

# Barbara Harbach: An American Voice

BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

In an interview for *Missouri Life*, **Barbara Harbach** confided that she was “one of the fortunate (or unfortunate) people who knew what I wanted to do since I was five years old—I wanted to be a musician, in particular, a concert pianist.” How could this be an unfortunate aspiration? “I guess because I was just laser focused onto being a musician and concert pianist. As I evolved through my early career, other keyboards began to fascinate me, and I enjoyed them very much. And then all of a sudden all I wanted to do was play in Carnegie Hall; at that time I was majoring in organ. I was pretty naive; Carnegie Hall didn’t have an organ then. So, that dashed that hope for a little while. [Laughs.] But overall, it’s been a wonderful ride. It’s been a lot of fun; I never thought my career would be where it is today.”

A composer, organist, and harpsichordist, Barbara no longer performs or records on the piano. What happened to redirect that “laser focus?” “I love the piano, I love hearing piano music, and I play it a lot in my various jobs. But I just felt a bigger and better affinity for an organ. Also, it’s loud. [Laughs.] I played Strauss’s *Also Sprach* —that was a thrill. I did it in Woolsey Hall at Yale University. And I’ll tell you, that organ—there’s nothing like drowning out an orchestra!”

The organ and the harpsichord are both keyboards, but in a sense they’re distant cousins. Still, Baroque composers like Bach and Handel were virtuosos on both. “Yes. And while it’s true that the respective techniques differ, they share one thing: no matter how hard you pound on those keys, it doesn’t get any louder.” Laughing, she adds, “of course you don’t really pound, I’m just speaking metaphorically.”

One of the fascinating things about organists is that they’ve preserved the art of improvising fugues, toccatas, and other pieces “whole.” Does she ever try her hand at it? (The notes to “Toccatas, Flourishes and Fugues,” MSR 1254, refer to the third part of *Land of Rest* as a free improvisation on *Amazing Grace*.) “I do a little bit, not in the same scope as Marie-Claire Alain, or somebody who at the end of a concert can make up an entire piece out of four notes. With *Land of Rest*, as I was thinking about it, ideas arose as my fingers were moving over the keys, so in some ways it was an improvisation that became a piece. And then I combined the two themes

(the original hymn tune and *Amazing Grace* ). I like doing that, but I don't really improvise in public. I may have a little Bach in my name, but it's not *the* Bach." [Laughs.]

Barbara is primarily self-taught as a composer, although she did have some lessons with Samuel Adler. She's been playing for church services since she was nine, and has held positions as music director for religious institutions of all denominations, so many of her early works were written with a practical purpose in mind. "I think you start with what you know the best, so I wrote for choirs and organ and slowly started expanding. I did small ensembles, then a string orchestra piece, until finally I felt comfortable enough to tackle a full orchestra. Of course, I still keep the Kennan book, *The Technique of Orchestration* , right by my side. [Laughs.] And now the technology is incredible, you can do a range check with Finale." (Finale is a type of notation software often used by composers and arrangers.) Does she use Finale in other ways? "It depends on what I'm writing. I guess over the years we all get a way that we do our hieroglyphics. I usually do a melodic sketch on the piano with one-note harmony, and if I hear the countermelodies, maybe a little bit of that. And then, I just go to the computer and do it.

"I lived many years in small rural areas like Pullman, Washington, and Oshkosh and Stevens Point in Wisconsin, and continued to write music, knowing that there would be few performances, if any. I have been very fortunate in St. Louis with the many excellent musicians, and have found that there is a place for my music, and that audiences enjoy listening to it."

Speaking of technology, Barbara has done her bit to bridge the gap between science and art. "I was an associate professor in the Department of Mathematics and Computing at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. But what I was emphasizing was how to create art with the technology. I would teach the students how to make a video, or how to underlay a score, a little bit about film. We'd have certain assignments, for example, how to make an electronic holiday card. It was kind of a catchall, because I was teaching computer majors who basically never left their computers, trying to get a little of the arts into them."

Barbara has often found herself promoting culture in one form or another, and once hosted a TV program for a few years. "It was called *Palouse Performance* , and it was when I was professor of music out at Washington State University, over in Pullman near the Idaho border. The

time was right, and it was really a musical variety show. We'd do a lot from all over that part of southeastern and even up into central Washington. People would come and we'd tape them. We'd have a good time. These were local performers; we had bluegrass, jazz, and pop. One of the singers was so great—she wrote a song called *I'm gonna fax my baby some love*. I performed, as well. For one program, we went out of the studio so that I could give an organ concert, and I took three keyboards with me: my clavichord, my harpsichord, and my pump organ.”

