

Programme Notes

By John Zorn and Barbara Hannigan

JUMALATTARET

Using pieces of texts from the epic Finnish tale the Kalevala, *Jumalattaret* (2012) is a song cycle in praise of nine Finnish Goddesses out of Sami Shamanism: Päivätär, goddess of summer—Vedenemo, the mother of waters—Akka, goddess of the underworld—Louhi, a powerful witch and shapeshifter—Mielikki, the goddess of the hunt—Kuu, the moon goddess—Tellervo, goddess of forests—Ilmatar the virgin spirit of air—Vellamo, the goddess of water. The music uses a variety of musical techniques and genres, and moves from lyrical folk-like simplicity to more complex atonal and textural pyrotechnics.

John Zorn:

Barbara Hannigan was in New York City performing George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* at Lincoln Center in the summer of 2015. We met for the very first time, introduced by mutual friends, for a memorable lunch at the Thai restaurant Som Tum Der on Avenue A. We stayed for hours talking candidly about music, life, collaboration, improvisation, the classical world, conductors, and so much more. It was deeply inspiring—and we began to imagine a path forward. Remembering *Jumalattaret*, I sent her the score and proposed it as our first adventure together.

Barbara Hannigan:

Meeting John back in 2015 was a turning point in my life as a creative person. The connection between us as musicians was immediate and magnetic. I began working on *Jumalattaret* in 2016/17, but realized quite quickly, that I'd met my "Waterloo" in its virtuosic demands.

I was not sure I would manage it, even though I had tackled many "impossible" pieces before. Finally, I mustered the courage to write to John with my concerns. I was hoping he might make a few corners of it a little more "possible" for me to manage.

We exchanged several emails, and John was incredibly deep in his response to the vulnerabilities I was sharing with him. I'd never experienced anything like this kind of support with a composer. He was not offended. He was really with me in the struggle.

John wrote the following to me:

one cannot transcend anything by staying on safe ground

and it is in these intense moments that we can find deeper truths, bring mind and heart together - and begin to understand the soul and its workings

in that courageous moment of letting go and going for it, the music will become alive in a special and heroic way - a way that is beyond just the notes on paper

John:

The long journey toward Barbara's mastery of the piece is beautifully told in Mathieu Amalric's insightful documentary *Zorn III*, which is focused on our back-and-forth communications, and the long process of Barbara learning, struggling, rehearsing, and performing *Jumalattaret*.

Barbara:

Because of John's belief in me, I felt overcome with a new energy and summoned all my strength to throw myself into the music until I was completely immersed

in it, and it became a part of me. I have performed it many times now at festivals celebrating John Zorn's music and wanted to put it into a new performance context, programming it together with Messiaen's song cycle *Chant de terre et de ciel*. Both works are deeply spiritual, mysterious, tender and ecstatic. While the Messiaen cycle has a more male dominated focus, (the God of the Catholic faith) the Zorn is inspired by female power, as are many of John's compositions.

John has gone on to write another 5 works for my voice, with various combinations of instruments and not a season goes by that I am not singing his music, somewhere. He has become a very dear friend and inspiring mentor.



Barbara Hannigan and John Zorn in Zorn III (2018-2022) by Mathieu Amalric