

# The Complete Artistic Self: Five Collaborators Talk about Barbara Hannigan

## Une artiste complète : cinq collaborateurs racontent Barbara Hannigan

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Barbara Hannigan : les voix multiples

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Article abstract

*Who is Barbara Hannigan, as a singer, performer, conductor, mentor, and community-involved musician? What is the impact of her personality on the music scene? How has her artistic character evolved throughout her formative and professional years? With these questions in mind, I interviewed five of Hannigan's closest, and most important collaborators and mentors: Hans Abrahamsen, George Benjamin, Gary Kulesha, Mary Morrison and Thomas Morris. Individually, the interviews shed light on specific phases and events in Hannigan's career, from her undergraduate studies to the present. Taken as a whole, they open the door to understanding Barbara Hannigan as a complete—and completely fearless—artist.*

# Enquête

## The Complete Artistic Self: Five Collaborators Talk about Barbara Hannigan

EMANUELLE MAJEAU-BETTEZ (With contributions from Hans Abrahamsen, George Benjamin, Gary Kulesha, Mary Morrison and Thomas Morris)

Who is Barbara Hannigan, in her multiple roles as a singer, performer, conductor, mentor, and community-involved musician? What is the impact of such a personality on the music scene? How has her artistic character evolved throughout her formative and professional years? These questions were posed to five of Hannigan's closest and most important collaborators and mentors. Their answers are at once rare, rich, and deeply informative. They help us understand the devotion and—to use a word that becomes a *leitmotiv* in this article—the *fearlessness* with which Hannigan embraces music.

Commenting on one of her most famous opera roles, Hannigan says, “it’s hard to say who Lulu is, because nobody knows where she came from.” This article places Hannigan at the complete opposite of the Berg character, and shows us where Hannigan “comes from.” Her emergence as an artist is documented through interviews with conductor and composer Gary Kulesha, and soprano Mary Morrison. Both faculty members at the University of Toronto, they mentored Hannigan during her undergraduate studies, and have remained close far

beyond those formative years. Through their interviews, we see Hannigan grow. Or rather, we see the potential she had even as a young student that allowed her to become the artist she is now. The two interviews that follow give a snapshot of Hannigan’s work with composers. George Benjamin and Hans Abrahamsen recount in generous detail the steps that led to the soprano’s stunning performances of their works. We follow Hannigan’s involvement in the creative processes leading to the premieres of Benjamin’s operas *Written on Skin* and *Lessons in Love and Violence*, and Abrahamsen’s opera *The Snow Queen* and song cycle *let me tell you*. To conclude, former artistic director of the Ojai Music Festival, Thomas Morris, describes the important role—or rather, roles!—played by Hannigan as the 2019 Ojai Music Director; an intense experience where, despite a tight schedule and the multiple hats she wore as director, singer, conductor, and mentor, she “felt like she was only doing one thing—being her complete artist self.”<sup>1</sup>

1. See interview with Thomas Morris, in this article.

**Gary Kulesha** (Text received by email on April 9, 2020)

I first encountered Barbara when she joined the Contemporary Music Ensemble at the University of Toronto, sometime around 1990. It was not uncommon for singers to join, but it was immediately clear that this was a remarkable student. She would have been a teenager at this point, but she was already a focused and determined performer. Most performance teachers know immediately when they encounter a special talent. I have taught and mentored many, but few have impressed me as deeply as Barbara did. She always came impeccably prepared, and, even at this young age, demonstrated the two things that every conductor of contemporary music wants in a singer: she sang all the written notes in tune, and she could count. This may sound like a given, but the number of singers who can bring this level of skill to difficult contemporary music is very small, and it is even rarer among young singers. I cannot remember all the music she took part in, but certainly the standout was Luigi Dallapiccola's stunningly beautiful song cycle *Cinque Frammenti di Saffo*, for soprano and chamber orchestra. This remarkable work would be daunting for any professional. It was Dallapiccola's first twelve-tone work, and is both expressive, as you would expect from Dallapiccola, and technically very demanding. Its combination of soaring lyricism and angular athleticism was ideal not just for Barbara's skills, but for her perfectly clear and elegant voice. Her performance remains one of the highlights of the twenty years I directed the ensemble.

