

# “It’s about Complete Incorporation”: An Interview with Barbara Hannigan

## « Il s’agit d’incarner pleinement » : un entretien avec Barbara Hannigan

Tamara Bernstein

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Barbara Hannigan : les voix multiples

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Article abstract

*In a conversation with Tamara Bernstein, Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan discusses topics related to her musical formation and early career, significant professional relationships, and the professional voice.*

*Hannigan describes her early decision to specialize in contemporary music as a moment of quasi-religious vocation; she recounts the artistic processes of composers George Benjamin and Hans Abrahamsen when they were writing opera roles for her, and reflects on the influence of some of her colleagues and mentors, including the late Reinbert de Leeuw and three stage directors. She elaborates on the transformative experience of performing the title character of Alban Berg’s Lulu; addresses the persistent prejudice against singers who specialize in contemporary music; and comments on approaches to vibrato in both contemporary and “early” music. Her observations on the implications of ageing for an elite singer speak to the intimate physical connection of an artist to her voice, and confirm Hannigan’s fundamental commitment to singing as “complete incorporation.”*

# “It’s about Complete Incorporation”: An Interview with Barbara Hannigan

Tamara Bernstein

*I spoke with Barbara Hannigan via WhatsApp on May 4 and 5, 2020, during the initial COVID-19 lockdown. She and her companion, actor-director Mathieu Amalric, were riding out the plague in their 17th-century house in rural Brittany, France—the country Hannigan has called home since 2015. I began our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, by asking how she was coping with le confinement.*

**Barbara Hannigan (B. H.):** As you know, my mother died just before Christmas, and I decided to take January and most of February off, so I had cancelled my engagements for those months. Then Reinbert [de Leeuw]—my mentor, my lodestar—died on February 14.<sup>1</sup> I knew he was going to go, and went to see him before, so I was relieved that I had that time free.

So I only went back to work at the end of February, conducting in Stockholm. From there, I was supposed to go to Munich, but 15 minutes before the taxi was to arrive, the Munich people called and said it was off. Mathieu and I have been in *Bretagne* since March 16.

How am I coping? Like everyone, it depends on the day. But after 10–15 years of working at a pace that’s on the verge of too fast, I needed to see what it was like not to run around all the time.

That said, I work all day, every day, here. If I read, it’s related to work. And I’m working on my voice in a way I haven’t had time to do in years! I’m also getting better sleep, and exercising every day. I try not to endgame or look into the future, because we don’t know what’s going to happen. But we have

1. Reinbert de Leeuw (1938–2020), Dutch conductor, composer and pianist.

to look at next year's season—what is possible to do with reduced forces; what pieces I have to replace because I won't be allowed to have enough people on stage. Musicians are going to have to be really flexible, and work more like pop musicians, ready to do something quickly. So I'm trying to cover the bases.

**Tamara Bernstein (T. B.):** Inspired, perhaps, by the title of the Gérard Grisey piece on your new album—*Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil*—I'd like to start by talking about some crucial thresholds that you've crossed in your artistic and professional life. You've said that you decided "early on" that you wanted to devote yourself to new music. Was there a specific moment when you made that choice?

**B. H.:** Yes! It was during my first year at the University of Toronto (U. of T.); I was standing in the hallway on the lower level of the Edward Johnson building, by the notice board near Mary Morrison's studio.<sup>2</sup> I remember saying to the first person who passed by—it was my fellow student and friend, soprano Patricia O'Callaghan—that I had just realized what I wanted to do with my life: I would dedicate it to contemporary music. I guess I was 18 or 19 years old. In retrospect, I can understand very clearly why, but at the time, it was just: I have to do this; it's something of service; something that I'm good at and is needed. It was *noblesse oblige*: I could look around me and see that not every singer at the U. of T. was clamouring to sing with Continuum,<sup>3</sup> or in the new music concerts at U. of T.

It also had to do with a kind of confidence I had when I sang this music. My voice was still developing, of course, but I had a confidence in my musicianship—in my rhythm, my pitch, my ability to handle these tricky scores. I also knew that I felt such a passion for it! It wasn't just an affinity, it was really a *passion*. So looking back: that's vocation; that's being called. At the time I didn't think of that word; I've only started using it recently because I feel it even more deeply. At the time it was just: OK, I'm good at this; I love doing it; and I don't get as nervous singing new music.

