

Keynote speech, Lucerne Festival 2016  
written by Barbara Hannigan

## Equilibrium

I'd like to open with a memory of the great Pierre Boulez. We performed his masterpiece *Pli selon pli* for soprano and orchestra here in 2011, with the Lucerne Festival Academy and Ensemble Intercontemporain, and then took it on tour throughout Europe. During our tour, he was interviewed on television in the Netherlands, and said about the soprano role in *Pli selon pli*: "She is like the prima donna in the theatre. She leads the piece." And when the interviewer seemed surprised that Boulez was talking about a prima donna in his own music, Boulez replied, "Yes! Absolutely, yes. She has an actress' attraction, I find, and that I like." And the interviewer pressed on, asking why he evoked such an old fashioned phenomenon as the prima donna. Boulez replied, "That depends on how you consider the prima donna. A prima donna is a kind of character, a very strong character." Boulez was, not surprisingly, so very right. The Prima donna is beyond stereotype.

That tour was a pinnacle of achievement in contemporary music, and for me, a high point in my career. We played one of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries most complex scores for sold-out audiences in Europe's major concert halls. But my roots are somewhat different. I grew up in the village of Waverley, in Nova Scotia, on the east coast of

Canada. We had a petrol station, a post office, a convenience store, a church, and an elementary school. I remember very clearly, at 6 years old, the day our new school music teacher arrived, the speed of my heartbeat while walking with my classmates in single file from our classroom to the Music Room. I see the hallways of our little school in my mind's eye, and feel my excitement and curiosity about what would happen in that Music Room. I ran home from school that day, up and down the two big hills on the dirt road which led to our house by the lake, leaping home like a little gazelle, to tell my mother about Miss MacEwen. She was a highly gifted musician, very religious, in her first teaching job. Her parents had both studied at Juilliard and settled in Nova Scotia. She was a wonderful pianist with hands that had seemingly endless fingers, and had a beautiful voice. She had glossy blond hair and wore long skirts, and while she was playing the piano, she'd turn to us with her shining blue eyes behind thick glasses, and with a loving smile, she taught us to sing.

Miss MacEwen had each child in the class come up to the white board at the front of the classroom to improvise graphic drawings of Beethoven's 5th symphony. While she played a recording, we drew the music in different colours and shapes, whatever felt right to each of us. I was so surprised at how

different all of our drawings were. The Music Room was a place where we learned focus and discipline, through preparing for our school concerts, local competitions and musicals. One year, our class of 10-12 year olds put on a performance of *The Mikado*, the operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan. One of my first great disappointments of life occurred then, when Miss MacEwen took me aside to gently tell me that I was not being given a leading role in that production and would only be in the chorus. Both my twin brother and older sister were awarded solo roles and Miss MacEwen explained that she simply couldn't give all the solos to the Hannigan children. I was absolutely heartbroken, and those two big hills on the way home were enormous that day, as I trudged in tears towards my mother's arms. But when I look back at the pictures of the performances, there is a little girl in the front row of the chorus, smiling and singing her heart out.

Music became the most natural, expressive tool for us as children, and though our repertoire was not sophisticated, we learned the basic skills of producing sound, communal breathing and listening which are the cornerstones of any professional musician's career. Throughout my youth, my friends and I were all involved in music, and much of our free time, weekends, even vacations were spent singing in choirs and playing in instrumental ensembles. We went to summer music camp, and when I see programmes like the Luzerne Festival Academy, I'm reminded of our childhood summer music programmes and our concerts in the high school gym, or outdoors in the village square or at a shopping mall. It is not an understatement to say that we performed in a lot of shopping malls. We played Canadian folk song suites, the theme from *Star Wars*, and the overture to *Poet and Peasant* by von Suppe. Summer camp is a little different nowadays. In 2014 I joined the Luzerne Festival Academy, the Olympics of summer music camp, to perform the world premiere of Unsuk Chin's *Silence of the Sirens*, conducted by Simon Rattle, and Mahler 4 with Matthias Pintscher on the podium. The repertoire was much more sophisticated than I'd experienced in my youth, the concert hall a lot more glamorous, but the work ethic was surprisingly similar. That said, it wasn't until I left home at age 17 to study in Toronto, (two hours by airplane from Waverley), that I heard a Mahler Symphony for the first time. In fact I hadn't even *heard* of Mahler, or Bruckner or Boulez, or Ligeti. As far as I was concerned the music of all these composers was "new music" to my ears.

