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In the premiere league

By Shirley Apthorp

Even the knottiest new music holds no fears for Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan



Barbara Hannigan, currently touring Boulez's 'Pli selon pli' in Europe

When I first saw Barbara Hannigan she was alone on stage, accompanying herself with a hand-powered flashlight and echoed by her own video double. The next time, she was flying through the air, bouncing from a massive black spider web, and dancing as she sang. She looked like a cross between Barbie and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and she never hit a note anywhere but bang in the middle.

In Michael van der Aa's *One* and Toshio Hosokawa's *Matsukaze*, contemporary composers were able to count on the Canadian soprano's talents to create boundary-breaking works of music theatre. This is everyday stuff for Hannigan, who has given 75 world premieres and has become a name to conjure with in contemporary music circles.

You may not yet have heard of Hannigan but you will do soon enough. Her reputation is steadily growing in mainstream circles as conductors such as Simon Rattle and Esa-Pekka Salonen champion her work and opera houses queue to hire her. Next year's engagements include the world premiere of George Benjamin's *Written on the Skin* in Aix-en-Provence in July, the title role in Krzysztof Warlikowski's new production of Berg's *Lulu* at La Monnaie, Brussels, and – another world premiere – Hans Abrahamsen's *let me tell you* with the Berlin Philharmonic.

Earlier this month, when she sang Pierre Boulez's vast *Pli selon pli* in Lucerne, she faced a challenge to equal – perhaps exceed – any of these. The hour-long symphonic work is the French composer's biggest, a milestone of 20th-century music, and the concert, with the Paris-based Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Lucerne Festival Academy, was a major event for the Swiss city's annual music festival. Hannigan is currently touring it in Europe; London audiences will get a chance to hear it next weekend, when it comes to the

Royal Festival Hall.

“Learning the piece is a marathon,” she admits the next morning when we meet in Lucerne’s World Café. “It’s really hard. Harder than Hosokawa, harder than Ligeti. To get it into my brain and body took months and months of work.”

Hannigan, sitting beside two enormous suitcases that will shortly accompany her to her next concert in Zermatt, looks smaller than she does on stage, and somewhat less invincible. “It’s hard to explain,” she says, dividing her attention between the conversation and a glass of yoghurt with fruit. “I always like that kind of challenge. To take what people think of as the most intellectual music and get it to the point where it turns into a liquid, to allow it to be from the heart – that’s my job. It’s a kind of alchemy. To turn something that seems insurmountable into what I think the composer wanted it to be.”

“Alchemy” may be the word. *Pli selon pli*, based on the poems of the French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé, is one of the 20th century’s knottiest scores; Boulez began writing it in 1957 and has been revising it ever since. Yet on stage the night before, with the composer himself on the podium, Hannigan was calm and radiant, soaring through the piece’s complexities.

Such apparent ease is the product of sustained effort. “I’m really, really organised,” says Hannigan. “I schedule my practice sessions rigorously and strictly. I have an idea of how long it’s going to take. I usually work by myself. I work so that I can get the maximum vocal and technical attention but so that I don’t exhaust my brain.” That means interleaving difficult contemporary works with more conventional repertoire and keeping the focus on lyrical phrasing. “I don’t want to make just notes and rhythms,” she says. “I have to make line and shape.”

She also runs, meditates and, time permitting, retreats to a Buddhist monastery. When not living out of suitcases, she lives in Amsterdam – which *Pli* reaches on Saturday – with her husband; she completed her musical studies, commenced in Toronto, at the Royal Conservatory at The Hague.

For *Pli*, Hannigan, Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Lucerne Festival Academy began separately preparing months before meeting in Lucerne for three and a half weeks of rehearsals with Boulez. The process was complicated by the composer’s ill health. All participants were conscious that this could be the last time the 86-year-old directed his own masterwork.

“Nobody was impatient,” Hannigan recalls. “It was more than respect – it felt like a real giving. For all of us, but especially for the young musicians, to see that it can be like this – this is what a conductor can be like – was great.” She is buoyed up about the prospect of touring the piece. “There’s something about doing it. It’s such a lonely journey to get to the first rehearsal. And then, last night, it really felt like dancing.” Dance, which Hannigan studied alongside music as a child, returned to her life this year through two productions with German director and choreographer Sasha Walz. *Matsukaze* was premiered at La Monnaie, Brussels, and went on to Luxembourg, Warsaw and Berlin; Walz also directed Hannigan in a new production of Pascal Dusapin’s *Passion* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. In both cases, Hannigan’s physical performance overlapped with that of the dancers on stage. “It looks as if it’s hard to dance while you sing but, in fact, it isn’t,” she says. “It actually made it easier, because to dance you have to engage your breath in a very active way, and in singing you have to do the same thing. It was super fun.”

“Super fun” seems to be Hannigan’s highest form of praise for any challenging project. It is also how she describes what she does to György Ligeti’s *Mysteries of the Macabre*, a concert setting of his operatic scene (from *Le grand macabre*) for deranged KGB-style soprano chief of police and orchestra, which Hannigan has toured extensively. As if the work’s stuttered, garbled texts and coloratura complexity were not enough, Hannigan also this year began conducting the piece, while singing it, at the Présences Festival in Paris.

The result is a mind-boggling feat of co-ordination, agility and controlled madness, which she performs in a black leather corset, fishnet stockings and wig. “It makes an impression,” she concedes. “Just seeing the faces of the audience while I’m doing this is thrilling. The piece is hysterical, and comic, and people really laugh.”

She has conducted other orchestral and vocal works, and feels at home on the podium. She has always read scores horizontally as well as vertically, taking in both harmony and melody, thanks in part to her studies as a pianist. She finds it not much harder, she says, to memorise an entire score than to memorise a vocal line.

Before Hannigan heads off for Zermatt, I ask whether she has perfect pitch. She smiles.

“It’s more of a physical memory,” she says. “I open my mouth and my body knows where the notes are. But ‘perfect’ is a funny word for me. I assume that we’re all perfect. What we did last night was perfect. That doesn’t mean that there were no mistakes. But it really was the best we could do at the time.”

‘Pli selon pli’ is currently touring Amsterdam, Paris and Munich until September 30. The concert will be presented at London’s Royal Festival Hall on October 2 as part of the Shell Classic International series

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