**T. B.:** Why do you think you were more nervous performing mainstream repertoire?

**B. H.:** I think it was the feeling that I had to fit into something, and I didn't know what the rules were. Over the years, I've gradually realized that with standard repertoire, there are rules, and then there are *rules*. I'm interested in the ones the composer has made; not the performing conventions that got attached to them over the years. Because I think that over time, things get

2. [Ed.] See Mary Morrison's contribution in the *Enquête* of this issue.

3. Continuum Contemporary Music, founded in Toronto in 1985.

changed, then taken for granted, until it's just: This is the way you do this. And it has nothing to do with the composer's wishes.

But at the time, I just didn't feel comfortable with—let's call it the traditional singer's mentality, especially in the *bel canto* repertoire. I just didn't get it.

**T. B.:** Did you tell Mary Morrison, your voice teacher, about your epiphany in the basement of the Edward Johnson Building? She herself had been such a champion of new music.

**B. H.:** I'm not sure. Mary certainly knew I was into contemporary music. But she was the one who told me, "You can't practise all day, and you wouldn't want to. No more than two hours per day!" She encouraged me to spend the rest of my working time in the Music Library. The head librarian at the U. of T.'s Music Library at the time, Kathleen McMorrow, had made it truly world class.<sup>4</sup> So I would go and listen to recordings—mostly of contemporary music. And I basically set up camp in the stacks, at M 1613, or M 1614.<sup>5</sup> I practically had a lean-to in that aisle! I'd pull out scores; I'd sit on the floor and quickly peruse them and see if something took my fancy. I'd have a feeling immediately. It wasn't that I could hear the whole piece—I don't have that kind of ear. But it just became a kind of addiction; pulling out scores, looking... You have to remember: when I came to Toronto, I had never heard a Mahler symphony; I didn't know who he was. Everything was new music to me!

I really missed the U. of T. Music Library when I got to Holland—and I still miss it!

**T. B.:** That fits with my first memory of you. It was around 1990; I was making a documentary on Hildegard von Bingen for CBC Radio at the time, and had been invited to speak about her to a class at the U. of T. Literally the only thing I remember about the event was this young woman with shining eyes and a very focussed excitement who rushed up afterwards and introduced herself as a voice major. You wanted—no, needed—to know where you could get scores to Hildegard's music.

**B. H.:** Yes! It was a Religious Studies class, called Women in Religious Traditions; it would have been in 1990–1991.

**T. B.:** That's an interesting course choice.

**B. H.:** I minored in religion at U. of T. Each year we had to take a non-music elective; three of my four were in Religious Studies. I started with a course called "Contemporary Religious Ethics," taught by Joe Mihevc;<sup>6</sup> in second

4. Kathleen McMorrow (B.A., B.L.S) headed the University of Toronto's Music Library from 1974 to 2013. Under her stewardship, the Library quintupled its holdings from ca. 100,000 to nearly half a million items, and moved into a purpose-built wing of the Edward Johnson Building. See: <https://music.utoronto.ca/mobour-people.php?fid=223> (accessed June 1, 2020).

5. Library of Congress catalogue numbers for secular music for solo voice with various forms of accompaniment.

6. Joe Mihevc, who holds a Ph.D. in Theology and Social Ethics, went on to serve as a prominent city councillor in Toronto from 1991–2018, espousing a progressive agenda.

year it was “Women in Religious Traditions”; the next year was a course on the Gospels. In my fourth year I took a theatre course for music students.

**T. B.:** Tell me more about your interest in religion.

**B. H.:** I was raised as a Catholic: both my parents were very religious, and after my siblings and I left home, my mom went back to school and got her Masters of Divinity. So yes, growing up, we were very, very involved in the church. It was pre-internet; there was no public transit where we lived, so your community was really school and church. Then in Toronto, a lot of singers at University had soloist jobs in churches. I was a soloist at Bloor St. United Church for quite a long time. The people who spoke there were fascinating—a lot of people who were coming in as ministers were also teaching at the University of Toronto, and were very progressive. I hadn’t experienced that as a Nova Scotia Catholic, and it was fascinating to me!

