

# Creative SEASON

Soprano

Barbara Hannigan

is passionate  
about performing  
contemporary  
repertoire.

We asked her  
to keep track  
of her latest  
creation—  
Pascal Dusapin's

*Passion*

Most dancers plan for retirement as they near 40. I, on the other hand, made my dance debut at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. My back hurt every night and morning. I had to cover my knees with makeup and powder to camouflage the bruises before each performance. I am talking about an opera production, a 90-minute work I shared with Austrian baritone Georg Nigl, six dancers and a mostly offstage chorus of six singers. I delivered my first phrases hanging upside down by my feet from Georg's neck.

*Passion* is French composer Pascal Dusapin's sixth opera. It premiered in June 2008 at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, and, just two and a half years later, was on to its third staging in Paris. I've sung a lot of contemporary music, including 75 world premieres and eight operas written for me. But *Passion* is the only major piece I know that has had three productions in major centres within three years of its creation. The two soloists, conductor and orchestra remained the same for all three. I want to share a little about this process, especially the Paris staging. That's where my dance debut came—in the production directed by Berlin-based choreographer, dancer and theatre artist Sasha Waltz.



## First contact and premiere

Georg Nigl had worked with Dusapin on one of his earlier operas, though I had not. The composer was driving in the French countryside in September 2004 when he heard me first in a live broadcast of Henri Dutilleux's *Correspondances* for soprano and orchestra. A year later, Dusapin was in the audience to see me on stage when I sang the same piece at the Palais Garnier. A few days after, I received a call from Aix telling me the composer wanted to write the female role for me in his new opera. On hearing more details, I happily agreed.

*Passion* doesn't really have a storyline. I would describe it as 10 scenes in a rocky relationship. The libretto consists mainly of phrases from Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, with a little Dante thrown in. The two characters, equal partners on stage, are merely He and She, and they could be a man and a woman in any place and time. The work is about love, loss, misunderstanding and fundamental loneliness—the unbridgeable gap between human beings. There are no light moments, but everyone can identify with the subject. As with any dramatic role, She pervaded all aspects of my life in and out of rehearsals.

Dusapin delivered his particularly difficult and demanding score early, which was a blessing because we are contractually required to arrive at rehearsals with the music memorized. In Can-

fortunately, a notable tension emerged between Dusapin and Frigeni. While a dose of anxiety is normal in any opera production, the less the visions of the director and composer overlap, the greater the possibility for conflicts. Such conflicts can generate the creative energy to take pieces to a higher level, but they can also divide a team. During the Aix rehearsals, I started to feel I was living in a dysfunctional family because Dusapin and Frigeni were at odds and it had an effect on the entire rehearsal process. I loved the music and I liked Frigeni's staging, which drew on meaningful archetypal and cultural references. He knew the score inside out, had great respect for Dusapin's music and gave very detailed direction timed to specific musical cues. He had planned exactly what he wanted before we arrived for rehearsals and guided us carefully through the blocking from day one. In the event, the premiere and ensuing 12 performances met with moderate critical success. But the composer was open about his displeasure, and was already looking for opportunities to mount a new production.

## On to Amsterdam

The first director Dusapin found was Pierre Audi, Artistic Director of Nederlandse Opera and of the Holland Festival, who agreed to mount a single performance in June 2009.

Our rehearsal period of five days was reduced to two when, due to a computer crash, I inadvertently booked my wedding at the same time. But in those two days, Audi achieved a very sober, clear and psychologically astute interpretation. Dusapin was happy with the way Audi's vision—with gorgeous lighting by Jean Kalman and a sparse but dangerous set made of shards of broken glass—showed the opera in a kind of nakedness. It was a success despite the short working period, in part because Georg and I by now knew the piece inside out, in part because of Audi's and Kalman's theatrical experience and intuition and in part because of the incredible support of Ollu and the Ensemble Modern. Being thrown into a pressure cooker made it possible to produce an intense performance in only two days.