That would have been something to see, especially for the clavichord, which is so rarely played in public (or anywhere else, for that matter). Conventional halls are just too large for its tender voice. “It's very intimate, believe me. I once gave a concert where a thunderstorm came up. I had to stop because you couldn't hear me! But I'm not a purist, because I've been known to amplify. Even with the harpsichord, it's so hard for strings these days to play softly enough, so I'm all for a little gentle enhancement.”

Barbara is very involved in educating the public about women's contributions to music. She founded Vivace Press after a publisher's plans for manuscripts she had unearthed didn't mesh with her own vision. She was excited about her finds, and wanted to have everything printed complete, but was told that only separate movements would appear and would have to be edited in a way that ran contrary to her ideals. Also, the publisher brought out an edition printed in pink, with a picture of a demure young woman seated at a piano on the cover. Today, Barbara is no longer offended by such stereotyping, but at the time it convinced her to go her own way. “It was the 1980s; we [feminists] were struggling away. [Laughing.] I'm probably a bit more mellow about it now. But back then, just to have to edit this early music. You know, we edit Bach, but we really don't, we use the *Urtext* if we're really into it. So, that was kind of my thinking, leave the music the way the composer intended it.

“By the way, **Fanfare** readers might like to know that we also made our own CDs under the Hester Park label. The label takes its name from Maria Hester Park, an 18th-century London composer and one of my first reclaimed historical women composers. We put out seven at one point. One of them that I really liked was called “Classical Prodigies.” It focused on Mozart and a little girl by the name of Elizabeth Billington. They were about the same age and they wrote music around the same time. So half was Mozart and half was the little girl. She was very good and went on to become England's supreme diva. She reputedly had a beautiful voice and

a great sense of ornamentation, but as soon as she started concentrating on singing the creativity lapsed. Just a quick aside: she was very, very interesting. She was married to her teacher, and when he passed away, she married an Italian (she was English, from London). They separated—they had this kind of tumultuous back and forth affair—but he wanted to reconcile, so he took her to Italy and murdered her. It's an opera waiting to happen. Really, what a wonderful story it could be with a high, great singer. [Barbara has written an opera and several musicals: more about them anon.] Anyway, I recorded her op. 1, written at the age of eight. Her second, her mature works, date from when she was 11. That was delightful. And the Mozart, of course was wonderful. But he had the extra-added dimension of Leopold correcting it. When the Billington family found out that I had published and recorded her music, they were thrilled. They actually called me and wanted to see the scores and hear the music.”

Vivace Press also published a quarterly, *Women of Note* . Was this perhaps available online so that readers could sample the contents? “No, it's not. We're just reviving it. Vivace Press has been taken under the wing of the University of Missouri as part of the Women in the Arts program I initiated. Women in the Arts is a natural outgrowth to all my passion of rediscovering, bringing to light neglected women composers. I've done a fair amount of men composers, too, who have written wonderful music and who sadly get tossed by the wayside and maybe not even looked at. And I so enjoy bringing that to the public and I let the public choose. Let the public decide the music's merits and where it stacks up in the musical canon. I mean, there are some really sharp people in the listening audiences.

“And so, I had my Vivace Press and my *Women of Note Quarterly* , and then in the year 2005, I was in Saint Louis and I decided that I would like to do a Women in the Arts 2005, and see if we could get together a few concerts, exhibitions, film screenings, all those kind of wonderful things, sculptures, paintings. I was hoping I could get 100 events throughout the Saint Louis region. I got over 850, and I couldn't even go to them all. The time was right for celebrating women creators. So that seemed to have been a good thing. And then Women in the Arts at the University took off and I became the director. And so, it's going gorgeously!”

With seven CDs of her own coming out on MSR, Barbara has written enough to host her own mini-festival, but she only recently added an opera to the list. “I based it on Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* I'm drawn to strong

women, and Willa Cather writes very strong women. *O Pioneers!* is this wonderful story of a woman who inherits the land; she makes it prosperous, the best farm in the Nebraska region, much to her brothers' chagrin, who are always kind of biting on her. And yet she never found love. In mid-life, she found that she thought that friends make the best lovers. And the other side of the story is illicit love, where a young Bohemian woman married the wrong man but fell in love with the strong woman's brother. And so, our illicit lovers meet for the very last time, they're parting, they're saying goodbye, and her husband finds them and shoots them both. Writing an opera is very complex, but luckily I have a great artistic director and conductor who put it together. I don't think I could do it. I'm not the impresario type."