From her undergraduate years, Barbara was fearless. She had a strong interest in early music as well, but it was her work in contemporary music that set her apart.

Student singers typically stay well within their comfort zones, but Barbara undertook anything asked of her. Mary Morrison was a very important influence on her, and there can be no doubt that Mary's faith in her gave her the confidence to pursue her explorations. At this point, Barbara had not yet developed and refined the very specific requirements she now has for new works. But this is what an undergraduate experience should be: exploring, embracing, and rejecting aesthetics define an artist, and she took every advantage of the resources of the school to do this.

Once again, I cannot remember the exact date, but it must have been in 1991 or 1992 when I invited Barbara to appear with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra's core chamber orchestra, the Canadian Chamber Ensemble. She sang two works, the *Madrigals* by Alfred Schnittke, for soprano and trio, and *Chansons populaire françaises* by Germaine Tailleferre, for soprano and chamber orchestra. These were very different works, the *Madrigals* from Schnittke's early serialist years and the Tailleferre folk-like and almost *café* music. I remember one of the players coming up to me after the concert asking, "Where did you find this girl?" The entire organization was extremely impressed with her, both musically and professionally. I enjoy telling the story about standing backstage immediately before going on for the first of her works when she suddenly turned to me and asked breathlessly, "What do I do?" I was a little taken aback. "We go out and you sing," I replied, a little bemused. "No," she continued, "What do I do when I go out?" I realized she had never done this with an orchestra before, so I gave her a quick coaching on waiting for the stage manager to give a signal, walking out on stage, bowing, acknowledging

the concert master, etc. Looking at her onstage now, it seems a little hard to believe.

During the mid-1990s, I did not have much contact with Barbara as she continued to develop her career. In 2000, I was asked to conduct two concerts with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) in November, on the 10th, as part of the Massey Hall Made in Canada Festival, featuring all contemporary music, and on the 11th, at Roy Thomson Hall as part of the TSO's subscription series. Barbara was, at that time, preparing *Mysteries of the Macabre* by Ligeti, and I proposed it for these concerts. For the second evening, she was asked to add some repertoire that was more in keeping with traditional TSO concert fare. Even in rehearsals, the assertive Barbara I know now was already present. One could imagine a young performer making her debut with the seasoned professionals of the TSO being intimidated, but she was quite the opposite. She was enthusiastic, assured, and very definite in what she needed from me and the ensemble. She was polite, but very clear and very specific about how she wanted the work to go. As always, professionals respect this level of artistry and commitment, and the players of the orchestra responded positively. On November 10th, she made a stunning TSO debut with the *Mysteries of the Macabre*, already sporting her trademark long leathers. On the 11th, somewhat more demurely, she began with Mozart's concert aria "Al desio di chi t'adora" before dazzling a very conservative audience with the Ligeti. This ability to switch between such starkly different styles became a trademark for her. Specialists in contemporary music rarely have the skills necessary to undertake standard repertoire. But both her skills

and her beautifully nuanced sound made the transition from Classical to dramatically Contemporary seem effortless.

Barbara has always been acutely self-aware. She has always been careful to choose repertoire that she knows she can serve, and that will be artistically satisfying for her. Equally importantly, she has developed into a teacher and mentor with commitment. Her work with young performers is not just generous, it offers them the insights of a performer who is highly intelligent, keenly observant, and very experienced. Last year, she returned to the University of Toronto to coach a performance of the *Mysteries of the Macabre* with the new Contemporary Music Ensemble, GamUT. As I sat in the hall watching the workshop, I realized just how far she has gone beyond that debut with the TSO.

I never doubted it for a minute.