I was no longer an active believer in God by then, but I think a Christian is more someone who believes in the teachings of Jesus. So I was still following Christian tradition, as opposed to a specifically Catholic belief. I was very interested in that, and I still am. I used the term “vocation” just now with a very deliberate intention. It’s related to spirituality, and it’s very much related to the idea of the concert hall being a sacred space. If we look back at 19th-century philosophy, at Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, musical expression was verging on replacing God and the church. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that my main area of interest, musically, is that spiritual period from the late 1880s into the 20th-century, when philosophy, harmony and religion were intertwined, which meant that the departure from tonality was shocking and disturbing on many levels. People felt bereft, angry, abandoned, and their reactions to the harmonic development of composers including Schönberg and his school reflected these emotions.

**T. B.:** I remember you singing a lot of new music in Toronto during and immediately following your studies at U. of T.—with Continuum; New Music Concerts; Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, and more. How did those experiences shape your path?

**B. H.:** New Music Concerts and Arraymusic in particular were performing music by, and bringing in, composers who made big impressions on me. Mauricio Kagel, Vinko Globokar [...] That’s where I met Louis Andriessen and Gerald Barry, with everybody hanging out together. So Toronto actually introduced me to a lot of composers I’d later work with in Europe. I made a lot of very fertile connections, to a certain kind of music.

**T. B.:** What do you mean by “a certain kind”?

**B. H.:** The music was quite severe.

**T. B.:** In a good way, I take it?

**B. H.:** Yes. I like complexity; I like *gravitas*. It had nothing to do with the American modern music scene. It’s partly because of the funding model: in Canada we had support from the Arts Councils, from government. The Americans were patron-funded, and that affects the kind of music written—it’s more conservative.

**T. B.:** So it would make sense that your next move would be to Europe. What made you choose the Netherlands?

**B. H.:** In fact, when I first moved away from Toronto, I spent a much-too-long year in London, in 1994–1995. I was studying at the Guildhall School [of Music and Drama]. But I don’t talk about that much, because it was a very disappointing year—it was when I first experienced prejudice against new music. After having spent my formative years working with one of Canada’s top voice teachers, I found that the main voice teachers at the Guildhall wouldn’t even let me audition for their studios. The door was closed to me, and it was clear that they just didn’t want someone who was enrolled in their contemporary music program.

It was very painful. I was very lonely, but it’s the tough stuff that makes you sing better. Breakups, loneliness, heartbreak, whatever: they’re all really great for the voice! But that’s why there’s no mention of the Guildhall in my bio, and never will be.

**T. B.:** What made them so negative about new music?

**B. H.:** I think it was the belief, the myth, that it’s bad for the voice. I can’t tell you how many times interviewers have asked me, “Doesn’t contemporary music ruin your voice?” And some of this prejudice is perpetuated by singing teachers, many of whom won’t allow their students to sing new music.

**T. B.:** I’m guessing that something like that would spur you on...

**B. H.:** For sure! I accepted the challenge: I’m not going to be a modern music singer with a wrecked voice. When I give lectures, or am asked about the so-called dangers of singing modern music in interviews now, I don’t name names, but I say, “Why don’t you look at the singers who are constantly cancelling for vocal reasons? And you tell me if it’s because they’re constantly singing contemporary music, or if it’s because they’re singing Wagner, or singing too much, or singing repertoire that’s too big for their voice.”

**T. B.:** So after that unhappy year in London you went to the Netherlands—a move that would prove decisive for your career. Why Holland?

**B. H.:** In London I was working privately with Diane Forlano, a fantastic vocal coach and an incredibly intelligent musician. She had connections to the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, and thought it would be a good place for me to explore. I liked Holland a lot, and wanted to stay in Europe, so I enrolled in the Opera School at the Conservatoire, for 1995–1996. I was so happy I had moved there: it was such a breath of fresh air!

**T. B.:** How quickly did you integrate into new music scene in Holland?

**B. H.:** I wasn't secretive, but at first I didn't put on display that I was really into contemporary music. I did my first Queen of the Night, the title role in [Janáček's] *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and so on. I didn't want to get boxed in or labelled as a new music person, because I had been so hurt in London. So that went on for about seven months. But I missed modern music so much that soon I was right back in cahoots with all the young composers, premiering their works at the school's Spring Festival. I realized there was a way to be passionate about contemporary music and to handle—to *embrace*—the feeling of being an outsider, that I had not been able to do the previous year in London.