## Back to Paris via Berlin

Dusapin found a third director in Sasha Waltz, who was engaged by Théâtre des Champs-Élysées to open its season with *Passion* last September. Waltz had worked with the composer before and he trusted her. Six dancers from Waltz's company would join Georg Nigl and I on stage, which made us a little nervous, especially after we saw the dancers in one of Sasha's pieces. They were out of this world—strong, lithe, theatrical and very, very mobile.

We began work with Sasha and the dancers at their Berlin studios in August 2010. Sasha was interested in the idea of loneliness as that unbridgeable gap I mentioned earlier, and let her creativity run wild. Where Frigeni had made most of his directorial decisions in advance, Sasha seemed to have a deliberately empty mind when rehearsals began. She was reluctant to set anything during the first two weeks of a five-week rehearsal period, and we spent the first days improvising with the dancers to clearly set



PHOTO: ELIZABETH CARECCHIO

**A scene from Giuseppe Frigeni's world premiere production of *Passion*, restaged at Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg in January 2010**

ada, most contemporary operas are written and workshopped, perhaps more than once, before they premiere. In Europe, this is uncommon. An opera is commissioned, written and the premiere is really the premiere. There is usually some dialogue with the composer during rehearsals, and if something isn't working, composer, singer and conductor negotiate changes. This is what happened when we rehearsed *Passion* in Aix in May 2008. We concentrated on lowering some of the higher vocal writing, because once I had prepared the whole opera, it was clear that an overdose of high notes was weakening their dramatic effect.

At Aix, the director was Giuseppe Frigeni and the conductor Franck Ollu, leading the renowned Ensemble Moderne. Unfor-

parameters, occasionally with music from random sections of the opera. We had no conductor and were not even obliged to sing. Sasha observed how we worked together in duos, trios, as the full group of eight and as soloists. She asked us to improvise solos, and then to join another dancer's solos to try to capture their physical language. She watched us like a hawk, sometimes joining the action but usually standing outside, writing in her notebook when she saw something that piqued her curiosity. I learned from Sasha's dancers in this kind of improvisation how they make every move feel right. Even when they lose their balance, they turn the awkwardness of a fall into something beautiful.

### Final scene: the movie

One of Sasha's few advance decisions was that there would be a film in the opera's final scene in which I would disappear. We made it over two days that August in a cold, abandoned East Berlin factory. The floor was covered with small rocks, pieces of glass and a fine cement dust. Since I had to work barefoot, the production team thoughtfully tried to sweep a path for me. But this stirred up so much dust that I asked them to stop. I thought it was better to save my voice than my feet.

In the final scene, as Georg and I sing our final duet, he stands on a narrow bridge over the orchestra pit and I am collapsed on the front of the stage. The film, projected on the set's entire back wall, begins with me walking very slowly back from the camera, then running, almost falling backwards, always with my eyes on the camera as if it is Georg. The shots alternate between facial close-ups and full body shots as I fall further and further away. The film is cut and pasted, slowed down and speeded up, and finally manipulated at the end so my face gradually fades into a white screen with each blink of my eyes.

### Scene One: sexy time

Sasha waited until the final week of rehearsal in Berlin to stage the opening scene. She told Georg and me that she wanted the opera to begin with just us—a pas de deux, if you will. We were immediately apprehensive. Both Georg and I were much more comfortable in choreographic combinations with the dancers than with each other. The dancers made us better movers. To have to trust only each other in such a situation was hard. Sasha hadn't seen the previous productions of *Passion*, in which there



From the final scene of the Sasha Waltz production in Paris

PHOTO: C. VANNEZ

had been almost no physical contact between our characters. We were visibly awkward when put together. This unease had dissipated somewhat over the weeks of training with Sasha, but she still had to encourage us to be more intimate in our contact onstage. She said we were behaving too much like brother and sister, and we had to agree.

We started to stage the duet on a day when Dusapin was in Berlin to hear a rehearsal. He went to the piano and started a kind of mellow jazz improvisation before the rehearsal started. Sasha asked him to keep playing once she started to work with Georg and me. She wanted us to do a kind of abstract, sensual improvisation, develop some lifts, holds and a physical language based on the past four weeks of work. Over the following days, we agreed on some key points, which we then set and polished until the dress rehearsal.