**Mary Morrison** (Interview conducted by phone on January 29, 2020)

**Emanuelle Majeau-Bettez (E. M.-B.):** You and Barbara Hannigan are often considered to have almost parallel careers, in terms of milestones and repertoire. To start this discussion, it would be nice to hear you reflect on your own coming of age as a professional singer.

**Mary Morrison (M. M.):** Oh well, those were such different times! I'm going to take opera as an example. In the late 1940s, when I was singing my first operas, the genre was quite new in Canada. There was not much happening [laughs]! I was with the first group of singers to perform with the Canadian Opera Company—the *original* coc! It was a totally different picture. At that time, my career included all kinds of music: chamber

music, oratorio, recitals... And, of course, I became very much involved with contemporary music.

**E. M.-B.:** Like you, Hannigan also performs in all kinds of genres, not only contemporary music. She is often asked if she approaches concert and operatic works differently, to which she says that she does not consider her technique to be any different...

**M. M.:** No, she has a very solid way of thinking, technically. The music plays such an important role: it is through music that she achieves what it is she wants to do with her voice. And she knows how to attain that!

**E. M.-B.:** Hannigan also often states that she does not interpret the works so much as she “becomes” the work, or the characters she is singing.

**M. M.:** Yes, she becomes the music. It’s in her; it’s just part of her! She becomes whatever it is that she is trying to perform or communicate to an audience. She *is* the music. There is no other way I can think of expressing this.

**E. M.-B.:** Did you witness the maturation of this approach to music during Hannigan’s formative years?

**M. M.:** Barbara was always very physically involved. You see the shape Barbara keeps herself in, or what she can do in a role. If you have watched her *Lulu*, you know what I mean!<sup>2</sup> The voice is such a unique, distinctive thing: it’s yours. I know a piano has different colours, and same with any other instrument. But your voice

2. Hannigan is arguably the most striking *Lulu* of her generation, as evidenced by her critically acclaimed performances of the Berg opera. She is also famous for her recording—as both conductor and soprano—of Berg’s *Lulu Suite* with the LUDWIG Orchestra.

is in your body; it *is* your body. Physically, Barbara is so well tuned. Since her body is in tune, she can do anything she wants! If you look at singers from another generation, or watch “voices of the past” on television, the bodies are not like that [laughs]!

**E. M.-B.:** I imagine that demands discipline...

**M. M.:** Oh, unbelievable discipline. Barbara has a certain routine that is infallible. She does it religiously, repeating the same things, and what she wants to do technically and musically is to bring the music and text to life. Technically, she is very, *very* in shape! She has always been enormously disciplined, even as a student, I can remember.

**E. M.-B.:** I interviewed Barbara Hannigan a few years ago, and she told me how she likes to dive into the heart of the score very quickly.<sup>3</sup> She often cites you as one of the instigators of this relationship to the score; how you encouraged her curiosity, how you told her to go to the library, to take the time to read all sorts of scores.

**M. M.:** Exactly, that’s the thing: Barbara reads like a shark, and she always has. Her whole thrust has always been the total picture of the music; not just her line. And that’s where, as a singer, she is quite extraordinary. What she hears, what she sees, through the score.

**E. M.-B.:** Here is a quote from Hannigan: “Besides the technical work Mary and I did to build a healthy and reliable instrument that can handle the crazy schedule I have now, it was with Mary that my curiosity for new sound and repertoire was embraced. She taught me

3. Majeau-Bettez, 2019, p. 51-62.

that taking risks was a good thing! But not without the discipline of good technique.”<sup>4</sup>

**M. M.:** That’s right! Indeed! One of the very first instances where I asked her to do a risky performance was for a new music concert.<sup>5</sup> It was a piece by Henry Brant, and her line was actually like an instrumental part. It could very well have been written for flute! I said: “Well Barbara, I think we have to try this.” And she did it, and it was just, oh, astonishing. She always remembers that. I knew that she was curious enough about whether she could do it. She just went for it. I think that kind of spirit of hers is really how she gets involved with everything the way she does. She is just that kind of person.

