

Judith Weir as Master of the Queen's Music is a vital step for new composers

As a once aspiring composer myself I know how difficult it is for women to enter – never mind succeed in – this profession

by Jessica Duchen

Judith Weir is to be appointed Master of the Queen's Music. Weir, 60, will be the first woman ever appointed to this role, which has existed for nearly 400 years. The title may be archaic, the job's implied responsibilities establishmentarian, but given the struggles for recognition that have faced women composers over the centuries it is still a significant crack in a crystal ceiling.

In an ideal world, nobody would think of mentioning her gender. Weir, whose works have been praised for their "lightness, wisdom and sheer imagination" by Guardian critic Tom Service, is one of Britain's most distinguished composers, her track record including everything from grand scale operas to intimate music for solo piano. Her latest opera, *Miss Fortune*, was not warmly received, but seems to have been a rare glitch in an output of otherwise sterling quality.

Her new role is one that has evolved to become the musical equivalent of the Poet Laureate (a position currently held by Carol Ann Duffy, who sets a similar precedent). As the official website of the British Monarchy says, the holder "may choose to produce compositions to mark royal or state occasions if he or she wishes to do so". The musician is paid only an honorary stipend.

Few composers of lasting renown held the job for its first 300 years. It was only in the 20th century that the post began to be awarded to those with a higher public profile – notably Elgar, Arnold Bax and Arthur Bliss. As media influence grew, so did opportunities for this official composer to use the increase in clout as a platform to speak up on behalf of classical music in general – something that the outgoing holder, Peter Maxwell Davies, has done many times in the past decade. That is why Weir's appointment is welcome first for her music – but also, inevitably, for more than her music.

Women composers face a ceiling made not of one sheet of plate glass, but a multicoloured mosaic of issues. Classical music is still dominated by works written well before women were given the vote. The perceived "difficulty" of

contemporary music in the postwar years did not help to endear it to sales-aware promoters, and even now opportunities to air new compositions remain limited. This year's Proms include music by eight women composers and songwriters – a relatively large number, believe it or not, yet still only a fraction of the 88 concerts on offer.

Another major problem is that the paucity of successful role models has made it rare for younger women to consider becoming composers. I remember arriving, in the 1980s, for my first term at university in great excitement at the idea of trying to compose, having been encouraged to do so at my school, one alumna of which is Weir herself. It did not take long to discover that women would-be composers were doomed to a series of patronising putdowns by resistant faculty and arrogant male students.

The strongest – I wasn't one – survived despite this environment rather than because of it. You had to be tough and believe in yourself, because nobody else was going to believe in you. Most people need a star by which to navigate and, though women composers did exist, they were few in number and far, far away. I hope all that has changed now.

As Master of the Queen's Music (let's not worry about redubbing her "Mistress", a word loaded with the contradictory atmospheres of schoolroom and boudoir), Weir becomes a necessary figurehead: visible, high-profile proof that women not only can compose, but can rise to hold the same title as Elgar himself. This is a vital step that can help to encourage a new crop of aspiring composers – and ensure that someday we may never have to talk about their gender again.