Today, almost 40 years after Miss MacEwen's first day of teaching, that same feeling of excitement and curiosity is still very present as I head to the Music Room, whether the Music Room is the KKL or the Berlin Philharmonie or the rehearsal rooms at Covent Garden's Royal Opera House.

There is something about people sharing a space, searching for a sound world we could find on our own, which gives music its power, which gives musicians the desire, and more honestly, the need to make music. And the power reverberates with everyone in the Music Room: both those playing and those who are listening. This is what makes the live music experience so exciting, risky, and moving: a situation where there is no chance to go back and correct something. We communally witness everything together, both the triumphs and the failures. The organization of the space, and the connections we make within it can be extreme or they can be very subtle.

Ten years ago, when I first worked with Pierre Boulez in Berlin, we were rehearsing Berg's *Sieben Fruhe Lieder* with members of the Berlin Philharmonic for a chamber concert. The instrumentalists were arranged in a semi-circle behind me and I was out in front of them, beside Boulez. I felt terribly uncomfortable – something wasn't right. I delicately asked him if I might be allowed to stand closer to my colleagues, to not feel separated from them. He turned to me with a twinkle in his eye (which I had the pleasure to see for quite a few years to come), and said, "Are you lonely?". And he moved me closer to the instrumentalists, it was perhaps only half a metre's difference, and I could sing again.

At age 17 I decided to pursue a career as a soprano. Without realizing it at the time, I chose one of the few possible careers in the world in which I'd have no male competition. Singing requires being centred. The voice, with its primal connection to our deepest emotions, must constantly be balanced and re-balanced, moving as a dynamic force. Just as our heartbeat and breath are never the same at any given moment of any given day, so the body and voice must constantly adjust in the ever-changing relationship between breath and sound. Alban Berg knew this. My favorite tempo marking of all time is in his opera *Lulu*, where he writes that the tempo of Lulu's Lied should be the same tempo as her heartbeat. Imagine what that means. In the performance, the character of Dr. Schön has just thrown Lulu a gun and ordered her to kill herself. They've been singing for over an hour. And at this point, the conductor must allow Lulu to set the tempo, according to the speed of her heartbeat at that moment. How does that happen? What kind of communication has to exist to allow Berg's wishes to take place? It is possible, and sometimes its really, really right. Lulu sings the aria. And then she shoots him. Not the conductor. I mean Dr. Schön, of course.

Singing *can* be a lonely and fragile choice of vocation. There is no barrier between the singer and the sound, in this strange art of cultivated screaming. The nervous system is laid bare, as if scraped onto a microscope slide and displayed on a big screen. But beyond the sound, there are the characters to inhabit and love. My beloved heroines include Lulu and most recently,

Mélisande, who I've been singing all summer at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. They are two very different so-called prima donnas. Lulu, full of self-knowledge and instinct, and Mélisande almost willful in her uncertainty and naivete. Empathy is of absolute necessity in conjuring these women to life: an exhilarating, addictive and exhausting process. And from this isolated preparation, weeks and months alone in the practise studio with the score, one moves into one of the most grand collaborative processes possible: the production of an opera. Six weeks in a rehearsal space with the director and her team and the music staff, eventually moving onstage with soloists and chorus, an orchestra and conductor in the pit, and all the backstage technical crew keeping the sets and light cues coordinated down to the second. It's an amazing sensation when a performance is successful and we can all feel the flow of electricity between us. But also when things go wrong, the failure pulls us even closer together.

My early repertoire choices were based on two strong feelings: fear and passion. I was intimidated by "tradition". I often felt very nervous singing the standard repertoire as a young singer and the resulting performance anxiety negatively affected not only my performance, but my general well-being and happiness. Walking offstage, I felt I'd betrayed the music by letting my performance be affected by my nerves. It was a mental obstacle for me. But in contemporary music, I had a very different feeling. I was passionate about the new music, and I felt confident in my musicianship and was willing to use my abilities to incorporate the difficult demands of the new scores. I loved working with composers and being the channel for their voice and the advocate for their music. It has something to do with *service*, directly related to my upbringing in Nova Scotia, fulfilling a necessary role in the community. But this love of working alongside living composers also had something to do with co-creation, and the joy of having the composer's creative force, in flesh and blood, in the Music Room.

