

#MeToo: Yes, it happens in the percussion industry. What can we do about it?

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I am an active, full-time professional percussionist. At every single stage of my life, from elementary school until today (I'm now in my 40s) I've been told that I didn't deserve the things I've achieved, that I've slept my way to the top, I'm trading sexual favors for influence, or that I'm benefiting from special treatment somehow because of my gender. The irony, of course, is that my hurdles were much HIGHER because of my gender. – Anonymous

At age 21, I was standing among a group of percussion colleagues discussing a new piece we were working on together when a male percussionist walked over and interrupted our conversation to tell me that my “tits look big” in the top I was wearing. This was just one of the many #MeToo moments I have experienced in my lifetime and it doesn't even come close to the most inappropriate thing that someone has said or done to me in a professional environment. Sadly, most women are all too familiar with this type of casual sexual harassment, and it happens in every industry, including percussion.

In this article, I have included quotes and experiences from other women who wish to share their experiences with sexual misconduct in the percussion industry. It's important to mention that sexual misconduct is not limited to women and that while this article does focus on some of the most appallingly bad apples in our industry, the majority of the people I've worked have been supportive and professional. It's also encouraging to see more young women joining the industry every year who are, for the most part, welcomed and supported by male colleagues.

However, we still have a problem, and it's everyone's problem.

Like many other industries, the percussion field has historically been male-dominated, which means that more often than not men have been the primary gatekeepers to professional and educational opportunities. Further complicating the matter, we are an industry of artists, where competition for coveted jobs is a way of life, and bad behavior is often excused or overlooked if the offender in question happens to be very talented or respected.

I don't have a lot of stories, just the general feeling of being treated differently. – Irene Durbak

When stories of sexual misconduct by powerful men started dominating the headlines in late 2017, the #MeToo hashtag sparked a passionate conversation among the women percussionists in my social networks. Most had stories to tell. When I made it known I was writing this article, I was floored by the number of people who shared their experiences with me, often following their testimonials with statements like, “That isn't even the worst thing that happened to me, but I don't feel comfortable talking about those other things right now.”

I can share many stories. Some examples include numerous comments on how I look and how that will affect the section; one senior section member who massaged my shoulders before every concert; countless incidents of “innocent,” “accidental,” “friendly,” “joking” touching; countless times I’ve heard “it’s such a turn-on when you play loudly;” a lot of patronizing, unsolicited instruction, and carrying my instruments without asking. Everything I have listed above is from my professional life. School was much worse. – Anonymous

Studies going back several decades suggest that instrument selection by students as early as third grade are already biased by gender-role expectations¹. Women who resist external pressure and pick historically “male” instruments (like percussion) often face ongoing bias and discrimination from their peers. Many women described the early experience of being pigeonholed into exclusively playing mallet parts as opposed to snare drum or timpani, even if they desired to play those instruments. The restrictions were sometimes imposed by band directors, but just as often dictated by male section members or leaders who acted as enforcers for the section. This type of early exposure to gender bias creates a culture that persists through grade school and into college, and attitudes that follow musicians into their professional careers.

I was in a local youth orchestra in middle school and the other percussionists were male high school seniors. They called me “Bells Bitch” the whole year and basically didn’t let me play anything else. – M.V.

Once they enter college, female percussionists face a variety of additional challenges. Typically the minority gender in percussion studios, some women report being the target of added academic scrutiny, practical jokes, or sexual interest. At such a young age, many students lack the maturity and resources to know how to deal with this type of unwanted behavior, so incidents frequently go unreported and offenders go unchecked.

A percussion minor decided to prank call me in the middle of the night, usually between 2 – 4 a.m. During these calls he would tell me the explicit, leaning toward violent, things he was going to do to me. I didn’t know his voice and was legitimately scared. His calls went on for weeks until another music student overheard him and persuaded him to stop. – Anonymous

Jokes, prank calls or “locker room talk” may seem harmless and funny to some, but they can also be an indicator or predictor of more malicious behavior. Constantly trying to separate actual threatening behavior from everyday inappropriate remarks about her appearance or personal life eventually undermines a woman’s ability to trust her intuition and puts her in a vulnerable situation. It can also wreak havoc on her ability to focus on her work and advancement.

While I was in college working in the percussion studio, one of the other percussionists would often exclaim I’ve got “decent chops...for a girl of course.” He also remarked that I “looked delicious.” This is the same guy who would later go on to sexually assault me. – Amanda Fliflet

The culture of each studio and school varies, but is shaped greatly by the attention and attitudes of the primary teacher. Young adults living away from home for the first time may look to their primary teacher as their first resource for help if they experience a crisis. How teachers choose to handle complaints and resolve conflict sets the tone for the studio.

