

To the Beat of Her Drum

by Erynn Gutierrez

Lena Panin is not dressed down for a coffee meet-up. Despite the cool Boston weather on this cloudy April day, she dons a long purple skirt, graphic tank top, and platform Doc sandals. Her long, dark hair flows freely down to her waist, her fingers adorn thick, metal rings, and her cat-eye shaped glasses frame her blue-lined eyes. “It’s the New Yorker in me,” she jokingly said.

On her arrival at Berklee School of Music’s student-run coffeehouse, Café 939, the students spinning up drinks behind the counter greeted her warmly. Everyone in the room seemed to know her well. Despite being a first-year student from New York City, 18-year-old Panin has prominently established herself in the Berklee community. She often plays shows in the café’s attached student-run venue, the Red Room, with her newly formed rock band, Company Eight, every other weekend. She backs the band of eight members with her drum playing, giving every song its power and feel.

Yet Panin still feels a disconnect from her school’s drumming community, which is primarily male. Stated on Berklee’s website, the school takes pride in its “almost equal” sex distribution among its student population, which in reality is a 42 percent female to 58 percent male split. Drum set/percussion is the fourth popular principal instrument out of Berklee’s offerings. Out of the school’s 487 students who have declared drum set/percussion, Panin is one out of fifty women drummers. Out of this, she is one of five women of color drummers, making her the only South Asian female percussionist at Berklee.

Panin previously attended Brooklyn Technical High School, a large public school in the heart of Fort Greene, where she majored in sound engineering. Brooklyn Technical is just shy of Berklee’s current population of 7,000, with about 6,000 total students.

“High school was sort of suffocating for me. Being a girl in STEM, I was constantly surrounded by male students, and I always felt so discouraged by it. So, coming to Berklee was sort of a reality check for me. I got here thinking that I would find my people. But it’s not that easy,” Panin said. “Just this school alone won’t help me get where I need to get. I realized that if I want to make it as a drummer, especially as a woman, I have to do it all myself. No one’s gonna move mountains for me here.”

Panin is not alone in this feeling. Across the United States, numbers of female percussionists at collegiate music programs are exceedingly low. In 2010, the University of Iowa surveyed 163 US universities and colleges on the gender ratio of their percussion studios. Of the 1,868 undergraduate students participating in the study, 18 percent were female. Of the 284 graduate students, 16 percent were female.

It is no surprise to see these numbers reflected in percussion positions of top orchestras in the United States. In a 2020 study by East Tennessee State University, researchers compared the percentage of women percussionists in the top 25 orchestras during the 2019-2020 season to that of the 1975-1976 season. It used results from the Percussive Arts Society’s (PAS) 1975-1976 study, which showed that 5.50 percent, or 8 out of 141, of percussion and timpani chairs were held by women. In the 2019-2020 season, it was found that the percentage of women percussionists has remained about the same with 5.36 percent, or 9 out of 177, of percussion and timpani chairs were held by women--even around 45 years after the PAS study.

This is significant as blind auditions (where the identity and gender of the musician are hidden from the judges) were enacted by top US orchestras in the 1970s and 80s as a way of “combatting” identity discrimination. Elena Bonomo, a Berklee drum set/percussion graduate

and the current drum chair of the Broadway musical, *SIX*, says that beyond blind auditions there must be more done to get more women in percussion chairs.

“There’s comfort in knowing that my audition result won’t be skewed just because I’m a woman. As it rightfully should be!” Bonomo said. “But besides putting a screen between me and the jury, how about crossing out whatever society expects a drummer to be? Don’t take me as another “woman” statistic for your demographics. Take me for my hard work ethic, my training, my passion, and my professional skills that have gotten me where I am.”

What do orchestras look for in the ideal percussionist? According to David Loebel, Associate Director of Orchestras at New England Conservatory, it’s not simply good rhythm. It is a question of versatility. Percussion is not just about the drums anymore. It is about pitched instruments as well.

“Can you play the bells and marimba as well as you play the bass or snare drum? And can you play all of these with equally as much emotion and musicality, too?” Loebel said. Known as the concept of total percussion, this idea encourages students to be exposed to all percussion instruments from the bass drum to the marimba. Students will not typically have the option of playing only one.

Panin’s orchestral percussion journey started with an unexpected instrument: the keyboard. “When I went in for my high school orchestra auditions, I wanted to play snare drums,” she said. “But instead, my band director put me on the keyboard and had me ‘play’ the marimba, while the other two boys in my class got snare and bass drums for the year. As for me, I was literally just tapping marimba noises on an electric keyboard.” Panin was put on keyboard for her first three years at Brooklyn Technical and had to seek training from an outside program to learn bass and snare drum before auditioning for colleges.

Melinda Latour, music and women and gender studies professor at Tufts University, says that the concept of total percussion contributes to the lack of women behind drum sets and in percussion chairs. Hidden behind every position in bands and orchestras is this stereotypically charged question of: Is this instrument more masculine or feminine?

In retrospect, these notions of what instrument must be played by whom are trivial. “Tone is a primary part of this,” Latour said. “It’s why more women play the soft, high-toned instruments such as the flute, whereas more men play the overpowering, low-toned instruments like the brass horn. It’s even in the build of the instrument. Think of a double bass, where the average three-fourths size stands at six feet and weighs around 50 pounds. It’s hard to ignore the physical aspect that women will struggle with while playing certain instruments when they are literally built for a specific amount of physical demand.”

These biases are deeply rooted in Western historical customs. In the 18th century, the prominence of the European marriage market considered a woman’s playing of music as an enhancement to her beauty. The ability to entertain increased her marketability on the marriage scene.

