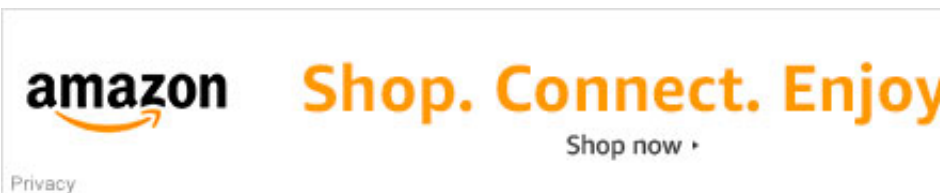


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## Time's Up in Classical Music

11/1/2019 by [CARRIE N. BAKER](#)

Over the past two years, the #MeToo movement has reached many fields, and classical music is no exception.

In 2017, [Charles Dutoit](#) resigned his position as conductor of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra after three opera singers and an instrumentalist accused him of sexual assault. In March of 2018, the Metropolitan Opera fired the conductor [James Levine](#) after an investigation “uncovered credible evidence that Mr. Levine engaged in sexually abusive and harassing conduct toward vulnerable artists in the early stages

of their careers, over whom Mr. Levine had authority.” Four months later, the Cleveland Orchestra suspended concertmaster [William Preucil](#) for sexual harassment and assault. Then this month, [Placido Domingo](#) resigned as general director of Los Angeles Opera after 20 women accused him of sexual harassment.

The tremendous power and prestige of conductors and concertmasters provides ample opportunities for abuse. But the abuse can start much earlier, among teachers and adolescent (or younger) students.

World renowned violinist Lara St. John recently [spoke to the Philadelphia Inquirer](#) about her experience of sexual assault when she was a young student at the Curtis Institute, a highly selective private conservatory in Philadelphia. She was 14 in 1986 when her 78-year-old violin teacher Jascha Brodsky raped her. When she reported the assault to the dean of the school Robert Fitzpatrick, he told her no one would believe her, and he did nothing to help St. John. She reported it again in 1995 and 2013, but she says that each time the school covered up the abuse.

Over the past two years, the #Me Too movement has spread from Hollywood to Silicon Valley, from Congress to the state legislatures, from the newsroom to agricultural fields. No area seems immune—and behind the civilized and sophisticated facade of classical music lies the same patriarchal and misogynist sexual abuse that we’ve seen in so many industries and fields in the #MeToo era.

St. John spoke to *Ms.* about her experience and how she and others are fighting back.



(James Farley)

### **Can you tell me about your experience at the Curtis Institute in the 1980s?**

*The school is full scholarship for every student. During that first year, I experienced what's called "grooming." My teacher was always very, very complimentary. He would say "oh, you're my favorite, you're the best," and all that kind of stuff. And then, little by little, he started doing things that were not at all appropriate, like having me sit next to him on the couch, and kissing me, and putting his hands under my clothes, and stuff like that. And then, eventually, under threat, in the early spring, it escalated to rape.*

*He was 78 years old and I was 14. Pretty disgusting, no matter how you look at it. I didn't know anything about anything. I really was very sheltered. All I knew was playing the violin. I didn't understand what I should do. I couldn't*

*talk to anyone.*

*I thought it was all my fault, of course. I ate more, gained some weight, wasn't practicing as well, and just had such a tough time going to lessons with anyone, actually. And then I went back in the fall, and realized "this is going to destroy me. I have to do something."*

### **What happened when you reported the assault?**

*I went into the then-Dean. His name was Robert Fitzpatrick. I call him the "Joe Paterno" of Curtis Institute because he was a facilitator. He laughed at me, he gawked and snorted, and said, "Who do you think anybody's going to believe, some kid, or someone who's been here for decades?" So that was his reaction. I was very tearful, very upset, and I just said, "all I want to do is change teachers, I don't want anything else, I just need to change teachers." Because I couldn't afford to be kicked out of the school. I was from a poor family. I couldn't leave. I don't know what would have happened.*

### **Did Fitzpatrick believe you?**

*I think he did believe me, actually, but he had to protect the school at all costs. To belittle me, I think, that's why he scoffed and snorted, to make it seem to me as if it wasn't very important, what I was saying. Facilitators are really good at this sort of thing.*

## Did he tell the teacher to stop this behavior?

*I don't even think he did that. I mean, the guy was still teaching until he died.*

## What happened after you reported the assault?

*The director's wife at the time, Naomi Graffman, took me out and said, "hey, isn't this wonderful, we've managed to switch your teacher, and not only that, you'll get an A for sure, so don't worry about that. And now you don't have to tell anyone anymore, right?" And I was like, "Yeah, absolutely, right!" because I was just so relieved and so happy that I wasn't going to be punished.*

*So, I picked myself up in the third year and learned a lot of pieces I really wanted to learn, and things went a lot better. But it was still just too hard to stay in the same school. And even though I'd be sure to not be there in the hours when I knew [Brodsky] might be coming down the stairs or something, it was just crushing.*

*I decided to leave, and get as far away as possible. I got myself on an exchange program between Canada and the Soviet Union. I put an Iron Curtain between me and that stupid school. And that was the best decision I ever made. It's liberating for people to go to such a different place. And this was before social media. Nobody in the Soviet Union knew anything about the situation at Curtis, so it was a very healthy thing I did...to get away, completely and utterly.*

