

PROFILE: BARBARA HANNIGAN

Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan has given over 75 world premieres; her captivating, pre-eminent performances of twentieth- and twenty-first-century repertoire have won new audiences for contemporary music. Widely acclaimed for her interpretations of Ligeti, she has made *Mysteries of the Macabre*, a tour de force for soprano and orchestra, a signature work, which she has sung – and also conducted – around the world. Her operatic repertoire has recently expanded to include Berg's *Lulu*, and the world premiere



[photo: Jean Radel]

production of George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*, both in 2012. Hannigan has also sung with The Berlin Philharmonic, London Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic and the Orchestre National de France, and has appeared at the Salzburg, Luzern and Aix-en-Provence festivals and at the BBC Proms.

Q. 'New', 'contemporary', 'modern': what attracts you to 'this' music?

A. Everything is new for me. This isn't just because I come from a small village where we had an active but unsophisticated musical life, or because I didn't know who Mahler was until I was 18. Opening a new score full of clean unmarked pages, whether it is Mozart, Stravinsky, Barry or Benjamin, creates an excitement and curiosity in my heart and mind, which I expect will always exist. Even when I'd like to think I know a score inside out, like the Ligeti *Mysteries of the Macabre*, it feels fresh every time. There is so much to discover, as our lives constantly shift and change, and those shifts and changes influence our perspectives on everything around us. That said, I realise and accept that I have a passion and an understanding of many contemporary scores which is not common, and therefore I feel an obligation to devote myself to them and to their composers as much as I can.

Q. What is inspiring you at the moment?

A. I am at the beginning of memorising a very special piece, a project very dear to my heart: *let me tell you* for soprano and orchestra by Hans Abrahamsen, with words by Paul Griffiths. It will be premiered in December by me and the Berlin Philharmonic, conducted by Andris

Nelsons. The piece was born of a series of generous acts between friends: Anne and Paul Griffiths, Hans Abrahamsen, and me. It began as an idea for a small song, a secret birthday present for Paul's 64th year, and turned into an orchestral commission of the highest level. I have the score in my hands now and it rarely leaves me.

Q. *Who are your new music heroes?*

A. Of course Reinbert de Leeuw, who just turned 75 years old on Sept 8 [2013]. He has been my mentor since 1999 when we first worked together, and his sense of space and time has opened for me a world of possibility. Mary Morrison, my singing teacher from Canada, who was herself a devoted performer of both the classic Mozart and bel canto works, as well as the most modern of scores. She encouraged me from age 17 to explore the modern repertoire, while giving me a solid grounding in vocal technique which would enable me to sing with freedom and discipline. I can give you a list of composers but I am afraid I would leave someone out! I have been so fortunate to be a kind of channel for many different composers' voices. It has been a great honour.

Q. *What does 2014 hold for you?*

A. 2014 brings a varied palette of repertoire: my debut in the role of Marie in *Die Soldaten*, my first Donna Anna, a return to the role of Matsukaze by Hosokawa in Sasha Waltz's gorgeous production, artistic leadership of the Suvisoitto Festival in Finland, with guest composer Gerald Barry, a residency at the Luzern Festival including a new piece by Unsuk Chin, several *Wozzeck* Fragments, quite a few performances of the new Abrahamsen work around Europe, and some conducting to boot.

Q. *Which five pieces of music could you not live without?*

A. If I look back on what works have been very important for me as a performer, I'd have to say that several had a life-changing effect on me. They brought me somewhere I could not have gone alone. Not always happy places, mind you . . . but I had very intense experiences in the process of incorporating them. I could live without any of them, but my life would have been very different. I am not saying these ones here are my five favourite works, by the way (not least because there are six!), but they are the ones that had the greatest effect on my life. They are all from my repertoire: Ligeti's *Mysteries of the Macabre*, Vivier's *Lonely Child*, Dutilleux's *Correspondances*, Berg's *Lulu*, Gerald Barry's *La Plus Forte* and – current 'life-changer' – George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*.

Q. *Is there a project you are dreaming about creating?*

A. It almost always feels to me like the piece I am singing at any time is the centre of my universe. But I do have the feeling that there are unnamed dreams out there . . . twinkles in my eye which I can't properly recognize yet, which will in time reveal themselves. That sounds like I'm trying to be poetic (and failing) but it was like this with certain works that are now integral in my repertoire, like *Lulu*. I never imagined, when I was in my 20s, that I would ever sing such a role. I never imagined that I would conduct an orchestra. I never imagined I would dance *en pointe* . . .