So as soon as word got out that there was this smart, high soprano who could sing any rhythm you put in front of her, I started getting hired both by early music groups—there's a huge oratorio circuit in Holland—and by modern music groups, starting with what is now the Asko|Schönberg Ensemble. It was great: I didn't get boxed in, and everyone seemed happy I was there. So Holland was really, really important for me—working with composers, ensembles, conductors, three radio orchestras. Then, around 1997 or 1998, while I was getting my Masters at the University of Toronto, I was cast for the premiere of *Writing for Vermeer*, as Saskia, the *ingénue*.<sup>7</sup>

7. Opera by Louis Andriessen, written in 1997–1998, and premiered in 1999.

**T. B.:** That was a breakthrough in your career, with international tours and a recording on a major label (Nonesuch). What did the piece mean to you at the time?

**B. H.:** It was not only a lot of exposure for me; I was learning to live with the demands of the very tough role. It's very high; the voice doesn't move around a lot; it calls for very little vibrato. Louis [Andriessen] doesn't like women's adult voices—he likes women's voices to be really “straight.”

**T. B.:** I know that non-vibrato has been a fraught issue in early music circles. Does it also come up frequently in the contemporary music world?

**B. H.:** The vibrato issue has been quite huge, both in early music and contemporary music. I've often felt that the request by contemporary composers to sing completely without vibrato results in removal of personal character and humanity—and maturity—from our sound.

And I think the request often comes from a misunderstanding or ignorance: what some composers have associated with vibrato was more a *kind* of vibrato that they did not like. A natural spin on the sound is healthy and pleasant, moving, and emotional: it does not take away from the clarity of pitch. I think there are very few composers who really want you to sing completely non-vibrato. I believe that most of them just want to hear clean harmonies, and clean pitch. That's why I've often suggested that composers use the term "minimal vibrato" in their instructions.

I prefer to use vibrato very consciously as a tool: sometimes minimally; sometimes straightening out a note completely, or slowing it down like a sine wave; quickening and slowing, making it wide or very tightly coiled. I often talk to orchestras about this, too, or sing it to them. It's tough when a composer or conductor says, "No vibrato!" because you feel like someone has just grabbed you by the throat. Whereas if you imagine there's a flow, and there's a very slow spin on the sound that is not wobbly—it's more like a caress of the sound; you get a sense of direction to the sound.

For some early music, it's the same—though the early music movement has changed so much. In the 1980s, there was kind of an allergy to vibrato; eventually the rules were adjusted, and singers and players were allowed to bring a more full-blooded and personal approach to their performances. That's why I loved Bruce Haynes's book, *The End of Early Music*.<sup>8</sup>

**T. B.:** Ah yes—his advocacy for imagination and a good kind of "craziness"...

**B. H.:** Yes, for freedom in performance—the fact that there wasn't a formula! Because I knew Holland; I knew what he was talking about when he wrote about Frans Brüggen, Gustav Leonhardt, Anner Bylisma. I didn't work with any of them, but I was going to their concerts. And Reinbert [de Leeuw] was very close to Anner. I never got to work with Harnoncourt, but I've watched his lectures, his performances, his masterclasses—again, it's that freedom through very deep, disciplined study that Boulez always talked about.<sup>9</sup>

**T. B.:** Going back to vocal matters: you've referred to "contemporary *bel canto*" in interviews. What do you mean by that?

**B. H.:** When I was singing Marie, in *Die Soldaten*,<sup>10</sup> I remember that a reviewer said I was bringing a Schubertian purity of sound to the piece. I sometimes had to sing powerfully, but I was trying to keep a *souplesse* in the

8. Haynes, 2007.

9. Dutch recorder player and conductor Frans Brüggen (1934–2014), Dutch harpsichordist and conductor Gustav Leonhardt (1928–2012), baroque cellist Anner Bylisma (1934–2019), and Austrian conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1929–2016).

10. A 2014 production of Bernd Alois Zimmermann's opera at the Bayerische Staatsoper.



sound. If you imagine *La Sonnambula* of Bellini—it’s that kind of cleanliness of sound. I’d ask myself, “How would Montserrat Caballé sing this? How would her pianissimos be?” Of course Caballé would never even have opened the score to *Die Soldaten*, but it was about: how could I get that most beautiful sound?

