



Theme & Variations

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Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions.

Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

Talent and versatility in pure state

During the Baroque period it was perfectly common for an orchestra to be led by the harpsichordist who, in a J. S. Bach concerto, often assumed both the leading role in the *solì* and actively directed the group in the *tutti*, a function sometimes performed by the first violin as well. From the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, with the intensification of the technical challenges of the works by composers such as Beethoven or Mendelssohn, the figure of the soloist-conductor would, however, cease to be a constant and became rather unusual. Barenboims, Buchbinders, Zuckermans and Kremers recelbrate nowadays the figure of the soloist-conductor, but it should be recognized that this spotlight, in addition to more or less sporadic adventures by other instrumentalists, is mainly shared by pianists and/or violinists.

An exception to this rule is certainly Canadian Barbara Hannigan, for several reasons. When she started conducting about 10 years ago, she was already an acclaimed and respected singer and her career as a singer-conductor, linked with her predilection for modern and contemporary repertoire, makes of her an absolutely remarkable artist. In my opinion,

FEATUREDGUEST

Barbara Hannigan



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Acclaimed as one of today's most interesting artists, Canadian soprano and conductor Barbara Hannigan has premiered more than 85 works and has worked closely with composers such as Boulez, Dutilleux, Ligeti, Stockhausen, Sciarrino, Dean and Abrahamsen and regularly collaborates with Rattle, Nelsons, Petrenko, Pappano, among others. She is currently Principal Guest Conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra and her schedule includes major orchestras and ensembles all around the world. Winner of a Grammy Award in 2018, Hannigan is a promoter of several international projects in support of young artists.

even more important than the unique characteristics of Hannigan's profile are the sheer quality and genius that overflows from her interpretations.

«When I started conducting, I was above all exploring an aspect of my musicality», confesses Hannigan. At the same time, she admits «it wasn't always easy because what I was aiming for, was very collaborative and both me and the orchestra needed time and space to grow». For that reason, «in the first years I was, above all, building trust and relationship, but in recent years I have been getting more support and immediate collaboration from the orchestra I am working with». About singing and conducting simultaneously, Hannigan underlines that «it only works with a few pieces and in a specific way». Among her greatest successes in the dual role of singer and conductor are certainly "La Voix Humaine" by Poulenc, "Lounnotar" by Sibelius, her arrangements by Weill and Gershwin together with Bill Elliott or the latest production of "Knoxville" by Barber with the London Symphony Orchestra. Still, I venture to single out her charismatic interpretations of the "Mysteries of the Macabre" from Ligeti's opera "Le Grand Macabre" as one of the most impressive examples of her talent and versatility. (*)

To my question about how polyvalent and multifaceted the profile and the life of a musician can and should be, despite being absolutely legitimate and respectable when a musician decides to dedicate himself and specialize in a single function, Hannigan says she faces singing or orchestral conducting as «parts of a singular goal of taking musical ideas to the highest level of achievement». Deep down, she recognizes it is all about a «unique role» motivated, in the first instance, «by the passion for music and by the development of musical abilities».

Returning to "Mysteries of the Macabre", Hannigan confesses that it was especially challenging to assume the role of a singer-conductor because she was already singing the work before venturing into the conducting world and the processes were already very crystallized. «I had to memorize the score, study it slowly as if it was a Mozart Aria, phrase by phrase, then speeding it up, memorizing, solidifying the technical aspects with an athletic attention to detail.» Hannigan acknowledges that the score is quite clear about how to "beat" the work technically, but that she tries to achieve «a freedom of expression that goes beyond orchestral conducting... (...) I look for clear gestures that simultaneously show the crazy and paranoid character, bringing the orchestra to that level of madness.»

Barbara Hannigan's predilection for modern or contemporary music – her favourite operatic role is Alban Berg's Lulu, and her past and present concert schedule is unmistakable – is almost a hallmark. «I love the modern repertoire and this love and passion for the repertoire almost compels me to perform it, because not all performers feel the way I do!» For this reason, she assumes the purpose of disseminating this repertoire, although noting that she has also conducted several Haydn symphonies in recent years or that she is «immensely interested in the search for emotionally and dramaturgically related material» giving examples of programs combining Mozart and Berg, or Stravinsky and Haydn.

We all know our own limits, or maybe not. The soprano and conductor seems to lack them and exude talent and versatility in a pure state. For those who think and believe art is more than just one art and rather a bifurcation of various arts, experiences, feelings and knowledge, that each day is a new opportunity to enrich and broaden horizons, to overcome

barriers and limits... or even for those who do not think or believe in any of this: Barbara Hannigan can certainly be a huge inspiration.

(*) Recommended external link | Barbara Hannigan performs Ligeti's "Mysteries of the Macabre" with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra (2013):
<https://youtu.be/ireZYjEkapc>