

**Cleveland Orchestra: soprano Barbara Hannigan
to sing U.S. premiere of Abrahamsen's *let me tell you***

by Christine Jay, *intern*



When critically acclaimed soprano and conductor Barbara Hannigan's surprise birthday plans for her friend and novelist Paul Griffiths fell through, she suggested a gift of even greater implications: a project of Griffiths' words animated by Hannigan's liquid sound. The end product will be heard on Thursday and Friday, January 14 and 15 in Severance Hall when Hannigan joins Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra in the United States premiere of Hans Abrahamsen's *let me tell you*.

This situation, indeed, is an example of collaboration at its finest; a soprano, librettist, and composer each separately became enthralled in telling a story. The bonding narrative is Griffiths' 2008 novel *let me tell you*, a work utilizing the 481 words appropriated to Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Told from Ophelia's point of view, Griffiths depicts her life's maturation, as she is perpetually caught in a web of royalty and patriarchy until her father's murder and her subsequent, aqueous suicide.

The story continues with Hannigan and Griffiths' joint decision to ask Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen to write the sounds of Ophelia's narrative. Abrahamsen, however, the only name of high esteem that came to Hannigan and Griffiths, had previously only written instrumental music. Hannigan, having delivered over eighty world premieres (and counting) in her distinguished new music career, was certainly up to the task of guiding Abrahamsen in Ophelia's recitations. A four-hour lesson ensued on the history of voice from Monteverdi to the present, with demonstrations by Hannigan regarding how her instrument fits into the vocal spectrum. Abrahamsen listened deeply.

Three years later, Abrahamsen won the 2016 \$100,000 Grawemeyer Award for *let me tell you* (2013). In hindsight, Hannigan praises Abrahamsen's comprehension of Ophelia's character. "Hans got it," Hannigan exclaimed during a recent telephone conversation. Structured in three parts, *let me tell you* reveals Ophelia's retrospections on her past, present, and future. Hannigan describes Abrahamsen's comprehension as a two-fold success: the composer presents both Ophelia's powerful fragility and the strength she has gained from over 500 years of reflection within the pages of Shakespeare. Quite simply, "Hans got it."

Others agree with Hannigan's musings. Commissioned for Hannigan by the Berliner Philharmoniker and the Danish Arts Foundation and subsequently premiered by Hannigan and conductor Andris Nelsons with the Berlin orchestra, *let me tell you* has garnered international fame as a new music composition and has been performed by some of the most celebrated orchestras in the world. Hannigan has brought Ophelia's story to such halls as Amsterdam's Concertgebouw and the Helsinki Philharmonic, and has recorded the work with Nelsons and the Symphonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks.

When asked how she becomes Ophelia for each performance, Hannigan said, "I incorporate her." Cleveland eagerly awaits both Ms. Hannigan's presence and Ophelia's story on the Severance Hall stage.

Following her performances in Severance Hall, Barbara Hannigan, Franz Welser-Möst and The Cleveland Orchestra will tour let me tell you to New York's Carnegie Hall on January 17. She will sing the Boston premiere of the work with Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony in Symphony Hall early in February.

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