Another reason I’m very attached to the idea of modern *bel canto* is that on the one hand, there can be a kind of prejudice against musicians who go far into contemporary music, as if they did it because they couldn’t do the traditional repertoire. And on the other hand, sometimes singers who are singing contemporary music are *not* disciplined enough in their technique. So you have a voice that could only sing contemporary music, but never Händel, Mozart, or Bellini. So this discipline is a kind of torch I’m carrying. It’s a way of saying, “Look: the contemporary music voice can be a healthy, technically assured, and disciplined instrument with the same level of finesse or polish as you have in someone that’s singing *bel canto* or Mozart all the time.”

**T. B.:** At the beginning of this conversation, you described Reinbert de Leeuw as your “lodestar.” How would you describe his influence on you?

**B. H.:** There are several layers to it. I first worked with Reinbert in 1999, when he was conducting the premiere of Andriessen’s *Writing to Vermeer*, and he became the most important musical force in my life. He still is, despite the fact that he passed away several months ago. We clicked in *Vermeer*—he liked to tell people that he was speechless at our first rehearsal, because he felt I was ready to go on stage. So his mind started turning as to what else he could program me in. A lot of really important introductions and musical relationships came out of these collaborations, many of which involved the Schönberg Ensemble. Reinbert was the first person who asked me to do the Ligeti *Mysteries of the Macabre*; that’s how I met Ligeti. We did the Dutch premiere of Dutilleux’s *Correspondances*, and that led to my meeting Dutilleux; the first time I did Boulez’s *Pli selon pli* was with Reinbert; later, I sang the piece with Boulez. Reinbert also brought me to the Berlin Philharmonic, on a program that included Kurtág’s *Four Capriccios*. So a lot of really important relationships came out of working with Reinbert.

Then, in September 2001, after having had one foot in Toronto and one in Amsterdam for a number of years, I was planning to move back to Europe full-time. And Reinbert gave me a place to live. He had a four-story house; he lived on the top two floors, and one of the apartments below was coming free just when I was looking for a place to live. And he said, “Oh! You can have the apartment.” So for the next five years I lived one floor below him, and we

had this extraordinary friendship, this collaborative engagement—talking, hanging out, borrowing scores, having dinner.

That was when he started thinking about recital programs to do with me. He made the *Vienna: Fin de Siècle* program, which we finally recorded more than 10 years later. We had a French program, also *fin de siècle*, with Chausson, Duparc, and Hahn; a Russian program that was mostly Shostakovich. And we had our Satie program. It was huge, and I learned so much from him!

**T. B.:** What was special about working as a duo with Reinbert?

**B. H.:** There was a kind of osmosis. We didn't talk a lot about music in rehearsal; we told stories, and had a nice time, but we never talked about meaning. Sometimes we'd talk a little bit about harmonic structure.

And Reinbert was not what people call “a sensitive vocal accompanist.” By that, I mean that he didn't give me time to breathe if it didn't make sense for the line. And that's good: one of the reasons I rarely did recitals, and I found them extremely difficult, was that I didn't like being “accompanied.” I want a collaborative partnership. With Reinbert, in the first years, I felt very much carried by him—if anything, I was accompanying *him*. And that was as it should be, at the beginning of that relationship.

**T. B.:** If you had to pick the most important thing about Reinbert's musicianship, what would it be?

**B. H.:** Space and Time! It was as if he was beyond the metronome. I loved this because it meant that even the most difficult contemporary music had fluidity and rubato. Even in Andriessen, where the rhythm can be very mechanical, he gave the music such breath and space. And Reinbert loved lyricism; he loved working with singers.

**T. B.:** There is something extraordinary about the melding of voice and piano on your *Vienna: Fin de Siècle* recording, as there was at your performance of that program at Koerner Hall in Toronto,<sup>11</sup> though I'm still struggling to put it into words.

**B. H.:** Well, by the time you heard that recital at the Koerner, or on the recording, things were very different. That tour was *fin de siècle* in every way: it was the last moment of Reinbert's life that he could play that repertoire, which is fiendishly difficult for the piano. He hadn't yet been diagnosed, but he had been complaining of numbness, coldness, and shaking in his hands.<sup>12</sup> I had bought him an electric heating pad, and at every recital, I left it plugged in in the wings, so it would be waiting for him the moment he got off stage. So if you want to talk about decadence and decay: we were at his most fertile point,

11. On November 10, 2017.

12. According to Hannigan, de Leeuw was eventually diagnosed with a slow-moving degenerative disease similar to Lou Gehrig's Disease, along with other co-morbidities.