**E. M.-B.:** I would love to hear your thoughts on Hannigan’s relationship to sound: how she hears textures, colours, the sound’s shape and direction, even material aspects of it.

**M. M.:** Yes, well first [laughs!], my reaction to that kind of thing is: how many singers do we know that have those kinds of ears? Usually, young singers become very much involved with their own sound; indeed, because they have to develop this. But she is beyond that.

**E. M.-B.:** In which sense?

4. So, 2017.

5. *Inside Track* (1982) by composer Henry Brant. The performance—the Canadian premiere—was conducted by the composer and Robert Aitken on December 9, 1990, at Premiere Dance Theatre during Toronto’s New Music Concerts. It was broadcasted on CBC-Toronto “Two New Hours” on March 3, 1991. This important performance marks Barbara Hannigan’s first professional engagement. She was 19 years old.

**M. M.:** Maybe you would call it a vision of where she would like that sound to be.

**E. M.-B.:** I heard her speak about a feeling of “being in the right place.” Musically, of course, but also in her career...<sup>6</sup> There is an evident joy in what she is doing!

**M. M.:** This joy that she has in performing and sharing is quite rare. If you have talked to her in person, you see the kind of giving person she is. I use the word giving because she gives so much of herself, and what she wants to express. You know it when you talk to her.

**George Benjamin** (Interview conducted by email in February 2020)

**Emanuelle Majeau-Bettez (E. M.-B.):** How did you first come into contact with Barbara Hannigan?

**Georges Benjamin (G. B.):** It was at the Lucerne Festival in the summer of 2008; Barbara was featured in a Sunday morning concert in the magnificent main concert hall. I remember her entering, completely alone, to sing a brief unaccompanied monody by Nono.<sup>7</sup> The performance was so magnetic, and her singing so beautiful, that within 15 seconds, I knew that it was for her that I had to write the role of Agnes in my opera *Written on Skin*. So I went backstage after the concert and introduced myself...

6. See “On Finding Your Passion: Mary Morrison and Barbara Hannigan,” UofT Music, <https://vimeo.com/152809802> (accessed May 6, 2020).

7. *Djamila Boupacha* (1962). This piece for solo soprano is featured on Hannigan’s newest album with the LUDWIG Orchestra: [www.barbarahannigan.com/discography/la-passione](http://www.barbarahannigan.com/discography/la-passione) (accessed June 15, 2020).

**E. M.-B.:** What drew you to Hannigan for the roles of Agnes and Isabel?<sup>8</sup>

**G. B.:** In particular, I love the purity of her voice, as well as her ability to project and shape melodic lines with imagination and charisma. I also value her focused and economical use of vibrato, something which is so rare. I also am grateful for the respect she espouses—and the degree of precision that she is then able to project—for the score from the very first rehearsal. It also has to be said that she is an extraordinary actress, powerful, convincing and, indeed, fearless on stage.

**E. M.-B.:** Hannigan insists on the fact that you compose for the specificities of the vocalists; for people. Yet, she also speaks of Agnes as a role that fell somewhat outside her comfort zone—at least, in the beginning. She describes how you explored her register: extreme changes in colour, explosive moments between the lower and higher ranges of her tessitura; also the softness, the lyricism of the vocal lines... Here is an excerpt from an interview with her:

George Benjamin's opera *Written on Skin* began as a role outside my comfort zone. I was concerned that he had misunderstood me, because the part did not seem virtuosic in a way I could immediately understand. But I was wrong! George kept saying to me, Barbara dear, I wrote it for you. As we worked towards the premiere, I found my way in, and finally my last struggles came