As the years have passed, I have returned to the more traditional repertoire, though I remain dedicated to the music of our time. I owe this change of mindset, this newfound courage, to the composers with whom I work. Never did Ligeti, Boulez, or anyone else ask me to approach a piece from the perspective of another performer's interpretation. They never said...oh do it the way so and so sang it. Not once did I hear, "Every soprano changes the rhythm here to make the high note longer, so please, follow their example!" No. The score, what the composer wrote on the page, is the blueprint. This experience with living composers gave me the confidence to go back to the older scores, and to find my way, through the music. Ligeti freed me, and gave me the strength to sing Lulu. As Maurizio Pollini said at reception here in Luzern a few years ago, contemporary music is essential to the development of our art. If we keep our programming focused mainly on the old repertoire, there will be very negative repercussions on the trajectory of music. There will

be a gap between what the audiences are used to hearing and what composers are producing now. Contemporary music used to be the "core business"! Mozart and Haydn had to churn out new works every week. Singers were clamoring for roles in the latest Donizetti opera. It didn't used to be the outsider's choice, and a musician of Pollini's level, who continues to devote his gifts to the music of today, is setting a very important example.

My voice teacher at the University of Toronto, Mary Morrison, would come to me after performances when I was young singer, with praise not for my high notes, or for a difficult phrase I finally managed to sing in one breath, but to say, "You took risks! I'm so proud of you!". I carried this mentality with me ever since. In taking risks, I was starting to feel at home. The summer of 2011 turned out to be the last collaboration I would have with Pierre Boulez. Standing beside him as he conducted *Pli selon pli*, witnessing every sound, every aspect of the piece during those intense days and weeks of preparation, was unforgettable. One day, I told Boulez what my teacher had so often said to me. On opening night here in Luzern, there was a beautiful bouquet of red roses lying in my dressing room, with a note attached. And in his very recognizable small and precise handwriting, were written Boulez' words: "Wishing you joy in tonight's **risk** of performing *Pli selon pli*."

Making music requires players to take on different roles at various times. One of the most important skills we are always working on is our listening. The challenge of maintaining constant awareness of our role within the balance of a piece is something we work on for our entire career. Since 2011, I have more and more often been moving half a metre to the left, to take on the role of conductor. This new position, facing the orchestra instead of having my back to them, feels as if the circle is complete. It is an ongoing exploration, one that can outlast my expiry date as a singer, and allow me to be a part of the musical community well into my old age.

What word or phrase can define the feeling of walking into the Music Room, knowing our "happy fate" is to be with 100 people who are all intensely listening to one another, making music together? I like the word Equilibrium, because it means: the condition of a system in which all competing forces are balanced. The competing forces, or elements of the system are not necessarily *equal*, but they are balanced and full of dynamic tension. We cannot achieve harmony without keeping our balancing act in constant motion. Any great performance is a sacred equilibrium achieved between all the characters involved: singers, instrumentalists, conductor, composer, text, audience. There is a dynamic flow within that state of equilibrium, which is rare and breathtaking. To go back to the memory of Boulez and the prima donna, during our tour of *Pli selon pli*, I'd like to recall one other moment from that collaboration. At the end of the piece, there is a duet between the soprano and

the french horn. We've all been playing for almost an hour, and our duet is a moment of virtuoso writing for both instruments. It is ecstatic and dangerous. During the rehearsals, we went back and forth in a dialogue with Boulez, as to whether he should conduct us, or whether we should lead each other, according to our breath and stamina at that point of the piece, without him cueing us. The production of the singing voice and the sound of the french horn are very similar, and we were close to living the phrase as one person, despite being far apart onstage. Boulez preferred that we take the responsibility upon ourselves, and with his blessing, we found our equilibrium, every night, and Boulez stood between us as the silent, unmoving, and balancing force.