13. The world premiere of George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* at the Festival International d'Art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence in July 2012, and Alban Berg's *Lulu* at Le Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, October 2012.

14. Hannigan was directed by Sasha Waltz in Pascal Dusapin's *Passion* (Théâtre des Champs Elysées, Paris, in 2010, and Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels, in 2012), and in Toshio Hosokawa's *Matsukaze* (Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels, in 2011).

15. Warlikowski productions in which Hannigan has starred or performed include Poulenc's *La Voix humaine* at the Opéra National de Paris (2015 and 2018); Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (Donna Anna) at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels (2015), Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Ruhrtrienale (2017), and Satie's *La Mort de Socrate* (2016 in Warsaw; 2017 at the Ruhrtrienale).

16. wow: Women of the World festival at the Southbank Centre, London, March 10, 2013. Posted online on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AhnOFwfBnM&t=189s> (accessed June 6, 2020).

before everything would fall apart and ferment. And I was ready to be a true partner to him by that time; I was leading *him*, as he had led me years before.

**T. B.:** Something I love about your performances of song, be it *Lieder*, *mélodies*, or a cabaret-style song like Kurt Weill's *Youkali*, is the way you always seem to present fully-imagined, three-dimensional characters on stage, as if in an opera or a play. Where does that come from?

**B. H.:** I think that's really the only way I can do it. I'm always looking for a very dramaturgical way in; I'm looking at the subtext of the story. For instance, the whole *Vienna: Fin de Siècle* program is about *Sehnsucht*, about longing. If we look at just the Wolf *Mignon* songs—well, they are an opera! So that night you heard them, I approached it as if: I am playing *Mignon*, singing this opera for this audience in Toronto, and she's going to sing her four songs to them, and she's not going to stop until she has said everything she wants to say today.

I think this approach got stronger in me after *Lulu* and after *Written On Skin*, which were back-to-back productions in 2012.<sup>13</sup> Prior to that, I had started working with Sasha Waltz, the German choreographer. She didn't direct you through emotion or intention: you were choreographed, and you found your intention or emotion through the choreography.<sup>14</sup> And that was very important for me, leading into *Written on Skin*, which was directed by Katie Mitchell. With her, everything was about intention and subtext. Her way in was through backstory, that Stanislavskian filling in of character. On the first day of rehearsal, we were given a 25-page backstory leading up to the moment of the opera. I remember going back to my flat right after the rehearsal, phoning my agent and saying, "I hope you haven't signed the contracts for the tour—this is crazy!" But I ended up growing so much from that experience.

The *Lulu* directed by [Krzysztof] Warlikowski came right after *Written on Skin*. Warlikowski became, and still is, a very powerful force for me, over many productions.<sup>15</sup> Katie Mitchell's directing style is to never demonstrate anything; Krzysztof shows you everything—he's a phenomenal actor. Watching him was a game changer for me.

These three directors are why I sang the *Vienna: Fin de siècle* recital the way I did. I had finally met people who were fulfilling something in me that I had always been looking for, but didn't know how to access: my need for dramaturgy and backstory. I really felt: Now I'm on the path.

**T. B.:** In a talk you gave in London, as part of the wow: Women of the World festival,<sup>16</sup> you associated *Lulu* with several colours—do you do that with all your characters? And do you associate them with animals?

**B. H.:** Yes, all of the above. And I costume each concert piece I sing—the dress, the hair, the makeup: I research and choose everything very carefully. It's never: Oh, I think I'll wear this dress tonight.

**T. B.:** Is it fair to say that singing *Lulu* was a watershed for you?

**B. H.:** Yes, there's definitely a before- and after-*Lulu*. The first thing is that it's such a huge role, vocally. I started with the three-act version, and after Act 1, in every single performance, I thought: I don't know how I'm going to get through the rest of this show. So it changes you, because you become part of a club of singers who have been able to handle this role, vocally and psychologically, because it takes everything out of you.

Then post-*Lulu*, you kind of feel that she's everywhere; she infiltrates everything. I think she's such an extraordinary, inspiring human being. She says that at age 15, after spending time away from men, she knew herself, she accepted herself, completely. She knew when she was making the right decision and when she wasn't. That's already amazing. Then she acted accordingly for the rest of her life. I defend everything she does in the opera. [...] Once I finished singing *Lulu*, I thought: Where did people come up with this idea of her being a *femme fatale*; a man-eater? She's just a powerful human being who knows herself. *Basta*. So why was she put into this box? Why is it that because she's strong, because she's powerful and sexual, that makes her a *femme fatale*? That's diminishing her power.