8. Some six years after the world premiere of *Written on Skin* at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence (2012), Barbara Hannigan sang the role of Queen Isabel in Benjamin's opera *Lessons in Love and Violence*, premiered at London's Royal Opera House on May 10, 2018. In addition to Hannigan, the 2018 opera brings back other members of the 2012 *Written on Skin* team: texts are by the playwright Martin Crimp, stage direction by Katie Mitchell, and design by Vicki Mortimer.

together in the last few days of rehearsals before the premiere.<sup>9</sup>

**G. B.:** Indeed, I remember this—and how, in particular, Agnes's final aria at first caused her some anxiety and difficulty. She was initially reluctant to tackle it, and—though I trust her professionalism 100%—I became slightly concerned. Then one day, not far from the end of piano rehearsals, we found ourselves, almost in a casual way, embarking on this challenging passage. She coasted through it as if it was the easiest thing in the world, and from that moment on we never looked back.

**E. M.-B.:** Drawing on this, how do you understand collaboration between musicians and composers?

**G. B.:** I get to know all my singers before I write a note for them. They come to my home, and I accompany them in opera extracts or in *Lieder*. During such encounters, I try to find out specific facts about tessitura, vibrato, favoured vocal ranges and techniques as well as potential vocal flaws and incapacities (which also have their interest for me). Of course, I also take note of the singer's character and dramatic ability, as much as I can. All of this information, assembled into a sort of instruction manual, aids me while composing and helps me to shape individual lines, as well as the complete roles. This was very much the case in both of the characters I created for Barbara.

Perhaps I should also mention that, after the initial encounters, the singers (and this includes Barbara) don't hear from me—maybe for years. I'm extremely reclusive while writing, and don't even share the subject or title of the work until late in the process of composition.

9. So, 2017.

So I also have to be grateful to Barbara for the patience and tolerance she showed me while I was writing.

**E. M.-B.:** How is it to work with a vocalist in the long run, over the years and during the many performances of *Written on Skin* and *Lessons in Love and Violence*? I am especially curious about how, having worked with Hannigan on Agnes, you imagined the role of Isabel.

**G. B.:** An indication of my dedication and admiration for Barbara is the fact that she is the only singer for whom I have written more than one role in my operas—usually I need the impetus provided by encountering new voices. However, it was understood from the very beginning that the new part would be smaller than that in *Written on Skin*—the core of the narrative is very much devoted to the two baritone roles, Gaveston and the King.

Although her character and dramatic trajectory are very different from that of Agnes, Isabel is still an extremely important presence in the opera. My writing is, of course, different too, something clearly perceptible in the register within which the part lies, its intervallic idiom and many other facets...

One further thing: I have conducted the premieres (as well as numerous subsequent performances) of both of these operas, and therefore Barbara and I have collaborated in the most direct way imaginable over months and months. In rehearsal she's genial and collaborative, but in performance something wild takes hold of her. This mixture of pristine vocal beauty and heated scenic intensity is truly remarkable.

**E. M.-B.:** From a personal standpoint, I have found that both operas succeed in portraying—musically and thematically—affects that are at once so far, yet so close to our contemporary lives...

**G. B.:** Thank you. Your intuition is very much in harmony with what both Martin Crimp and I wanted while writing both operas. And such a viewpoint is clearly present in the marvellous productions Katie Mitchell and Vicki Mortimer created for our works, and it was very much Katie—in her magical way—who directly shaped the onstage personae with Barbara.

**Hans Abrahamsen** (Interview conducted by email and videoconference in May 2020)

I first met Barbara in the mid-2000s. Our mutual friend, the fantastic composer, conductor and pianist Reinbert de Leeuw,<sup>10</sup> had programmed my transcription for soprano and seven instruments of Schönberg's *Vier Lieder*. Some four years later, Barbara got in touch with me concerning a project for a piece based on Paul Griffiths' short novel, *let me tell you*. The book is made exclusively of the words that Shakespeare gave Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Hundreds of years after it happened, Ophelia is telling us her story, in her own voice. Paul is a good friend of mine, so I knew the book already, and it had always been clear to me that it could be used for music. So, to Barbara, I said: "Yes, I will do it!"