Before embarking on an opera, Barbara had written five musicals, each with more than 20 songs. Any favorites? "I'm very fond of *A Mate for Kate*, *Tom and Sally* (based on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings), and *Booth!* *A Mate for Kate* is Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, so that was fun. And *Booth!* is based on the famous family of actors, the Booth family. It won a competition and then it had a short run on Broadway—off-off-off-Broadway, actually. The lyricist was very good, he's funny, the words worked well. I often find that even a few words can be so evocative. Sometimes, I have a melody in mind while I'm walking to the piano to start work, and at other times, the melody is there after looking at the words. Anyway, the musical focuses on Edwin Booth, who is the older brother, the most famous Shakespearean actor of his day. And it includes John Wilkes: of course, you have to touch base with him. John Wilkes was the most handsome man in America. He was a real lady's man. *Booth!* told the story of what happens to a family when one of its members does something heinous. Asia, Edwin and John's sister, was almost hanged by an incensed mob, even though she was innocent of any wrongdoing, but when they discovered she was pregnant they let her live. And when Edwin Booth could finally go back on stage, there were several assassination attempts while he was acting. It's a fascinating story."

Never one to pass up a dramatic opportunity, Barbara has written an orchestral score that was performed live as an accompaniment to a silent film. Today we picture a lone pianist or organist improvising the music on such occasions, but the reality is that complex arrangements for pit bands or even full orchestras were quite common. "That was a really strange film [*Simon Judit*]. It was a Hungarian Jewish film from 1916 about a young woman who falls in love. She is of the working lower class—her father is a

tinker, selling things, always going and coming—and she falls in love with the son of the estate. She becomes pregnant and somehow has the baby without anyone finding out. She takes the baby and goes down to the rushing water—today the depiction would probably be more graphic—but you see her come back without the baby. She cuts off all her hair, which is a terrible thing for a Jewish woman to do, and goes to see her Rabbi, who puts a curse on her—that she may never kiss any of her children to come. And so it goes on from there; it's a real melodrama. She's eventually cast out by her husband and becomes a beggar, but not before she's borne a daughter. On the day of the daughter's wedding, the mother appears—the daughter recognizes her from a painting that hung in the family parlor—kisses her and falls dead; it was based on a ballad by Joseph Kiss, who was a Hungarian poet. Writing for film was fun, but was also really nerve wracking. You time it out just so, and it's put on CD. But then they bring in the film, and it stretches, the timings aren't quite the same, so sometimes it's a little faster and the conductor has to be very alert to keep everything synchronized.”

Barbara's interest in strong women found another fortuitous opportunity for expression when she was commissioned by the Equinox Chamber Players to write a piece with a Saint Louis theme. She obliged by writing music inspired by four Saint Louis literary natives (*Freeing the Caged Bird*, for woodwind quintet—see review below): Maya Angelou, Sara Teasdale, Emily Hahn, and Kate Chopin. Of the four, Emily Hahn led perhaps the most exotic life. “She must have been an amazing woman. She smoked opium, she was the concubine of a Chinese poet, and spent many years writing for the *New Yorker*—what a woman! I met her daughter in 2005. I had her come in for our Women in the Arts festival. Sara Teasdale was fascinating in another way. She was a poet; her poems are very dark, which I think expresses her feelings in life. Sadly, she committed suicide in 1933 (one of Teasdale's poems is printed in the booklet notes for “Chamber Music II,” MSR 1255). Kate Chopin—Chopin was her real name, by the way—became famous for writing *The Awakening*. This was a book that just stood the literary world on its ear because it was a coming of age of sexuality in a woman. And that was *not* something one talked about at the end of the Victorian period. She wrote a delightful polka for her daughter, which I've arranged for woodwind quintet. Although she wasn't a musician, coming from the upper middle class as she did she would have studied piano, painting, embroidery, and all the other little accoutrements that went into the making of a nice young woman. The quintet's title,

*Freeing the Caged Bird*, was a response to Maya Angelou's autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In addition to acquiring fame as the first African-American woman to have her screenplay adapted to film and to being the first black female director in Hollywood, she was also the first female cable-car conductor. She overcame an abused childhood to speak five languages, win a Pulitzer Prize, and march alongside Martin Luther King and Malcolm X—a marvelous story that I've tried to interpret in music.”

Barbara is a prolific composer with a varied list of works in her portfolio. Is there any genre she prefers? “I keep coming back to organ music, writing organ pieces because they cleanse my palette between projects. Playing the organ in church has the same effect, as it's a different environment from the academic world. It's serene. It's peaceful. And I like playing traditional organ music. But getting back to composition, I like to write for different ensembles. Small chamber ensemble is one of my favorites; string orchestra is also, and of course, orchestra. And I love voice. I guess I like to write for all of them, to stretch myself and do things I haven't done.”