. But it’s a different story for female brass players, who are still vastly underrepresented in top ensembles.

In a telephone interview from Beijing, where she was visiting in-laws, Simms discussed gender disparities in classical music, her love for the trombone and her marriage to Ricky Feng Nan, a Chinese singer and actor. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

You’ve often had the experience of being the only woman playing trombone in an ensemble. What does that feel like?

It's lonely and isolating. If anything, I've been harder on myself. I've always felt like I had to prove myself to be there onstage. I still am really self-critical about my playing. I was stubborn in that respect, and I was also quite competitive.

If you're in a summer program, say, or you're in the studio and they are looking for that token female trombonist and they aren't really accepting so many, you feel more competitive with other women. So instead of reaching out to other women and finding camaraderie, there's this history of being more competitive with women than with men. We are pitting ourselves against each other, which is the absolute opposite of what we need to do.

What sort of obstacles do women playing brass instruments face?

There are things we're told to try to disguise. When you are behind a screen for blind orchestra auditions, people say, "Don't breathe too shallow, you'll sound like a girl" or "Don't wear high heels, so they won't know you're a woman." I think our differences should absolutely be celebrated.

Why has change been so slow?

There's an enormous number of phenomenal brass players out there who are female, trans or nonbinary who don't get the spotlight that they deserve. Many orchestra positions are tenured, and people tend to hold onto their positions for a long time, so openings are scarce. And then when there are auditions, there aren't enough women. If you get 50 trombonists for an audition, maybe five of them are women.



“If you get 50 trombonists for an audition,” Simms said, “maybe five of them are women.” Kimberly Desjardins for The New York Times

How can the industry change to improve representation of women in brass?

Visibility is the answer. We need to have more women, trans and nonbinary brass players in leadership positions — teaching at more universities, leading more studios, being in top positions in orchestras and members of notable brass ensembles. The more leadership we have, the more it'll encourage people to start the instrument and carry it forward.

You're a member of the Canadian Women's Brass Collective, and you've played in a variety of all-female groups. Does it feel different to play in those ensembles?

I don't feel like I have to prove myself all the time. I don't feel that way with the American Brass Quintet either. But in all-female groups, there's just this comfort level of knowing that everything that I've gone through in my career, the other members have had similar experiences. And we're just sitting down and playing our instruments and that's purely it. I don't have to put on a mask to play.

You started playing euphonium at 9 and switched to trombone at 12. What drew you to the instrument?

I loved singing along with Ella Fitzgerald and all these crooners. And I found that the trombone could imitate my voice the best out of all the instruments. If I wanted to growl with my voice or do scoops and slides, I could do that the best on the trombone. The slide vibrato that I could do on the trombone imitated the vibrato I would do with my voice. It just seemed like it was the best matched to what I hear in my head all the time. So that's what resonated, and I guess it just kind of stuck.

You met your husband at Yale, where you were both graduate students in music. Your relationship has received attention in China, where your husband has built a substantial following after appearing on a reality television show. What has that been like?

Every now and then we'll be walking down the street and the next day, we'll see a picture that someone shot of us posted on the Chinese social media platform Weibo. I think the weirdest thing was when Ricky was visiting me in Toronto and we were just walking to a Starbucks. I was on home turf; I had greasy hair and a ponytail. Then all of a sudden this girl recognizes Ricky and runs up to us. I just thought, "How are you getting recognized in Toronto, Canada, right now?"

What does it mean to you to be the first woman to join the American Brass Quintet in its 63-year history?

I'm absolutely honored and humbled, to say the least. I don't think I've wrapped my head around it, but it's it is really exciting and I just hope I can make the female brass community proud.

To not have an all-boys club anymore at one of the pre-eminent brass ensembles in

North America means that we're really saying something, which is excellent. It also means that I get to wear a dress. They were wearing all-black before, and I've introduced some color to their palette.

Javier C. Hernández is a culture reporter, covering the world of classical music and dance in New York City and beyond. He joined The Times in 2008 and previously worked as a correspondent in Beijing and New York.
[More about Javier C. Hernández](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: She's Continuing A Legacy, 'in Heels'