

Gerald Barry: the performer's perspective

As performances of Barry's music continue to flourish from Russia to the US, two performers explain his appeal:

Gerald Barry and I started working together in 2004, when I sang the role of Gabrielle in the ENO premiere of his opera *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, after Fassbinder's play. I was no stranger to his music, having heard a hair-raising performance in Toronto when I was a student in the 1990s, and later singing another composer's piece on a programme with the Ives Ensemble which featured chamber works by Gerald. From the first hearing, I was fascinated by the frantic, virtuoso nature of the pieces which, besides their furious difficulty, had a structure that, to my ear, made a quirky kind of sense.

'Breathtaking! Brilliant! Horrendously difficult!'

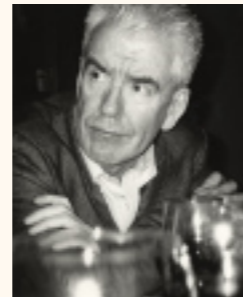
In *Petra von Kant*, Gerald wrote the role of Gabi as a kind of hysterical teenage girl with brilliant ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) coloratura passages. Whenever she sang, the large orchestral forces would suddenly disappear and I'd have to go on (and on). I loved the role. An actress can choose her timing and delivery of a phrase, along with the director. In opera, the composer already makes many of our choices. If we don't agree, or if the composer is unclear, sometimes we have to bend the phrase to our dramatic will. With Gerald's setting of (every word of!) Fassbinder's play, this was not necessary. He had a clear and convincing interpretation which came through loud and clear in his music.

During the performances at ENO, Gerald approached me about the idea of writing a solo opera for soprano (and

two mute actresses), after Strindberg's short play *The Stronger*. He already had the premiere date in February 07 for the Presences Festival in Paris, with CBSO and Thomas Adès conducting. I was thrilled at the prospect. He decided to set it in French for the premiere, as *La Plus Forte*, so that the text would be understandable to the audience. I didn't have any requests. Gerald knew my voice and I trusted him, so he set to work and I waited. The piano score arrived in the autumn of 2006. Breathtaking! Brilliant! Horrendously difficult! So I set to work and Gerald waited. Every time I practised it, my voice and body felt energized, veering towards feeling superhuman, and buzzing with a creativity that filtered through to the other pieces I was

with the orchestra. I knew it would be stunning and was not disappointed. The performance in Paris: calm, tense, hysterical, and sometimes unhinged in the best sense of the word. It went by in a flash of light.

BARBARA HANNIGAN, soprano



(Photo: Betty Freeman)

I wish more people would describe music in the kind of terms that fly out of Gerald's mouth:

- you are an exotic whirlwind
- a vortex of sound
- like a computer programmed spectacularly with a great software, switching on and off
- body twitching like a whole series of clocks
- like a cadaver in which liquid has been injected
- like a doll, uneven and unhinged
- like a gargoyle
- a springboard for the orchestra

The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant was premiered by the ENO, 16 September – 07 October 2005.

The US premiere of *La Plus Forte (The Stronger)* with Barbara Hannigan, Thomas Adès and the New World Symphony Orchestra will take place on 01 November 2008 in Miami. Venue tbc.

My first exposure to Gerald Barry's music was listening to a recording of the Piano Quartet No 2. It opens with piano alone, and I was immediately impressed and astounded at the amount of sound coming from the instrument. Before seeing the score, I was certain two people were playing the piano—perhaps, I thought, the cellist leaves his instrument to help the pianist. When I saw the score and later talked with Gerald, I discovered to my surprise and amazement that it is written for one player at the piano and, in the case of this fantastic recording, it was the composer!

Piano Quartet No 2 begins with a waltz. What distinguishes it as a waltz by Gerald Barry, and not Chopin, is that this waltz is played entirely in clusters,

elbows outstretched and spanning the length of the keyboard, and performed at impossibly fast tempi. The elbows are to be 'loose and bouncing', providing greater ease and flexibility through passage-work that would be considered virtuosic as single notes, let alone as clusters with the whole forearm, elbows, and palms. It is extremely athletic and nearly impossible to play, which makes it wonderfully challenging and exhilarating.

This is only one example of the many energetic chamber works that Gerald Barry has written. His music could be characterized as obsessive and extreme in tempi, in range, and in dynamic levels. Harmonically, Barry contrasts sections of cluster harmonies with single note and unison writing instantaneously clearing out the tonal landscape and creating

dramatic contrasts in mood. Compositionally, he builds his music in sections which are marked by dramatic changes in tempo, rhythmic/motivic material, dynamic range, and texture. These moments are unanticipated and reminiscent of Charles Ives. His tempo markings all border on impossible for players and require a degree of athleticism, but this gives his music the edge that he imagines and designs. *Los Angeles*, his newest composition for piano solo, is no exception, and I have only to learn how to sing a familiar lullaby while I play.

MOLLY MORKOSKI, pianist

Morkoski gave the premiere of Barry's new solo piano work, *Los Angeles*, in a composer portrait concert at the Miller Theatre in New York on 2 November 2007.



Stephanie Friede, Barbara Hannigan & Kathryn Harries, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, ENO production 2005

Linda Kitchen, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, ENO production 2005