

As Women's History Month draws to a close, TMM Artistic Specialist Melissa Niño, TCC Artistic Director Brittany Slaymaker, and Capital Harmony Works CEO Carol Burden reflect on the qualities that they have admired in great female leaders around them.

It might be a coincidence that Capital Harmony Works' leadership – including the CEO and all three program leaders – are women, but for the month of March, as the new relationship among Trenton Children's Chorus, Trenton Music Makers, and Music for the Very Young is evolving, there have been many opportunities to consider leadership through the lens of gender.

Both the Trenton Children's Chorus and Trenton Music Makers organizations were founded by formidable women. Sue Ellen Page, TCC's Founding Artistic Director, who will always be remembered for her clarity and grace, was joined by Marcia Wood as Founding Executive Director; Marcia Wood then continued on, nine years later, to found Trenton Community Music School with her indomitable partner Ellen Saxon. Two years later Marcia and Ellen were joined by Ronnie Ragen, who first founded Music for the Very Young and then fifteen years later, Trenton Music Makers Orchestra (originally known as "El Sistema Trenton"). This cadre of founders were universally respected for the strength of their vision for youth development through ensemble music in Trenton. Whether singing together, taking part in joyful and interesting first music experiences in their preschool classrooms, or playing as a string orchestra, young people in Trenton have been sustained, and have enriched and enlivened their city and their region, through the vision that still shapes Capital Harmony Works' shared mission today.

TCC Artistic Director Brittany Slaymaker thinks immediately of her predecessor, Patty Thel, when she considers great women leaders. "For over a decade, Patty as Director and Founder of the Westminster Conservatory Children's Choir Program and former Trenton Children's Chorus Artistic Director, has been a mentor and friend to me. When I was with TCC from 2011-2015, Patty led the program with integrity, devotion, and grace. From her, I learned the value of trusting your colleagues. She used to say, 'if you hire the right people, trust them and let them do their thing.' That was exactly how she led, no micromanaging, and as a result I felt valued and like I had a piece in the game. Now that I am in this leadership role, I hope to make our talented teaching artists feel the same. Likewise, I learned the importance of making my students feel seen and heard. One conversation that stands out to me is one in which Patty shared her concern around how easy it is for people looking in on a rehearsal or performance to give too much credit to the conductor and not enough credit to the students. Above all, Patty's students love her because of her devotion to them and the music first. I strive to share a similar thoughtfulness and integrity in each rehearsal and interaction with colleagues and students."

Melissa Niño concurs, especially in regard to trusting her colleagues as she leads the Trenton Music Makers orchestra program. "Many would think that being a female in a leading role is an honor but I would rather say it should be a normality. I remind myself that I am in a leading position to guide, learn and listen. However, I feel fortunate to be surrounded by a team of great professionals and human beings, continuing to work on the mission for access, equity and equality."

While discussing leadership, trust and listening skills resound as continuing themes. Capital Harmony Works' President and CEO Carol Burden considers her days as a young opera singer, and the extraordinary experience of an apprenticeship at the Lyric Opera of Chicago during the reign of General Director Ardis Krenik. "Ardis was unmistakable about her expectations, and what she required of everyone around her for Lyric to be its greatest version of itself," Carol recalls. "When she was speaking to you, no one else in the company mattered, even if you were an insignificant little Apprentice. I watched her handle divas, negotiate with union representatives, steward major donors, and address the media with the same firm grace. There was never a moment to doubt that she was running the show, but the love in that warm smile promised how much you were going to enjoy the ride."

Of all of Capital Harmony Works' leaders, Melissa Niño is living farthest home, with her roots in Caracas, Venezuela. She smiles as she thinks of her best example: "I take inspiration from many women but my role model has to be my mother, her hard work, strong self-esteem, resilience, humbleness and love have been essential in my development. These are values I hope to pass on to our young girls whose voices must be heard and potentials must be empowered." Carol Burden joins in: "I developed some of my best leadership qualities in my role as a mother! I had to learn very quickly that the buck stopped with me, but that others' thoughts and experiences were essential. I learned to have a plan and a structure, and then to be ready to chuck both of them out, based on what circumstances threw my way. I learned to orient myself toward what supports the whole, while focusing on a part of the whole when that part calls for attention."

Capital Harmony Works' leaders – the artistic and educational leaders of its three programs, and the CEO who holds the space for all of them to do their best work – are grateful for the opportunity to work with Trenton's young people, and proud, on those young people's behalf, for the beauty and artistry that they are developing and sharing with their home city.