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Katherine Balch named first woman resident composer at California Symphony



At age 25, Katherine Balch is set to become the next Young American Composer in Residence at the California Symphony — the first woman in the history of the program.

These days in the Bay Area, the California Symphony may be the most forward-looking music organization around.

It's not just its official mission — “to become a 21st-century orchestra, making classical music relevant to those we serve, bringing in new audiences along the way” — or its newest program, “Orchestra X,” which aims to lure millennials to orchestral concerts. (That isn't just hype: For its season-opening program, the Symphony offered young concertgoers \$5 tickets, food trucks and a post-concert pizza-and-beer party.)

Now the Walnut Creek-based Symphony has done something truly radical: It has named a woman to be its new resident composer.

Katherine Balch, 25, will serve as the orchestra's Young American Composer-in-Residence for a three-year term, from August 1, 2017, to July 31, 2020.

In a call from her home in New York City, Balch said she was thrilled at the prospect of working with California Symphony music director Donato Cabrera and the orchestra.

“I’m very excited about it,” she said. “It’s a one of a kind opportunity.”

Balch, who was born and raised in San Diego, began her music studies at the New England Conservatory of Music (in a double degree program with Tufts University), is a graduate of the prestigious Yale School of Music and is pursuing a doctorate at Columbia University. In recent seasons, she’s had works commissioned and performed by numerous organizations, including the Albany Symphony Orchestra, Ensemble Intercontemporain, the FLUX Quartet, International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) and Contemporaneous.

“I love writing for orchestra,” she said. “I feel it’s where my voice has enough room to breathe and speak. My music has been performed by orchestras before, but it’s been sort of an in-and-out feeling. You’re there for a day or two of rehearsal; the piece is performed, and that’s it.”

“The chance to have a personal connection with the music director and the people in the orchestra will be an incredible experience. It’s a great opportunity to find out what I want from an orchestra and what I can learn from it.”

Launched in 1991 by California Symphony founder Barry Jekowsky, the Young American Composer-in-Residence program has produced 34 new symphonic works. It has also helped propel the careers of each of its former resident composers: Kamran Ince (1991-92), Christopher Theofanidis (1994-96), Kevin Puts (1996-99), Pierre Jalbert (1999-2002), Kevin Beavers (2002-05), Mason Bates (2007-10), D.J. Sparr (2011-14), and current resident Dan Visconti, whose term ends later this year.

Women composers are still woefully underrepresented in American orchestras – the San Francisco Symphony, for instance, has only one, Kaija Saariaho, on its recently announced 2017-18 season – and I ask Balch what it means to her to be the program’s first. “It’s about time,” she says, laughing.

Balch goes on to say that smaller organizations like the California Symphony often lead the way. “It seems like the larger organizations – the Met Opera, for example – are the most conservative. I’m certainly for female representation in the concert hall, and it’s institutions like the California Symphony that set precedents that work their way up to these giant institutions.”

Balch has no specific plans for what she’ll compose, although she acknowledges that a violin concerto is “a sort of dream piece.” A passionate supporter of music education, she’s eager to get involved in the Symphony’s outreach programs. “Aside from that, I look forward to eating a lot of food,” she says. “I’m really hoping to get to know the restaurant scene there.”