One woman who chose to remain anonymous shared her experience of being physically abused by her recital partner, a fellow percussionist. Her teacher, who had assigned the recital partner, was unwilling to intervene. As she recounts, *“I tried to speak to my teacher several times and he would cut me off and say that I needed to figure out my personal problems and that he didn’t want to hear about it.”* Despite showing up with visible bruises on her face and seeking police intervention, her teacher refused to involve himself in the situation. She writes, *“I will never know if my teacher knew what was really happening, but I do blame him as much as I blame the guy that was hitting me.”*

Incidents of sexual misconduct or harassment do not arise exclusively on a peer-to-peer basis. The student-teacher relationship can be an intimate exchange that relies heavily on trust that can easily be abused. In addition to one party dictating the tenor of the relationship, the mentor may be older and more established in the industry.

When I was in my undergrad, I was the public relations VP for the school percussion studio, which meant I helped the artists who visited with anything they needed. One year an international PAS [Percussion Arts Society] chapter president came to our school to perform with his students. I helped him and tried to be a good representation of our studio. He flirted with me and gave me some sticks that he had used. I was flustered but I tried to stay professional. That night, he messaged me asking about the studio and other American music programs. I tried to be as diplomatic as possible and I was so excited because he was a very important PAS member. He then turned the conversation into asking what the night life was like in our town, then to what I was doing, what I was wearing, making sexual comments, finally asking if I wanted to come to his hotel room and get on my knees for him. I immediately stopped talking to him – I had only hoped I was misinterpreting his attitude because surely an educator and a man of great influence in the percussion community couldn’t be hitting on me. But the bluntness of asking for sexual favors made everything seem so disturbing. I felt so gross. I felt like my professionalism didn’t matter. Even worse, I thought my professionalism and my excitement about percussion in general made him think I was interested in him. It made me feel like an object rather than a musician. – Nicole Robbins

Beyond having her trust violated by someone who was supposed to be in a mentorship role as a guest artist, the events described in the testimonial above reveal a serious conundrum that many young women face in our industry –trying to network and be professional without having friendliness misinterpreted as flirtation.

Women working in the field of percussion equipment manufacturing face similar challenges. Outreach and networking are an expected marketing component of these businesses and women attempting to achieve success in this industry must gain the acceptance and respect of men already established in these fields.

As a college senior, after completing an internship with a well-known drum set manufacturer, I was seeking out an equally prestigious internship opportunity with another percussion manufacturer to gain further experience and satisfy my Music Business degree requirement. At the NAMM [National Association of Music Merchants] show, I approached a male representative of a leading percussion manufacturer to inquire if they had an internship program, and was told “Sure. We always need pretty girls to work the booth.” Then he proceeded to give me a big wink and asked me my plans for the night. – Anonymous

When women are repeatedly not taken seriously as professionals, or not able to break through glass ceilings despite years of experience, many otherwise ambitious and talented individuals eventually leave the field altogether. When talented musicians are driven away, the industry suffers.

Women in professional orchestras are equally under-represented. While the impact of screened auditions on improving female membership in orchestras has been well-documented², percussion sections remain almost entirely male. In data collected in 2009 by Amy Louis Phelps and included in her dissertation, *Beyond Auditions: Gender Discrimination in America’s Top Orchestras*, only 6 percent of percussionists in the top 15 American orchestras³ were women⁴. Despite the success of the three women who have obtained positions with top orchestras, most percussion sections remain entirely male. Facing these odds, many female percussionists find themselves in an uncomfortable situation if the other section members are not respectful of their ability or rank within the section. Instances of “mansplaining” are common, as are situations where female principals are not taken seriously, and other players defer to the opinion of male section members.

I am a percussionist in an orchestra. On one occasion I was in charge of the percussion group for a large production. Most of the extra percussionists working with us were very pleasant, except for one, who refused to take instructions from me because he “knows everything” and starting telling the other percussionists and me what to do. I had to sit next to him and he put his hand on my thigh as he leaned in toward me to tell me how to play my part. I didn’t want to create an uncomfortable atmosphere in the group so I didn’t say anything. In the end I did up telling the person in charge of the production what happened and asked him not to call this percussionist again, which he agreed to. But, as they are friends, he told me that I should still be “nice” to this individual. Another (male) colleague told me that “it’s not a big deal; it’s not as if you were raped.” – Anonymous

One of the more extreme examples in the percussion industry of where culture and unwritten rules dominate is marching band and drum corps. The camaradery and team mentality that make marching band so appealing for many young people can also insulate instructors and directors who behave inappropriately from punishment. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* recently broke the story of George Hopkins' resignation as director of the Cadets after nine women accused him of sexual misconduct including rape. In 2014, The Ohio State University released a damning report into its investigation of the marching band's culture which led to the firing of its director, Jonathan Waters. The culture of many marching bands, as was the case with Ohio State, operates much like a fraternity, and incidents of hazing are common along with the expectation of loyalty. A close friend of mine recently described an incident that happened on a marching band bus ride in high school, during which fellow band section members forcibly held her down while one of the males touched his scrotum to her face – an incident they described as a joke. What astounded me about this was that, according to her, incidents like that were so common in her marching band that it seemed unremarkable to her at the time.