Rehearsing dance moves with Sasha Waltz

For the first part of the scene, all the while singing, I was balanced upside down, my feet searching upwards till they reached Georg's neck or shoulders and we could effect a subtle lift with only my feet hooked around his neck. I had a terrible headache after these rehearsals. Initially, all my effort was going into straining my neck to see the conductor from upside down while trying not to cut off my own breath supply entirely. It was painful to rehearse, and only later could I worry more about vocal matters.

During rehearsals, I reminded Georg of the comic movie, *Borat*, in which the main character, at the most inappropriate moments with a member of the opposite sex, proclaims, "Sexy time." We both cracked up whenever I mentioned the film. I whispered "Sexy time" to him just before we rehearsed the first scene together, and eventually every night just before we went on stage. Somehow, it made it easier to start this very serious piece with an inner smile, knowing that we two non-dancers were going to open the show with a *pas de deux*.

## Scene 4: The Dolphin

Sasha wanted the male dancers to lift me repeatedly while I sang. After a few weeks of work, she knew that I liked being lifted, but I had to learn that the person being lifted has as much work to do as the lifter. Sasha's strongest male dancer, Virgis, told me I had to be relaxed in my body just before the lift, and then suddenly feel an impulse in tandem with his

that would lead us into the lift. I related his advice to how I learned to sing leaps from Mary Morrison at the University of Toronto. She used the image of a springboard, using the lower note of the leap to find the bounce up to the second, allowing it to soar higher. The dancers insisted that I sing out when we rehearsed, saying my body was more alert when I sang and I was more receptive to being lifted as a result.

In one lift, three male dancers took me high in the air until I was upright like an airplane with its nose straight up. Then, after I finished singing a long note, I swooped down in a nosedive (we called this move "The Dolphin"), came back up to the original position and then arched my back high above their heads. I rolled onto Virgis's shoulder, slid down slowly to the floor for a few seconds, then took to the air again.

I had to work very hard not to let all this movement affect my tone. I organized with the dancers exactly when we would do a difficult move, trying to co-ordinate it with faster-moving vocal passages rather than during long notes that could be jarred by a sudden physical gesture. They had to grasp my body differently than they would that of another dancer, because my breathing apparatus and my neck needed to be free enough to sing. It was a fascinating collaboration to try to make something so difficult look effortless.

## On with the show

I have only been in a few productions where I've been as acutely aware of my own mortality while performing. One was when I had to fly five stories above the stage as Venus in Ligeti's *Le grand macabre* in Brussels. Venus is a stratospheric part to sing, and initially a sustained high E flummoxed me. Once I was hanging in a harness no bigger than a pair of underwear, I was only thinking about staying alive, trying not to fantasize about my funeral. That high E flew out like a magic bullet.

In *Passion*, there were so many lifts extending me high over the orchestra pit that I felt scared, and the feeling lingered until the last performance. The Paris stage and pit felt very different from the rehearsal space, which was just a flat floor. The pit was deep and full of people with sharp instruments. I found myself trying to decide whether it would be better to fall on a bass clarinet or a harpsichord. Then I began to consider the physical welfare of the musicians in the pit. Would they forgive me if I maimed them for the sake of art?

After five weeks in Berlin and 10 long days rehearsing at the theatre in Paris, we were standing quietly in a circle backstage waiting for opening night to begin. We could hear the steady buzz of conversation from the sold-out hall. Sasha spoke to us as a group. She said she was incredibly proud of the work we had done together, and that whatever we did tonight would be right. We wished each other the traditional "Toi, Toi, Toi" and gave the performance with all the heightened emotions that a premiere brings. Afterwards, at the reception, we cleared away tables covered with champagne glasses and hors d'oeuvres, our producer connected his iPod to nearby speakers—and we danced the night away. 🎧

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