When I was done choosing the material for the text, Barbara and I met. Our meeting had two stages. First, Barbara gave me a great lesson on how composers wrote for the voice. I had written very little vocal music, only small pieces when I was quite young. So Barbara gave me an excellent lesson about which words I could use in the high, low and middle registers, she talked

10. Recognized as one of the great figures of 20th-century music, de Leeuw was Hannigan's long-time collaborator and mentor. He passed away on February 14, 2020.



about colour, she demonstrated the possibilities of her own instrument... That was fantastic. I still have my small notes! Second, I showed Barbara how I thought of organizing the text. The book is in prose, but I chose eight fragments that I wished to include in the composition. I grouped these eight songs according to what would later become the themes of the cycle: memory, time, music and love. I felt that, as a composer, this was a great liberty: I could, out of a book, choose the things I wanted to work with. That is something characteristic about Barbara: her trust in people. Somewhere in your questions, you ask how Barbara and I discussed the themes of the cycle. Yet, somehow, we did not do this. It all happened beautifully by accident. I chose the parts and Barbara thought about it, but we never felt the need to put it into words. Sometimes in silences, that's where intuition can emerge. In a way, through silence, egos seem to vanish.

It was soon decided that the piece should be for soprano and orchestra. Barbara talked with the Berlin Philharmonic. Simon Rattle knew Paul's book too, and it became a commission!<sup>11</sup> That was exactly what I had hoped for, because of all the colours, and the landscape that can be created by such an ensemble, and by Barbara.

During the composition of the piece, I was not in contact with Barbara until the score was sent to her in June 2013. Of course, I was very excited—and a little nervous—about her response! But I felt at once

11. Sir Simon Rattle was the principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic from 2002 to 2018: [www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/history/sir-simon-rattle/#event-simon-rattles-first-concert-as-chief-conductor](http://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/history/sir-simon-rattle/#event-simon-rattles-first-concert-as-chief-conductor) (accessed May 20, 2020).

that Barbara was very happy with it. Somehow, I must have listened carefully to her lecture about her voice, because she had only a few suggestions; only four places where a consonant could be set differently.<sup>12</sup> In *let me tell you*, there is both a very fragile side, and also a very strong one; Ophelia becomes stronger through each song. Barbara felt the music intuitively, to perfection. At the premiere, in Berlin, in December 2013, she sang the piece by heart. She integrated the music totally, and she sang it directly—fearless—with such beauty and strength. When she sings, Barbara has a terrific charisma; there is nothing between her, the music and the audience. She can sing so many colours: very warm, very cold and in between; green, blue, red, yellow; with and without vibrato. All these features are very flexible. That is an integral part of her persona: *she* has so many colours, and like her voice, she is supple. Barbara is a fantastic singer, musician and human being, and all that shines through her voice.

This flexibility is also apparent in collaboration. I remember, in my opera *The Snow Queen*, Barbara pointed out to me that some parts were too low for her.<sup>13</sup> After the second performance, we had a very good talk about this, and I even transposed a few other sections. The third performance proved to be a great

12. In an interview, Hannigan says, “sometimes there are scores which seem to fit me like a glove. An example of this would be Hans Abrahamsen’s orchestral song cycle called *let me tell you* which he composed for me in 2013. It was like looking at my DNA on the page. Not just musically, but emotionally as well.” So, 2017.

13. Hannigan premiered the principal role in the English version of the opera, at the Bayerische Staatsoper on December 21, 2019, just a few weeks after the world premiere in Copenhagen.

improvement. Yet, the “Troll Song” from the first scene still needed attention... Since it was not possible to simply transpose it up an octave, I found a solution in time for the last performance, where her line was transposed up a fifth in some places, and a tritone in others. It is a very difficult place in the opera, not just vocally, but also in the rhythmic interplay with the orchestra, led by two conductors. Barbara received the changes a few days before this last representation and, a mere three hours before the actual performance, I met with her and her pianist. She then walked directly on stage, without any rehearsal with the orchestra, and performed the “Troll Song” fantastically, with all her colours and her emotions. I was totally impressed. She is fearless. This is what I mean when I say she is flexible: she has the ability to adapt very quickly. Barbara’s input was a major improvement for her part, as well as for the entire opera.

