



WHAT A SCORE

Kate McNamara,
Elise Chong and
Jen Winley. Picture:
Daniel Wilkins



The women orchestrating change in classical music

KATE EMERY

These three musicians are hoping to drop the f-word when it comes to describing their job.

Jen Winley, Elise Chong and Kate McNamara are female conductors and when their gender can go unremarked upon it will mean that one of the most male-dominated jobs in the classical music world has achieved something close to equality.

Given just eight of the world's top 100 conductors are women and the WA Symphony Orchestra has never had a female principal conductor, that day has not yet arrived.

"I don't know what the statistics are but certainly female conductors are under-repre-

sented in orchestras and there's countless reasons why that might be," Ms Winley told *The Weekend West*.

"I think being able to redress that balance continues to be important so long as it's merit based. There probably are a few more hurdles that minority conductors need to go over just because we don't look like the traditional conductors."

The trio are now tapping on the glass ceiling with their batons. They are among eight West Australians — four of them women — chosen for WASO's inaugural emerging conductors program.

The conductors, already accomplished musicians or singers with some conducting experience, will have access to

WASO assistant conductor Thaddeus Huang as well as WASO rehearsals, concerts and the orchestra's artistic planning team.

Asked about the gender disparity in classical music, all of the women, who range in age from 25 to 42, felt the pace of change, particularly in conducting, had been slow.

Ms Winley said that in more than a decade of playing percussion in orchestras she had never had a female conductor.

Ms Chong said it was no different to women's struggle for equality in all kinds of positions of authority: "It's about women in leadership."

And Ms McNamara said the problem was not a lack of female talent. "There are women out there, we just need

to be given the opportunity," she said.

The introduction of blind auditions in most major orchestras around the world, in which musicians audition from behind a screen intended to conceal their identity, has helped tip the gender balance towards equality. The WASO, for example, has 35 women and 42 men.

But it is still rare for a female hand to be holding the baton that guides them.

Research published this month on classical music website *Bachtrack* found there are still just eight female conductors in the top 100 orchestras.

Australia's Simone Young will take on the job of Sydney Symphony Orchestra's chief conductor from 2022.