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1/2

interview 17

The Spellbinding Ms Hannigan

Interview by **Maria Roberts**

No artist wants to be put inside a box, but one gets the sense that with Barbara Hannigan if anyone dared try she'd spring out with such force that it wouldn't happen twice. Hannigan is an electric performer who uses her delicate skills to possess an audience with her energetic delivery. The Canadian soprano and conductor, who studied at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, has given over 75 world premieres – and she is as passionate about contemporary work as she is about baroque and classical music.

It is lunchtime when we talk and Hannigan, who is married to theatre director husband Gijs de Lange, is in Lucerne for the festival to perform Boulez's *Pli selon Pli* (conducted by Boulez himself). As we chat on the phone, church bells ring in the distance. Hannigan's schedule is enough to knock the breath out of anyone. 'Most of my work is international, so I'm on tour a lot and it can be hard because you're on your own,' she says. 'When you're a soloist you're travelling by yourself and you have to really trust your own opinion. Most of Gijs' work is in Amsterdam, but when we're together it's brilliant. I really trust his opinion.'

'Once you get to a certain level as a performer you are expected to be consistent and to produce what the audience knows of you'

Hannigan has a strong team behind her, and now regularly joins forces with conductors who have been longtime collaborators, such as Sir Simon Rattle. She is currently preparing for a performance of *Written on Skin* at Aix en Provence (a new opera directed by Katie Mitchell and devised by George Benjamin and Martin Crimp), followed by debuts at Covent Garden, and the Teatro Liceu in Barcelona. She will sing her first Lulu at La Monnaie in 2012.

Born and raised in Waverley, a small village in Nova Scotia, Hannigan's childhood was musical but remarkably her destiny as an opera star was hardly etched in stone: 'Where I came from we didn't have an opera company – I remember a touring company visited from Nova Scotia with *The Tales of Hoffman*, and so that was the first opera that I ever saw. We had a symphony orchestra, and the Canadian radio CBC, so I listened to classical music as a kid. But I didn't know who Mahler was; I knew about Beethoven and Bach, and Handel, but beyond that I really didn't have much of a background until I moved to the big city and then I was very hungry to find out everything I could.'

Hannigan's village was blessed with a series of music teachers who encouraged local children to pick up instruments as there was little else to do: 'I think that was how it began for me, and that creativity just continued to snowball until I went to Toronto when I was 17.'

It was in Toronto, under the guidance of teacher Mary Morrison, that Hannigan's singing career began to bloom: 'I just wanted to listen

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and open my ears,' she says. 'I went to every opera performance and every symphony performance and I was there every single week waiting for student tickets.'

More than 20 years on she evokes a sexually magnetic yet rapturously beatific presence on stage. Ligeti's *Mysteries of Macabre*, for which she dons a black wig and dominatrix style outfit, 'is really a cornerstone of my development,' says Hannigan. 'I started singing that piece about 10 years ago. When I got the score for it in the post, I was so incredibly excited that all I wanted to do was get to the studio and start learning it. I just knew this piece was me, it was so – I was about to say paranoid and hysterical – but well, that's not me.'

Finessing her stage persona happens in the studio and for Hannigan a layered approach is essential: 'There's so much hard work that goes into allowing the performance to be really free,' she explains. 'There's so much technical work, especially with the really difficult music, but I don't want anyone to know how hard it is – I don't want the audience to know that, I want them to sit back and be affected by the passion. I don't want them to worry.'

Certainly, it's a method that requires a tremendous amount of toil, but 'I don't think of it like that,' she says. 'I just love it.'

'It's about constantly being open to different creative influences from all sides'

For a performer of Hannigan's calibre (she is a frequent guest of the Berlin Philharmonic, has performed *Mysteries of the Macabre* at the Lincoln Center, the Konzerthaus in Vienna, and recently sang Gepopo at New York Philharmonic's staged production of *Le Grand Macabre* directed by Douglas Fitch) the process is ongoing. Once she has nailed the vocal technicalities in rehearsals, she then furrows into finding the emotional creativity at the core of each work.

'That doesn't necessarily have to do with the piece,' she explains of her method. 'It has to do with life experience and everything you see all day long: the people you see on the street, it has to do with art, or even a character in a movie that may influence how I sing a line in the

performance. It's about constantly being open to different creative influences from all sides. It's that hunger I was talking about when I was 17.'

She says she is still 'inhaling all those possibilities' but the pressure is on: 'Once you get to a certain level as a performer you are expected to be consistent and to produce what the audience knows of you. They know who you are as a performer and they want that, or more, every time, and so how do you achieve that?'

Hannigan says her situation is similar to that of a tennis player: 'You have test matches and you have Wimbledon, and you need to know which situations are the test matches. It's really about being able to focus the energy and knowing when you need to save it and need to expend it – I think that's a skill that every artist struggles with in the beginning.'

It sounds exhausting. 'You work so hard to prepare something,' she admits, 'and give so much of your energy and heart and time, and then it's finished – and in some ways it does feel a little bit lonely.'

But for now, as Hannigan prepares for her next premiere, she's thinking about the audience, 'it is all about making friends with the music, loving the music, and raising it like a child,' she says. 'I hope that the audience is somehow transported by the level of energy and concentration and focus that goes into the way that I like to make music.' ■

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