

Barbara Hannigan makes a compelling debut conducting the Cleveland Orchestra



Critically acclaimed Canadian soprano Barbara Hannigan has built a separate – though sometimes simultaneous – career as a conductor. She made her conducting debut with the Cleveland Orchestra on Thursday, leading the ensemble through an event of works by Haydn, Strauss Vivier, and Ligeti. Roger Mastroianni

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by Kevin McLaughlin

Barbara Hannigan, the Canadian dynamo who started singing professionally at 17 and later added separate — though sometimes simultaneous — responsibilities as conductor, has at last made her debut in that role with The Cleveland Orchestra. That she might give soaring accounts of mainstream and contemporary works by Haydn, Strauss Vivier, and Ligeti, was hoped for, even if not surprising, but that she should make such works about

mourning, death, and loneliness so compelling and listenable, may be a good reason to have her back.

Hannigan's interpretation of Haydn's "Mourning" Symphony (No. 44), so called because the composer may have requested that the Adagio be played at his funeral, was fleet of foot — quick but not absent of tension, a combination well calculated to push one back in one's seat.

This may be the most tuneful of Haydn's *Sturm und Drang* symphonies, however, its "stress" comes less from its minor key than from its propulsive rhythmic drive and syncopation. The first movement is striking for its severity coupled with passion. Michael Mayhew made the high exposed horn lines sound easy, and solos by principal oboe Frank Rosenwein and concertmaster David Radzynski, were enchanting.

The Minuet — the second movement in this symphony — was stylish and fun with its chasing canons two bars apart. The chorale-like Trio, followed by an elegantly turned slow movement, offered solace before the troubled but exhilarating Finale.

Claude Vivier was born in Montreal in 1948 and moved to Paris in 1982. The next year he was stabbed to death in his apartment, a month before he turned 35, by a 19-year-old serial killer looking only to kill gay men. *Lonely Child*, for soprano and orchestra, a musical self-portrait set to Vivier's own text, examines the role of fantasy in the composer's unhappy childhood; first in an orphanage, and later with abusive adoptive parents.

Aphrodite Patoulidou, her arms raised in cradling gestures, was a compelling presence both physically and vocally. The loneliness (or perhaps joy) of the title character was mirrored by the qualities in Patoulidou's flexible and luminous voice, heard clearly above the shifting colors and textures in the orchestra. Every note of Vivier's exquisite score was clarified and sharpened by Hannigan's conducting.

In Ligeti's *Lontano*, (meaning "distant," or perhaps in this context, "approaching from a distance") sheer sound replaces traditional harmony. Single tones pile up one on another and gather or fall away. Here, as in other works on the program, Hannigan managed long-term dynamic and timbral changes with extraordinary discernment. She has an uncanny ability to give the right gesture to produce the right degree of intensity, and to keep track of the progress of a long movement.

She also had a vast number of instruments to manage: each player, even in the strings, is assigned a different role. The massive dynamic and timbral accumulation and its final disappearance to nothing made a startling impact. Hannigan's rising cut off kept the

orchestra and audience suspended for several seconds before applause finally defined an end.

From the quiet chords of the opening, Hannigan found just the right quality of sound and pacing for Strauss's Death and Transfiguration. Confidence in the orchestra (let's face it, the brass) was such that fortés were allowed to grow to heroic volumes without ever becoming strident. One can also credit the beautiful woodwind solos (flute, oboe and clarinet), but it was the composite that impressed the most.

The closing Transfiguration theme — which Strauss later used in “Abendrot,” one of his Four Last Songs — grew from a low horn into a solid but full tutti chorus. Maybe these two works seem not so far apart, for both the early tone poem and the late elegy speak of a reluctance to let go.

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