

Women Warriors: The Voices of Change – a celebration of global activists who are fighting for social justice

Madara Boka, Conductor, Latvia

“Women can make peace. We can change the world, and we have that power when we are no longer afraid to speak out. That is the essence and mission of its deeper educational purpose,” says Amy Andersson. She is a conductor, producer, director and writer of *Women Warriors: The Voices of Change*, a groundbreaking concert that honours the strength and heroism of global activists fighting for human and civil rights, LGBTQ rights, indigenous rights, environmental causes, minority rights, gender equality and for the right of every girl to an education. Two years since the premiere, it has become an award-winning independent film that is now reaching global audiences with foreign language subtitles.

Women Warriors first premiered as a live-to-picture symphony concert in collaboration with the Orchestra Moderne NYC, the Riga Cathedral Girls' Choir TIARA, conductor Aira Birziņa, and celebrated composers Nathalie Bonin, Miriam Cutler, Anne-Kathrin Dern, Isolde Fair, Sharon Farber, Penka Kouneva, Starr Parodi, and Lolita Ritmanis. Premiered at the Lincoln Center in New York City on 20th September 2019 to a sold-out house and standing ovations, critics welcomed the courageous choice of subject matter. “This concert event should be required viewing

at the UN General Assembly [...] and it should be screened in every high school and college domestically and worldwide,” wrote Frank Daykin in a review on *New York Concert Review Inc.* (22nd September 2019).



Orchestra Moderne NYC © Derek Brad



Riga Cathedral Girls' Choir TIARA, cond. Aira Birziņa © Madara Boka

The vision for creating *Women Warriors: The Voices of Change* came to Amy after she read about the life of voting rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer. Because of her activism, Ms. Hamer suffered death threats and was beaten and jailed by police in 1962 in Mississippi, USA. In 1964, she appeared on national television and publicly testified about her abuse. "Her speech impacted me deeply. I watched her on *YouTube* many times and was riveted by her incredible strength and courage. I promised myself never to forget her story," said Amy. "For two years I researched the lives of women who had fought for equality and human rights and discovered hundreds who had been forgotten or ignored by history. I began reconstructing the lineage of activists over an 800-year period using archival photos and footage, creating a silent film. As I began to view the film, I started hearing music."

Amy then invited eight extraordinary composers to score the nineteen tracks needed to accompany the silent film. After

synchronizing to picture, a live-to-picture concert production was born. Divided into twelve chapters, this moving and inspiring musical achievement gives testimony to the strength and creativity deeply connecting concert audiences to the strength, resilience and contributions of womenkind.



Lolita Ritmanis and Amy Andersson © Sanita Sparāne

In February 2020, Amy Andersson traveled to Riga, Latvia with composer Lolita Ritmanis and engineer Mark Mattson to record the entire soundtrack for the documentary *Women Warriors* with a seventy-five-piece orchestra of distinguished musicians from several Latvian orchestras and ensembles. Released in February 2021, this sixty-five minute soundtrack CD encompasses musical styles ranging from intimate strings and harp only pieces, such as *Tender Dismay* by Nathalie Bonin, to large-scale symphonic landscapes as in Lolita Ritmanis' *The Long Road*, Penka Kouneva's *Honor Her*, and Sharon Farber's *Say Their*

Names, among others. A number of composers perform on the album as well. A pop style song called *Rise Until We Stand* by Isolde Fair and Starr Parodi, features Isolde Fair on vocals, and Starr Parodi on piano, while Nathalie Bonin is the featured violin soloist on Penka Kouneva's *Build Peace*. The final piece of the concert is *We Rise* by Lolita Ritmanis, with lyrics by Amy Andersson. With conductor Aira Birziņa, artistic director of TIARA at the helm, TIARA was filmed during the audio recording. This film was then synched to the music, enabling soloist Gillian Hassert to perform virtually with TIARA. Through the use of modern technologies, the cities of Riga and New York (which are almost 7,000 km apart) were able to unite through the power of music in a live concert.

Lolita Ritmanis, an American born with Latvian heritage and an Emmy-Award winning composer, wrote three compositional pillars of the concert performance. *Prologue* opens the concert and advocates for the right of every girl to an education; *The Long Road*, the most complex part of this project and nearly eight minutes in length, traverses women's history from the 13th century to the 1960s; and the final piece *We Rise* is for the full orchestra, soloist and the girls' choir with lyrics by Amy Andersson. The heart of the lyrics to *We Rise* is based on the Chinese proverb "Women hold up half the sky". This moving song pays loving tribute to those upon whose shoulders we stand, while advocating for women to use their power and voices to change the world.

Lolita introduced Amy to the idea of recording with TIARA, as she has recorded and worked with orchestras and choirs in Riga over many years. The result is an intimate, yet powerful performance of *We Rise* by TIARA that literally brought the audience in New York City to a standing ovation. Both the documentary and soundtrack have now achieved sensational success, winning more than eighteen international awards in 2021. *Women Warriors: The Voices of Change* is on a humanitarian mission to inspire, educate and give hope to

women and girls, as the ones who changed the course of history. Within this framework of symphonic music and film, I believe we can invoke change and do good to the world,” says Amy Andersson.



Madara Boka (1993) graduated from the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music with a BA in music and choral conducting (2017, under Andris Veismanis) and a MA in musicology (2019, under Baiba Jaunslaviete). Since 2015 she has been the choirmaster of the female choir DZINTARS, and the project manager of the Riga Cathedral Girls' Choir TIARA since 2017. Madara Boka has been the producer of several music projects including the Latvian premiere of Imants Raminsh's opera *The Nightingale*, which was nominated for the *Latvian Grand Music Award 2019* in the category "Production of the year".

Edited by Charlotte Sullivan, UK