

Wind symphony finds wonder in works by women

By [Scott Hewitt](#), Columbian Arts & Features Reporter

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'Legends of American Band,' last fall's concert by the Southwest Washington Wind Symphony, featured the usual legendary suspects: Alfred Reed's "The Hounds of Spring;" John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever."

After that concert, conductor Patrick Murphy decided to change directions. The upcoming concert by the Wind Symphony features all women composers. He said he was inspired — and a bit embarrassed — by some research done by the Wind Symphony's publicist, Colleen Chun, who crunched the numbers and found that a whopping 2 percent of the group's material over the past 12 seasons was composed by women.

Murphy, who teaches music and directs bands at the University of Portland, reviewed his own track record there and found it similarly skewed. "I'm on a campus that's 65 percent female and I'm close to 6 percent" in terms of selecting music by women. "Oh my goodness, I'm not promoting what I need to be promoting," he realized.

He added that he's got plenty of female flute students and conducting students — and yet, professional flautists and conductors in the classical music world are mostly men. "For whatever reason, there's still a big gender gap in classical music," said Murphy. "Who are the famous women composers? They're hard to name."

The good news, Murphy said, is that the younger world of "wind bands" is "more accessible to women composers" than the older, stuffier one of symphony orchestras. "We're always on the lookout for new repertoire, new stuff by living composers. We're much more in the now," he said — even if concert programming hasn't yet reflected that. Murphy went hunting for quality music by women and discovered "a wealth of great material, a lot of stuff I never heard before," he said.

Fresh voices

You've heard of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven — all "dead white German men," Murphy said. Now, meet Giroux, Nishimura and Szymko.



Cait Nishimura

Julie Giroux "is the big name in terms of female composers" right now, Murphy said. "She's written a ton of great stuff," including symphonic and piano works as well as many soundtracks for movies and television.

"Kahn," one of two Giroux pieces in this concert, isn't a soundtrack but sure sounds like one, Murphy said; it's a dramatic and visual portrayal of the life of Mongolian warlord Gengis Kahn. "It really grabs you," he said.



Julie Giroux

"The most compelling" female composer Murphy knows is the youngest, he said: 25-year-old Cait Nishimura, based in Toronto and the recent winner of a prestigious national competition with her piece "Chasing Sunlight. "It's a cross section of urban and natural themes," said Murphy. "It's about driving west toward British Columbia and following the sun as you go. It's a beautiful piece."

Nishimura "writes with a fresh voice that doesn't sound like anybody else writing now," he said. "She's going to make it. I want her to meet my college students. I think they'll be very inspired by this young, minority woman writing music that is getting played."

[remainder of article describes Clark College winter choral concert]