So all of that gave me a kind of strength as a human being. I thought: If I can sing *Lulu*, I'm going to get through the other things I'm afraid of. And I would literally ask myself: What would Lulu do? Even when I was conducting, I would ask myself: How would Lulu conduct this? Because she's so at ease in her body.

**T. B.:** You have such a strong, animal magnetism on stage; with social media being what it is, the videos that invariably pop up when one searches your name on YouTube are the most *outré*, like your *Mysteries of the Macabre*. Do you feel there's a danger of your being typecast as someone who does this "out there" staging?

**B. H.:** I don't mind, because *Mysteries* broke open a lot of doors for contemporary music. People thought: If this is contemporary music, I'll take it! It also opened a lot of doors for me. And I think if you're going to do crazy, let's do it like that!

**T. B.:** So many composers have written music for you; I'd like to hear about the different ways you work with some of them. For instance, I've heard

17. [Ed.] See Benjamin's contribution in the *Enquête* of this issue.

George Benjamin say that he always spends time listening to singers in his studio before he starts writing for them.<sup>17</sup> Did he do that with you?

**B. H.:** Yes, each member of the cast for *Written on Skin* had to go to his house. I sang through the Berg *Seven Early Songs* with him; maybe we read through a few other things. And we played a game: on music staff paper, he'd draw a note, and I'd have to draw the next note, where I wanted to go vocally. Then he'd draw the next note, and I'd draw the next two notes. Through this, he learned how my voice likes to move—all without speaking. He learned that A-flat was my favourite note; that I didn't like to hang out too long in the *passaggio*; that I liked to leap; that after a long time on a low note, I wanted to get out of there and skip two registers up. Then he went away and wrote the opera. And George doesn't change things after he writes—you get the printed score and that's it; there's no negotiating. Which was fine because it was such a perfect score.

**T. B.:** I thought you've said that the ending was excruciatingly difficult for you.

**B. H.:** Yes, it was—but that doesn't mean it wasn't a perfect score! Something else I learned from Reinbert is that if there's something we don't connect to in a piece, it's our problem, not the composer's.

**T. B.:** Have you ever refused to sing a piece written for you?

**B. H.:** No. I might decide not to tour it, but I've stuck with anything through the premiere, or a first round of performances agreed on in advance.

**T. B.:** What would put you off a new piece? Clearly, not difficulty!

**B. H.:** Sometimes—very occasionally—I've felt that a composer was using my voice for their glory. I couldn't find the *gravitas*; I didn't feel the artistic necessity of all that virtuosic music. I think Ligeti wrote the Chief of Police, in *Mysteries of the Macabre*, because he had to write that part. I don't think he wrote it because he thought it was going to be a hit.

**T. B.:** In one interview you said that when Hans Abrahamsen wrote his first piece for you—*let me tell you*—he had not written much for voice, so you sat him down in his studio and gave him an incredible-sounding guided tour of the vocal repertoire—showing him the rules of *bel canto* writing; showing him how and where composers can break them, and why it works...<sup>18</sup>

**B. H.:** Yes, though we met in Berlin, not in his own studio in Copenhagen. For four hours he just sat and listened. Hans is a really deep listener—you couldn't do that with everyone. And he ended up writing a piece that suits me better than anything ever written for me. I would never have said to a composer,

18. [Ed.] See Abrahamsen's contribution in the *Enquête* of this issue.

“I want you to write me a high C on a *pianissimo*.” That would scare me to death. And yet, when he wrote it, somehow I could do it; I found my way.

*The Snow Queen* [2019] was a totally different matter—it was: What was he thinking? The DVD will be very different from what you saw on the livestream:<sup>19</sup> by the fourth performance we had changed so much of my material—we had rewritten the entire first aria.

**T. B.:** The problem being...?

**B. H.:** It was too low! So whenever there was a chance to be more lyrical, we took things up by a fifth, or a tritone, or an octave. We didn’t have time to rehearse it. The music staff would give a sheet to the conductor, saying, “This is what she’ll be singing tonight.” We didn’t even tell the orchestra.