“Women would play versions of the keyboard: the harpsichord, clavichord, even one literally called the virginal,” Latour said. “Think about how you’d sit there: You can wear your big gown and show your body in a way that is not too revealing to the man’s eye. All of this while succumbing to the soft, feminine sounding tones of the piano.”

Compare this to the means of percussion, which is anathema to this old European notion of femininity. The physicality required of percussion is something that is considered by society as violent. Consider how the percussive position holds the power of the beat, which dictates the

tempo that the entire orchestra or band follows. Percussion points wayward of society's definition of femininity.

For Panin, the lack of female of color role models in the percussion industry has created tension in her journey as an artist. Before moving back to the United States at twelve years old, she spent most of her childhood in New Delhi, India under her grandparents' supervision while her parents went abroad for work. Her exposure to female drummers was little to none—but the lack of such role models in her life only made her want to learn about the art even more.

She looked to the work of the drummers that were in the headlines. Hussain Zakir, a famous Indian tabla drummer, was her number one idol. Credited with popularizing the art of the tabla drum to Western music in the 1960s, Zakir was plastered all over India's advertisements and TV shows during Panin's youth. She would spend hours watching videos replicating his fast-paced fingers tapping against the pair of drums against her couch's armrest.

“I'd initially gotten into the drums after playing a whole lot of the video game, Rock Band, with my cousins. My seven-year-old self fell in love with the beat of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, The Who, the Talking Heads,” she said. “But discovering the drums in the context of my culture was something special. I'd never heard anything like the tabla before. And the best part was feeling what Zakir was conveying without him having to outright say it.”

And so Panin kept going. Her family, who was not as musically-inclined as her, allowed her to enroll in tabla drum lessons for a brief time before she returned to the US. Though being stuck on the keys in high school, she did not see this as a personal setback.

“I think that not being able to drum in high school was sort of a blessing in disguise. It forced me to ask myself: ‘Do I want to drum to disprove the people who don't believe in me, or am I truly doing this for me, and only me?’”

Ever since, Panin has seen playing percussion as a way of expressing her femininity. She protested her keyboard position in her senior year of high school by wearing a bold, neon colored dress to her winter concert to make herself stand out from her high school orchestra--despite her director calling for black and white formal dress. After the concert, she was able to talk to her director about playing the drums for the rest of the year, which he finally accepted after a three-year battle.

“Looking back now, it’s upsetting to see how I felt like I was being unheard, especially by my teachers. And for so long, too. It’s made me think about other musicians who have been silenced or rejected or thrown under the bus simply because they are women,” she said.

This is exactly why Panin started the club, Dress Up, a percussion ensemble for POC and gender minority groups at Berklee. Except, with a twist: members of the ensemble show up to the club’s open studio in their fanciest, swankiest, or wackiest outfits that fit the agreed-upon weekly theme.

Dress Up gathers in a mid-size practice room on a quiet street by Fenway Park. But for about two hours every Wednesday night, members are granted permission to make as much noise as they want. In their studio, bells are always ringing, and the drums are struck without a dampener wall, which slightly mutes drummers sound as they play.

“While swiping through the Berklee Percussion Facebook page for events last semester, I realized that all of the guest lecturers and performers were men. And that all of the pieces they were teaching or performing were written by men. And I realized immediately that I couldn’t go through the next four years only being exposed to male percussionists—not here, not again.” she said.

The club primarily performs pieces written by female-identifying artists. Ranging from pop to rock to jazz to classical to world, Panin wanted Dress Up to be a space where students could get exposure to different genres they've never explored before.

“Getting to college made me realize how different my experiences are from others,” she said. “Like, it wasn't until recently that I learned about flamenco in my world music class. And it got me thinking. There's probably so many people here who've never heard tabla played before. Which means there's many people who've never been exposed to classical or jazz or have experienced one more than the other.”

Dress Up is still in its initial stages, with only about ten members attending the club weekly. So far, they have played along to many Olivia Rodrigo songs, a club-favorite artist. Their biggest project right now, however, is learning their first percussion piece, “Sequoia”, by non-binary artist Yaz Lancaster.

“If I claim to want change for women and gender minority groups in this industry, it must start with composers and artists who reflect that,” Panin said. “Composers like Lancaster are such a huge inspiration to me. I hope in the future, Dress Up grows to a point where we can get funding for artist visits and all of that.”

The club is mostly made up of drum set/percussion students, except for a couple of members who are learning from the expertise of the latter.

“What makes Dress Up different from other groups on campus is how it's open to any principal instrument,” says Katie Lin, a Berklee first-year student whose principal instrument is voice. “I'm a classically trained vocalist, so I've never been exposed to percussion pieces, let alone have any experience even picking up a pair of drumsticks. It's been a great learning experience to understand how other musicians perceive and perform music.”

On the fashion side of things, members always show up runway ready. With themes from disco fever to burlesque, Dress Up's players dress as well as they play.

"I'll never turn down an opportunity to dress up," says sophomore Rebecca Tate, whose principal instrument is also drum set/percussion. "Dress Up has an incredibly empowering energy where it's like, I can feel comfortable spreading my legs and keeping my hair down while playing my drums. I can practice my art in a space filled with likeminded artists, all while looking my best, too."

Apart from Dress Up and Company Eight, Panin still has big plans with her career at Berklee. "Despite the barriers set for women in the music industry, I know that Berklee was the right choice to further my career," she said. "Every day here is a step further in my exploration of my art as well as in my femininity. I knew coming here was not going to be easy, but in the short time I've been here, I've found myself to be the most active and outspoken I've ever been in my life. And it's a good feeling to finally have."

###