

Reviews for Gerald Barry's solo opera, *La Plus Forte*

"Barbara Hannigan is mesmerising as the garrulous Madame, who saps her own strength by talking and talking and talking, incriminating her damaged self through every one of her transparently spiteful sentences. It's a part that could be pitched in so many different ways. Hannigan delivers it without coarseness or caricature, pitching it on the level. The grip of an absorbing reality, of an overheard top-of-the-bus encounter, is at the heart of Hannigan's appeal. Psychology, pure, still, stationary, is all there is here. And it makes for a thrilling theatrical experience."

Barbican, London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Ades
The Arts Desk, London, June 7, 2010

"*La Plus Forte* sets a French translation of Strindberg's tiny play *The Stranger*, in which Madame X finds Mademoiselle Y sitting alone in a cafe on Christmas Eve. Though the younger woman says nothing, Madame X continues her small talk about domestic matters, until it dawns on her that her companion has had an affair with her husband. After confronting her rival, though, she comforts herself with the fact that she will be going back to a home and a husband, while Mademoiselle Y will be spending Christmas alone. Barry turns what is effectively a monologue into a remarkable vehicle for the soprano Barbara Hannigan, who rattles off the machine-gun word setting with aplomb. It's unaccompanied to begin with, then the orchestra enters with the familiar Barry repertoire of brassy riffs, rampaging toccatas and a rocking lullaby-style tune. It adds up to brilliantly effective scenes, by turns frivolously witty and psychologically penetrating."

Barbican, London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Ades
The Guardian, 9 June 2010

"Then again, perhaps it was the contrast with the sharp-edged innocence of Barry's *La Plus Forte* that made it seem so. Soprano Barbara Hannigan was a marvel as a neurotic and primly elegant actress who encounters a rival in a café, and subjects her to a 20-minute monologue of feigned concern, anxiety, and (finally) outrage when she realises this hussy has seduced her husband. This rival is never seen or heard, but her hateful presence could be sensed in every twitch of Hannigan's marble-white shoulders and in her amazing rendition of Barry's cruelly difficult lines, icily controlled but on the edge of hysteria. It was hilarious and deeply poignant."

Barbican, London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Ades
The Telegraph, June 7, 2010

"No blank exterior was possible during *La Plus Forte*, a pocket opera by the Irish maverick Gerald Barry, based on a French translation of Strindberg's short psychodrama *The Stronger*. The remarkable soprano Barbara Hannigan took the sole sung role, babbling in step with Barry's equally chuntering score as the neurotic wife who senses that her silent café companion has probably enjoyed an affair with her husband. Hannigan's vocal onslaught was remarkable, though it wouldn't have struck home so forcibly without Barry's playful gift for dramatic portraiture. An excellent night."

Barbican, London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Ades
The Times, London, June 8, 2010

"The other soloist of the evening, however, the soprano Barbara Hannigan clearly stole the show in the UK première of Gerald Barry's *La Plus Forte*. Written for Barbara Hannigan after her performance in Barry's 2005 ENO commission *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, this one-act opera is a French translation of the Strindberg short play *The Stronger*. Its brief twenty-minute duration belies the intensity of the dark and devastating psychodrama that unfolds in a chance meeting of Madame X and Mademoiselle Y on Christmas Eve. Actresses that had competed for the same role, Madame X, the only spoken role of the work, comes to the realisation Mme Y may also have had an affair with her husband.

From the opening a cappella phrases, Hannigan inhabited the character of Madame X with breathtaking passion, reaching out and gripping the audience, taking them with her on an agitated emotional journey, that threatens to, but doesn't quite become unbalanced. Barry's considered scoring cleverly intensifies the drama; often the voice is alone, or the orchestra is used as a chamber ensemble, subtly needling and disquieting the character. Adding to the awkwardness of the scene, the vocal lines soared and plummeted with a range to rival that of the Queen of the Night's 'Der Hölle Rache' and were stunningly executed by Hannigan."

Barbican, London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Thomas Ades
Musical Criticism, June 8, 2010