## What happened when you reported the assault again later?

*A few years later, I was in New York, in December of 1995, and for some reason, my counselor from Curtis called me up and asked me about the incident. I was like “Hey, you know, I’ve made a life for myself, and I don’t want to go back into that.” And she said, “Yeah, but it’s important. What happened?” And so for the first time I actually told the entire story, with all the details.*

*The next day, once again, the director’s wife calls me up and says “oh, there’s no need to talk to anybody about this, because this guy’s almost dead and only teaching one person.”*

*Then in 2013, the former Dean—Fitzpatrick—wrote an essay for a very well-known classical music blog called “Slipped Disc.” He made himself out to be such a protector and patron saint of children, talking about how well he did with them and how well he protected them. I had never been so angry in my life.*

*It took me a little while, about a month and a half or so, to be able to get up to the courage to write a letter to Curtis. I wrote a 9-page, detailed letter in May 2013 to the Curtis Institute. And I said, “I want you to shut up that Dean and I want every member of the Board to read this.” But they didn’t. What they did was they shoved it under the carpet again. They supposedly hired an investigator who talked to two people. The [report](#) was a sham. They didn’t even try to talk to me, or witnesses, or anyone else.*

## How are young people in music schools particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse?

*In music schools, it's a huge problem. We're taught as kids that your teacher is basically a god. You must do everything that your teacher says. And in my case, it was the threat against my brother, [who was also at the school], because Curtis is entirely a scholarship school. My teacher said, "if you don't do this, I'll kick your brother out."*

*It's also the one-on-one lessons and the 7 hours of practice a day in classical. It's so preposterously intense, and it takes over your whole life from a very, very young age. I think it's easier for people to take advantage of children in classical than it is in other types of music, where they tend to be older when they're getting into the field.*

*They're also very ... I don't want to say old fashioned, because that almost sounds nice ... but they're not forward thinking at all, and there tends to be a very old patriarchy, or matriarchy. At Curtis, for example, at least in the time I was there, everyone was over 70 and 80, and all the Board members are, you know, from a different time. So they don't understand or take seriously things that happen to students. It's just too many generations apart. Especially in Europe, those music schools have those backward-looking worldviews. A famous author who was a friend of this guy who was jailed [for sexually abusing a student] said "oh, he's from another time, he was just having fun." Exactly the same thing happened to me and many other people, because it's music, it's classical music, it's art, there's a lot of passion. We're always talking or playing about life and*

*death and love and fire. To a certain extent, that can kind of transfer somehow to the studio, which of course is not right. But I guess somehow, to some people, it seems more understandable.*

### **What inspired you to talk to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* this past summer?**

*The #MeToo movement is partly why I came forward. And something that encouraged me as well was watching the Kavanaugh hearing, where I saw Christine Blasey Ford get raked over the coals by these stupid old men. I was also watching the administration at Penn State, as well as all the cases of people being abused by priests. I think that two or three years ago I would have been dragged over the coals, once again. But it's really, really changed.*

*So I thought, you know what, there's probably a bunch of 14 year old people like me having this problem, or maybe they're 20, or maybe they're 30, who cares. They may not be in the position that I am to be able to talk about this issue.*

*I know that my article made a lot of other people speak out, finally, at last, some from the same time period, some even from different countries and music schools, some not even from music schools. I got, it felt like thousands, but it was probably in the high hundreds of emails and messages saying "Thank you so much," basically "Me too!"*

### **New York just extended the statute of limitation for child**



**sex abuse. Is there an effort in Pennsylvania to do that?**

*I don't think that the statute of limitations should exist at all. There's a [bill](#) in the Pennsylvania Senate right now [to eliminate the statute of limitations], which the Catholic Church is actively lobbying against, and so is the Boy Scouts Association. I'm trying to be an advocate for the bill. I'd love to speak in front of the senate. I'd love to get the guys from Penn State, some of the Catholics, and we all go, we all speak. I think that would be fantastic. I just have to figure out how to do that.*

**How else are you raising awareness about this issue?**

*I just did a fundraiser for the Women's Fund of Miami. I'm meeting with supporters in Boston, from the Boston Symphony, just wonderful women who have been incredibly supportive and helped me by writing to Curtis and speaking to lawyers. I'm going up to Boston to meet them, and a fellow survivor, then after that I'm going to take a trip to the Baltimore Symphony to meet another one of my great supporters, down to DC to meet with RAINN, to Delaware to meet with another survivor, and to Philly to see a bunch of people there. I also plan to make a documentary by interviewing survivors. A lot of people have agreed to speak with me on the record.*

Lara St. John's [open letter](#) to the Curtis Institute President Robert Diaz sent on October 30, 2019.

**TAGGED: INTERVIEW, Q&A, SEXUAL HARASSMENT, WOMEN IN MUSIC, WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT**

### **ABOUT CARRIE N. BAKER**

Carrie N. Baker is Professor and Director of the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College. Her 2007 book *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment* won the National Women's Studies Association Sara A. Whaley Book Prize. Her second book, *Fighting the US Youth Sex Trade: Gender, Race and Politics*, tells the story of activism against youth involvement in the sex trade in the United States between 1970 and 2015.

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