As a musician, Barbara connects to all her colours. She is known for singing contemporary music. Yet, she also performs older works, and she’s bringing it all together—there is no new or old music; all the colours in music make a whole. As an artist, she achieves this when she stands in front of the orchestra. I remember the first rehearsal of *let me tell you*: somehow, she brought things together with her presence. During a performance, she uses herself to be with us, the audience. To be in a space with Barbara means that there is no glass between the music, the audience, and the singer. The glass shatters.

As a composer, it is a gift to write for her.

**Thomas Morris** (Interview conducted by email in April 2020)

**Emanuelle Majeau-Bettez (E. M.-B.):** Could you share your first encounter with Hannigan? How did you contact her to be the Music Director of Ojai 2019?<sup>14</sup>

**Thomas Morris (T. M.):** My first meaningful interaction with Barbara was in 2010, when she performed *Grisey’s Quatre chants pour franchir le seuil* with the New York Philharmonic. She and the piece overwhelmed me. In 2013, I heard her sing with Simon Rattle and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and we spent some time talking about music and life. She was just starting her conducting career. I was so impressed with her energy and creative mind that I invited her to be the Ojai Music Director on the spot. Since we plan many years in advance at Ojai, and I already had commitments for five years, 2019 was the date.

**E. M.-B.:** Hannigan said of working with you on the festival, “ideas just bounce off each other,” to the point where one doesn’t know whose idea it was from the start. How did this play out, for example, in programming decisions?

**T. M.:** My role as Artistic Director at Ojai is to choose the Music Director, and then collaborate with them to produce a festival consistent with Ojai’s vision, as well as one reflecting the artistic personality of the Music Director. It is very much of an interactive and iterative process, usually developing over 3 or 4 years. Agreeing up front on the fundamental goals frees up openness in planning and, in fact, we both totally lose track of who initiates

14. Ojai Music Festival: [www.ojaifestival.org](http://www.ojaifestival.org) (accessed May 6, 2020).

any idea. I have found that process somewhat the same with each Music Director at Ojai. One of the other distinct challenges for Ojai is the need to structure a complete festival that has an organic shape from beginning to end, a totally different challenge from constructing one isolated program. Most artists have experience with the latter, but not many with the former.

**E. M.-B.:** Since the earliest stages of her musical training, Hannigan has had a great curiosity for new music in particular, but also for all types of music, in general. Looking at her repertoire, we can see that Hannigan is an avid music lover, and that this love does not limit itself to a specific genre. How was this reflected in her attitude as a Music Director?

**T. M.:** This is the precise reason I was attracted to her as a collaborator. Ojai is all about creativity, adventure, and surprise, both within each festival and across different festivals. The structural idea of having a different Music Director each year has been ingrained in Ojai since the beginning, and it guarantees non-linear thinking across festivals. For an artist, Ojai offers the possibility of showcasing the entire artist, not just one or two aspects of their talent. As such, I am always attracted to artists who, in fact, are many things—unlike most other presenters, who hire artists to fill a precise slot to do only one thing.

**E. M.-B.:** Hannigan credits her former vocal teacher, Mary Morison, for having taught her the benefits of risk-taking; to find, through flawless technique and discipline, the liberty to make bold aesthetic choices. How did this translate during her time at Ojai?

