

For the first time, a professional Dutch symphony orchestra receives a female chief conductor. The American Karina Canellakis (36) will be in charge of the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra from the summer of 2019; The Radio Filharmonisch orchestra together with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra are viewed as the top of the country.

Karina Canellakis is the successor to Markus Stenz and has illustrious predecessors such as Bernard Haitink and Jaap van Zweden. Canellakis is the protege of the latter: for two years she was Van Zweden's assistant at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. She will stay with the in Hilversum based group for at least four years.

That a woman could become the head of a prestigious Dutch orchestra seemed to have been excluded until a few years ago. In 2014 the Volkskrant wondered where 'la maestra' was: most orchestras hardly have one female guest conductor per year. The Concertgebouw Orchestra only had six female conductors in its 130-year history so far. No women have been studying the national master's course in orchestral conducting - not for years.

But change can be seen. Barbara Hannigan (with the orchestra Ludwig) and the Lithuanian Mirga Gražinyte-Tyla (on tour with her City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra) made a big impression this season. Just like Canellakis, who first worked with the Radio Philharmonic in March. Her energetic performance (including Beethoven's Seventh Symphony) in TivoliVredenburg was awarded four stars.

At the first meeting, she fell in love immediately, says Canellakis. 'I enjoyed every minute of that week. The orchestra was so positive, so focused and curious about what I had to say. The level is very high, but the orchestra is not arrogant at all. Often when you come as a guest conductor, there is a kind of invisible wall between you and the orchestra, but here I had only nice conversations in all the breaks.'

That she is the first woman in the Netherlands with such a position, she finds no more than a nice fact. "As a girl from New York, raised in the eighties, equality of the sexes seemed quite normal to me. I am not so concerned that I am a woman. But I understand very well that women in their 70s or 80s who have had a much harder time will think: wow, we have achieved this. I am happy for them. All the positive that this brings about is good. But I did not get this job because I am a woman. I am particularly proud to be the chief of this orchestra, I prefer to go into the history books for what I can do.'

Canellakis, who initially trained as a violinist, grew up in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Her mother is a pianist, her father a conductor, her younger brother is a cellist. 'Our apartment was very small: music was made in all the rooms and the walls were not sound-proof. You had to ignore each other.'

When she was 18, she exchanged New York for the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, a relatively small elite conservatory for which no tuition fees have to be paid. Musicians such as violinist Hilary Hahn and pianists like Lang Lang and Yuja Wang - now world stars - were her classmates. 'I felt constantly like I was failing, it always had to be better.'

Conducting did not initially seem realistic to her. Not because there are few female role models, but simply because she was so invested in the violin. "In retrospect, I was already busy with conducting all that time. I always had music scores with me and even had some lessons, but it seemed like a side issue. "

Her career as a violinist went well. She was hired at the Academy of the renowned Berliner Philharmoniker. And there it happened. 'The chief conductor, Simon Rattle, asked me after a chamber music evening: how do you think about directing? He must have seen something in the way I led, my expression. He said: if you want to do this, go for it. What you can do can't be learned, and what you cannot yet do, you can learn. '

It took a few more years before she really took the advice and signed up for the conducting training at Juilliard School in New York. Six hours a day she sat at the piano with a score. "That year I did not miss any programmes from the New York Philharmonic or the Metropolitan Opera."

And then Dallas came. Van Zweden took her after an audition of twenty minutes. Soon she was allowed to replace him in Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony. Canellakis acquired the reputation of an ideal incumbent conductor. "I was ready. I was hungry, I was prepared. "

Since then she travels around the world - still with her violin - and has a schedule full of debuts with famous orchestras. She does not take holidays, and she can no longer tell where she lives. With the Radio Philharmonic - her first real 'position' - there is more certainty in her life, but for the moment not much more rest. People are drawn to her on all fronts. The fact that the orchestra contracted her after one project - something exceptional - says enough. This is only the beginning for the first female chief conductor in the Netherlands.