

Classical music doesn't need to change. It just needs more performers like Barbara Hannigan

The celebrated conductor/soprano talks to Philip Clark about her forthcoming tour with the Britten Sinfonia and how atonal music is like a deep tissue massage

ARTS FEATURE Philip Clark 25 April 2015

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'I find my comfort zone in the wilderness': Barbara Hannigan

Everyone keeps talking about classical music's image problem, and proposals on the table designed to rescue the music from apparent extinction have included the suggestion that conductors ought to face audiences rather than orchestras, and the cunning plan, mooted by Julian Lloyd Webber, that we stop calling it 'classical music'.

But what classical music really needs right now are more performers like Barbara Hannigan, whose embrace of music is absolute; whose solution to the problem of what classical music might represent in our increasingly fragmented culture is not to go into denial but to dive deeper, forever deeper, inside music. Hannigan has anchored her reputation around high-wire modernism. When a conspicuously frail Pierre Boulez came to London's South Bank in 2011 for a final lap of honour, Hannigan sang *Pli selon pli*, his

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labyrinthine, tangled 60-minute long setting of Mallarmé.

On the opera stage, the characters she portrays have a tendency to plummet towards emotional collapse. In Berg's *Lulu* and George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* dark sexual derogation results in her characters' suicides. In *Die Soldaten*, by the German composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann, who himself committed suicide in 1970, her character Marie does survive, but only to be marooned inside hell on earth, dodging brutalised soldiers whose collective morality has disintegrated to the point where rape is their only mode of communication.

So much darkness apparently, and yet the woman who greets me as I knock on the door of her central Amsterdam home exudes cheery, blithe warmth. This house was, she tells me, in a previous existence a piano workshop, a fact that was revealed by an old-timer local who could remember spare piano parts being passed through what is now Hannigan's kitchen to a repair shop at the back — precisely where her own piano now stands, flooded by sheet music. Tea is brewed — 'you want Yorkshire tea?' she asks, and immediately I'm reassured — and with the kettle boiling I ascertain that Hannigan, born in 1971, relocated to Amsterdam from her native Nova Scotia in 1995. 'And really everything I've achieved,' she says, 'has only been possible because I came to Holland.'

Hannigan recalls feeling instantly at home in Amsterdam: the chatter of audience members boasting that they had come to hear a Boulez classic, or the première of a crunchy new orchestral piece, because they might not have a chance to hear it again was music to her ears. 'Huge concert halls here were filled for every kind of music all the time, not just for Beethoven 5,' she recalls, 'and this was something that simply didn't happen at home.'

'Follow the path,' she explains, 'that's what most singers do. You learn your opera roles, the traditional repertoire, and you know where your career is going. But that was never for me. The idea made me very nervous in fact. I felt calmer being on a path that was full of branches, working out where that path might lead as I was walking along it. I find my comfort zone in the wilderness.'

If all paths led to Holland — Hannigan followed her studies at the University of Toronto with a year at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague — it would be wholly wrong to assume that her career has been solely concerned with 12-tone angst. She has spent the morning practising Mozart's concert aria 'Bella mia fiamma, addio', which she will perform as part of her forthcoming tour with the Britten Sinfonia — two alternating programmes built around the

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Though Britten-less, the programme of Mozart, Rossini and Ligeti that Hannigan and the Britten Sinfonia toured during 2010 represented a surefire success, and helped clarify Hannigan's most audacious career move to date. She led the Mozart and Ligeti pieces from the podium. Five years on, she considers herself a conductor/soprano — and will be leading the Britten Sinfonia through both programmes herself.

My suggestion that she needs to find a composer willing to write her a work for self-conducting soprano is cheerfully brushed aside: 'Hmm, I'd have to find someone with a good sense of humour — know anyone?' She has combined her conducting and singing before, most memorably in a PVC-clad performance of Ligeti's *Mysteries of the Macabre*.

Conducting is absolutely not something she does as a sideshow to her singing. During the next 12 months, she will conduct Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin* and the Suite from *Lulu*; and for the future, she is preparing Mahler's *Fourth Symphony* — where she will turn towards the audience to sing the last movement, having conducted the first three.

'People can, and have, tied themselves up in knots trying to define what it is I do — to which my answer simply is that I'm a musician,' she says. 'Now I'm conducting I can explore repertoire that previously I could only experience as a listener. And that's why I say I'm 'a musician' — both sides of my musical life have come together.'

'You see, when I'm preparing a character like Lulu, the search really is about finding her inner voices and, curiously, the same thing applies in an orchestra — when I'm conducting, it's the inner workings I love, never the melody.'

Hannigan's concert exploring Schoenberg will culminate with his String Quartet No. 2, the piece that broke the mould. Composed in 1908, the final movement finds Schoenberg properly abandoning tonality for the first time.

A soprano voice is introduced to underline this unheralded moment of harmonic transition, and I wonder if Hannigan's obsession with the inner mechanics of music gives her ease of access into the atonal borderlands? 'Twelve-tone music is unsettling even for me,' she declares nonchalantly. 'By the time I'm onstage singing Webern or *Pli selon pli*, the music is completely fluid and natural: water, air, pure blues and reds and greens. But getting to that point is about sitting at the piano working it out. Atonal music is never a warm bath, it's more of a deep tissue massage...' The pleasure that comes with releasing toxins? 'Exactly,' she says.

Barbara Hannigan is on tour with the Britten Sinfonia from 1 to 12 May.