**T. M.:** For her Ojai festival, we presented over twenty-five events over four days. And that means that prior

to the festival, there were multiple weeks of rehearsals and preparations. The planning is very intricate, and the schedule wildly intense. For Barbara, we knew early on we wanted to present her as a singer, as a conductor, as a collaborator, and as a mentor. That meant she had to perform in all those roles within this short period of time. Knowing Barbara's interest in the most challenging contemporary scores, we knew we needed to have her sing the Grisey *Quatre chants*, we knew she had to sing John Zorn's *Jumalattaret*, we knew she had to conduct a staged production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, we knew she needed to bring eight of her Equilibrium young artists to Ojai to appear in multiple roles.<sup>15</sup> All of this, and in four days, was an incredible physical, mental, and musical risk for her, one that she enthusiastically embraced because that is what Ojai is all about. In every planning meeting, we would review her personal schedule of conducting, singing, and mentoring to make sure she could navigate the journey with stamina and strength. Watching her go through it all was astonishing—I have never seen an artist with such personal discipline. At the end, I asked her how she felt, and while she admitted she had been worried about having to do so many difficult things in a short period of time, she said that she actually felt like she was only doing one thing—being her complete artistic self. Mission accomplished, as far as I was concerned.

**E. M.-B.:** Could you comment on Hannigan's role with Equilibrium? How does she see mentorship?

15. Founded by Hannigan, Equilibrium Young Artists is a mentoring initiative for young musicians in the early years of their professional careers. <https://equilibrium-youngartists.com> (accessed May 6, 2020).

**T. M.:** When I first heard about her Equilibrium project, there was no question that it had to be a presence with her at Ojai. Equilibrium is about working with and through Barbara for these remarkable artists. Ojai provided a laboratory where these young artists could perform a variety of roles, interacting with each other and with the other festival artists in multiple ways, and also witness the crucible of a festival in its totality.

**E. M.-B.:** Ojai was also an opportunity for Hannigan to affirm her identity as a conductor. When she conducts LUDWIG,<sup>16</sup> for example, while she does have authority over the organization of the rehearsal, collegiality and collaboration play an important part in her approach. How did this play out during rehearsals at Ojai?

**T. M.:** Barbara is very much about collaboration. I have watched her, not only in the preparation for Ojai, but in rehearsals with other orchestras, and in other opera productions. She is the example of the involved and present artist. As a conductor, she totally understands that great conductors today are not content merely to show orchestras what they want, but they also take from what the orchestra has to offer, allowing it to help shape her understanding of the music and how she leads it. Great conducting is very much about balancing give and take. At Ojai, she also functioned as a cheerleader for

16. "In 2012, six Dutch orchestral musicians defied prevailing trends and created a new musical collective. They wanted an ensemble which would distinguish itself not only artistically, but also in its range and flexibility [...] vary[ing] in size from a single soloist to full-scale symphonic orchestra." [www.ludwig-orchestra.com](http://www.ludwig-orchestra.com) (accessed May 6, 2012). Barbara Hannigan is one of the first and closest collaborators of the ensemble. During the encore of their first collaboration, LUDWIG performed Holst's *Thaxted*, and Hannigan conducted them for the first time.

the LUDWIG orchestra, given the astonishing number of pieces they performed. While I have seen other ensembles wither under such a schedule, Barbara was effective in leading by example in how to pace themselves, how to conserve energy when possible, and when to go for it.

**E. M.-B.:** As someone who is very involved in the music scene, how do you see Hannigan's role; her influence as a performer, as a music lover, as a conductor, as a mentor?

**T. M.:** I see Barbara as very much the model of a future musical leader. While she is unique in doing so many different things (and I suspect that list will grow in the future), she also seems to address each individual role from a fresh perspective. As a singer, she is a champion of the really new, and a strong advocate of music as a theatre. As a conductor, she is less interested in the traditional conducting career of standard repertoire in predictable programs with predictable ensembles. She has already focused on developing close artistic relationships with select ensembles built around projects, rather than collecting "posts." Her repertoire and programs are simply different and more interesting than what you usually find. Her future will be built around her advocating tirelessly for such non-traditional and distinctive approaches.

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