In discussions with women who are or have been involved in marching arts as both students and instructors, it is clear that loyalty to the group and lack of an adequate structure for reporting incidents make it difficult to root out misconduct. Equally problematic is the flirtatious culture that exists often between male instructors and young female students.

My freshman year of college, an older guy in the percussion studio who was also our front ensemble tech made several weird comments to me including "you trying to seduce me with that short skirt?" He's now an influential marching arts adjudicator. – Anonymous

Relationships between underage students and instructors are universally prohibited by school administrators, however many of these relationships go unreported for a number of reasons. As with other organizations that place value on the strength of the group over the individual, members often fear alienation or retaliation by their fellow members if they get someone in trouble, or don't go along with the group mentality.

I have come across many drum line instructors who have dated their freshly graduated senior students or even students still in high school. I find the whole concept totally wrong – instructors have authority and power, so students don't really see them as regular people. – Katie Keefe

The good news is that our society is in the midst of a reckoning - one that extends from Hollywood to higher education to corporate America and beyond. The tide is starting to turn. Companies and industries are sending a clear message that sexual harassment and misconduct in any form will no longer be tolerated. Musical titans such as James Levine and Charles Dutoit have lost contracts with top organizations following allegations and complaints that span decades.

However, in every #MeToo story, the details that sadden me the most - aside from the obvious trauma and humiliation felt by the victims - are the stories of unrealized potential: Those women

who eventually couldn't take it anymore and gave up on their dreams. Incidents of misogyny, sexism, harassment, gender bias and even worse add up over the course of a career (or a lifetime), and can eventually break a person, especially when their complaints are repeatedly ignored and predators get away with bad behavior over and over again.

So what can we do about it? First, we can empower victims to speak up by listening to their stories, believing them, and taking action to remove predators and misogynists from our industry.

To all the good men out there: We need your help. Male allies are vital to changing the broader culture. If a man makes inappropriate or sexist remarks – whether in public or in private – other men need to speak up to let them know it is unacceptable.

To the men and women in positions of authority: We need your help. When someone reports an incident, take immediate action to protect the victim, discipline the offender. Those in charge must set the tone for behavior and culture, and make it clear that bad behavior will not be tolerated. Leaders must also work closely with their workplace and school administrators to establish and articulate no-tolerance policies for any type of harassment or discrimination, including the potential consequences for violating those policies.

Change doesn't occur overnight and there is more work to be done in the months and years ahead. However, as we emerge as an industry that allows all people to realize their full potential, we will all benefit from a truer and more honest expression of our art form.

Additional Resources

RAINN

- “RAINN (Rape, abuse, & incest national network) is the nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization. RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE, online.rainn.org y rainn.org/es) in partnership with more than 1,000 local sexual assault service providers across the country and operates the DoD Safe Helpline for the Department of Defense. RAINN also carries out programs to prevent sexual violence, help survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.”
- www.rainn.org

Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund administered by the National Women’s Law Center

- “Connects those who experience sexual misconduct including assault, harassment, abuse and related retaliation in the workplace or in trying to advance their careers with legal and public relations assistance.”
- <https://nwlc.org/times-up-legal-defense-fund/>

Time’s Up Now

- “Powered by women, TIME’S UP addresses the systemic inequality and injustice in the workplace that have kept underrepresented groups from reaching their full potential. We partner with leading advocates for equality and safety to improve laws, employment agreements, and corporate policies; help change the face of corporate boardrooms and the C-suite; and enable more women and men to access our legal system to hold wrongdoers accountable.”
- <https://www.timesupnow.com/>

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

- “The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee because of the person's race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information. It is also illegal to discriminate against a person because the person complained about discrimination, filed a charge of discrimination, or participated in an employment discrimination investigation or lawsuit.”
- <https://www.eeoc.gov/>

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¹ Phelps, 70, in reference to studies by C.L. Martin and J.K. Little and Pickering and Repacholi.

² Goldin, Claudia and Cecilia Rouse. "Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians." *American Economic Review* 90 (2000): 715-741.

³ As determined by budget from the American Symphony League

⁴ This percentage may now be slightly higher as there are two women members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra percussion section that were not accounted for Ms. Phelps's original numbers.