Blind auditions help women

By Mary Caffrey

"Blind" auditions for symphony orchestras have contributed to a substantial increase in the number of women who have secured these positions, according to Cecilia Rouse, assistant professor of economics and public affairs.

In a blind audition, a screen is placed so that the evaluator can hear but not see the performer. While screens in final rounds of auditions are still uncommon, the use of screens in preliminary rounds is now a wide-spread practice, Rouse said.

She used personnel records and rosters from several symphony orchestras to track the hiring of women musicians as orchestras adopted the practice of blind auditions during the 1970s and 1980s. Her findings are presented in "Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of 'Blind' Auditions on Female Musicians" (Working Paper #376 of the Industrial Relations Section, coauthored with Claudia Goldin of Harvard).

"The switch to blind auditions can explain between 30 percent and 55 percent of the increase in the proportion female among new hires and between 25 percent and 46 percent of the increase in the percentage female in the orchestras from 1970 to 1996," according to the study, which was based on a final analysis sample of 14,133 individuals and 592 audition segments.

The study found that the practice of blind auditions increased by 50 percent the probability that women would advance out of certain preliminary rounds. "The screen also enhances, by severalfold, the likelihood that a female contestant will be the winner in the final round," the authors noted.

The study points out that the surge of women in symphony orchestras has occurred despite the fact that the number of positions is highly fixed and turnover is slow.

Exceptional factors

Blind auditions for orchestra positions offered researchers a unique opportunity to study hiring discrimination against women, Rouse said. (The analysis was limited to women because gender was the only characteristic the data provided for a large sample, according to the study.) Several factors made the situation particularly telling.

First, discrimination against women seeking orchestra positions in the 1960s and 1970s was well documented. Rouse and Goldin cited statements by famous conductors that women "have smaller techniques than men" and are more "temperamental." They write, "In the era (say before 1970) when just a few orchestras used the 'screen' for the preliminary round, just 10 percent of the new hires were women."

Second, symphony orchestras "do not vary much in size and have virtually identical numbers and types of jobs. Thus, we can look at the proportion of women in an orchestra without being concerned about changes in the composition of occupations and the number of workers."

Finally, the introduction of a screen and other means of concealing an applicant's identity made it possible to filter out factors such as experience or education, which might prejudice the evaluator.
The lack of women in orchestras before the 1970s was probably not due to poor training, according to Rouse. "Women have always been trained alongside their brothers," she says. But in earlier generations, highly accomplished female musicians ended up becoming teachers.

In the study, Rouse examined the musicians' performances at several auditions, both screened and non-screened. In this way, she was able to show that blind auditions helped female applicants after controlling for ability.

This kind of access to hiring records is unusual. While longitudinal studies often track a given person's ability to obtain jobs over time, the opportunity to know the fate of every other competing applicant "is extremely rare," Rouse said.

Rouse, who studied under Goldin at Harvard, decided to examine the effects of blind auditions after Goldin noticed a "throwaway line" in a paper about the increase of women in orchestras once screens were adopted. For Rouse, the project offered an opportunity to tap her longtime interest in music. "I've played the flute for years," she said.