**T. B.:** I’d like to return to the idea of thresholds: in that talk you gave in London in 2013, as part of the wow: Women of the World festival, you spoke movingly about the prospect of aging—the “shelf life” of your voice, as you put it. Are you planning to adapt your repertoire to less spectacular works, or are you an “all or nothing” person—especially since you have been moving into conducting?

**B. H.:** I don’t really think of it that way. For one thing, I know what I have coming up for the next four years, and there’s nothing less spectacular about it! The other thing is that you don’t lose your high notes; you lose your strength in the middle. In fact, I’ve gained a minor third since the [COVID-19] *confinement*! I lose my high notes because I’m under pressure, or I don’t have time to practise, or I’m dehydrated from being on too many airplanes.

But aging is also about chemical changes, and all the changes in libido that also have to do with singing. I don’t think anyone has written about this connection, but I’m absolutely convinced of it. So when the chemicals in your system, and your urges, change, what happens to the urge to sing? For me, it’s *physically* pleasing to sing, and I have to be both musically pleased and physically pleased before the audience. It’s not just about “getting it right”—it’s complete incorporation.

I’m sure there are a lot of singers who leave the business at a certain age, not because their voices don’t work (though that can happen), but because of the changes to this primal libido. Somebody’s got to write about this!

**T. B.:** Does this connection between libido and singing underlie Mathieu Amalric’s short film about you, *C’est presque au bout du monde*?<sup>20</sup>

**B. H.:** It does, yes, in part because the warming up of the voice is a kind of awakening of the senses, and the libido is directly related to the senses. The warmup is a very personal moment of singing, and in my opinion must be

19. The December 28, 2019 performance of the opera at the Bayerische Staatsoper was streamed live on [https://www.staatsoper.de/en/staatsopertv.html?no\\_cache=1](https://www.staatsoper.de/en/staatsopertv.html?no_cache=1) (accessed January 29, 2020).

20. Viewable on: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_C\\_RG5XTQI&t=611s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_C_RG5XTQI&t=611s) (accessed July 9, 2020).

taken seriously and with respect, not something rushed through until we get to the “real thing”—*the music*. The warmup *is* the real thing! Breath and sound! The music is an aspect of that, as organized sound.

Also, the way I breathe for singing—engaging the muscles of the pelvic floor (a way many singers breathe and support the sound, but also used in many other practices including yoga, for example) is a somewhat obvious example of the relation of sexuality to sound. Some singers will discuss and acknowledge this, and others will not, either because they do not realize it, or because it is something they prefer to keep private or deliciously mysterious—understandably!

**T. B.:** If you had to pick a line of text from all the repertoire you’ve sung, that encapsulates your artistic journey, what would it be?

**B. H.:** [after thinking for a moment]: There’s a couple in the Grisey *Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* [1998]: “*J’ai parcouru... j’ai été florissant... je fais une déploration... le Lumineux tombe à l’intérieur de...*”<sup>21</sup>

That line just gets me: that attempt, that yearning, and the elusiveness of not being able to hold onto it. “I had it, I had it!”

Another would be in the Wolf-Goethe *Mignon Lieder*, which are all about *Sehnsucht*—that word we mentioned before that kind of means “longing,” but which goes so much deeper than that, and encapsulates entire Romantic and late Romantic feeling. I love the line: “*So laßt mich scheinen, bis ich werde!*”<sup>22</sup> Mignon is in this Christmas pageant, and they put this white angel dress on her and she says, “Don’t take the dress away from me!”

It’s saying, “Let me be what I am right now; don’t push me; don’t box me into this or that; just let me be what I am.” Well, it’s Schopenhauer, isn’t it? This idea of becoming your true self by finding your true nature through the quote-unquote genius of your art. And “genius” doesn’t mean being one-in-a-billion-people; it’s something more personal. You can be a genius and not be Einstein! This “let me become who I am” has been very important for me—with the changeability of that. This is what I am now, for however long it may last—until the next thing, and the thing after that...

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21. “I passed through... I flourished... I cry out...The Brightness falls inside the...” (translated by Barbara Hannigan and Tamara Bernstein). These lines are taken from the second *Chant*, “D’après les sarcophages égyptiens du moyen empire.” Grisey borrowed them from Barguet, 1986.

22. Literally: “Thus let me seem, until I [thus] become.”