

Deconstructing the Diva: in praise of trailblazers, killjoys and hags

While most of the classical music industry is engaged in a drive to bring in more women, in one strange corner women rule the roost: the diva, the *prima donna*, outnumbers and overshadows her male counterparts. Even today, the vast majority of contemporary classical singers are women — are sopranos, in fact. I am one of them. Singing new music has been my career now for twenty years. I write essays such as this in order to process my experiences: I spent a few years needling away at the topic of collaboration and now seem to be engaged in a series of essays that explore archetypes. The goal is always to try and make things better for the younger artists joining the scene. In my work with emerging-generation singers, specifically through VOICEBOX, a programme that I have set up for singers wanting to specialise in contemporary vocal performance, it feels urgent to help them identify and then neutralise the outmoded assumptions that form barriers to their success. I also run eavesdropping, a charity for experimental music that is trying to approach artist development through the lens of intersectional feminism¹; in that role I am endlessly questioning how we can do things better in this industry. This paper, then, is an opportunity for me to ask: What have we inherited? What are we building? What do we want our legacy to be?

An archetype is an original pattern, a ‘pure form’ (according to Plato), a universal, inherited idea found in the collective unconscious (according to Jung). The internet overflows with quizzes about feminine archetypes which attempt a feminist spin whilst perpetuating a largely very white, heteronormative, Hollywood-centric model of womanhood. Neither mother nor maiden, rarely a lover and not yet a queen, I seem to be backsliding my way between or beyond society’s expectations of what a woman should be. It turns out there is considerable freedom and fun to be found in this hinterland. We can’t escape archetypes altogether, but we can dismantle some of the problematic ones and embrace some more empowering alternatives.

My first target has been the muse. As I argued recently in a paper entitled ‘I AM NOT A MUSE’, this archetype does not serve us well as performers; furthermore, if we’re serious about dismantling the myth of the genius composer, then we have to be ready to kill the muse. The diva, too, needs deconstructing: does such an archetype empower us today? As a singer I have been called a muse and a diva, and neither felt particularly complimentary; I am writing, therefore, from an unapologetically personal starting point, joining a long line of feminist writers who have turned a niggling discomfort into fiery words of retribution. My hope is to contribute to a collective examination of the ways in which cultural archetypes and private role models might be put to good use in the march towards a diverse, inclusive and flourishing classical music industry.

Before I get to work deconstructing the diva, I’d like to share with you an excerpt from the contract that soprano Giuditta Pasta signed with King’s Theatre in London in 1826:

In all the operas in which Madame Pasta will perform, she alone will have the choice of the actors and the distribution of the roles, the absolute direction for all

¹ Defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as ‘a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other’: <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>. Accessed 2 September 2023.

that regards the rehearsals and all that concerns the *mise en scene* of the said operas. No one will have the right to intervene in rehearsals, nor to meddle in anything concerning the performance of those operas.²

This is my kind of diva! She has agency, she has power! But doesn't she sound just a little bit *tyrannical*? One wonders how the other singers or the stage hands got on in this working environment... And so we immediately confront the fact that one person's power can mean another's persecution; where agency allows for equity, power is much more about control. Whilst we associate the positive attributes of a diva with a high-flying, glamorous woman, the flip side is, in my experience, much more commonly enacted by powerful men: slapping and punching a singer because they entered, or exited, from the wrong side of the stage³, for example. A misbehaving *prima donna* or a bully of a conductor are both engaged in an abuse of power, and an industry that repeatedly turns a blind eye to this desperately needs reform.

What is a diva? The word (which means 'goddess' in Latin) has been used to describe a celebrated female opera singer since opera became a thing. Today, according to various dictionaries, the word can be applied to a famous singer of opera or popular music. Interestingly, usage has rocketed since the 1980s⁴ — my guess is that this is less to do with Jessye Norman and Anna Netrebko, and much, much more to do with Madonna, Mariah Carey, Lady Gaga and Beyoncé. Google's English dictionary offers a second definition: 'a self-important person who is temperamental and difficult to please (typically used of a woman)'. Hmm. Thank goodness for the Urban Dictionary, which describes a diva as 'a fierce, often temperamental singer who comes correct. She is not a trick ass hoe, and she does not sweat da haters'⁵. All divas — even AI divas, it seems⁶ — are still trapped under the patriarchy: opera divas are destroyed on stage according to the plot; pop divas are often destroyed by the plot of their own lives.

So how does the diva archetype play out in the land of contemporary classical music? When it comes to contemporary vocal repertoire, it's fun to imagine an alternative history that, rather than listing works and their composers, focuses on the trailblazers that breathed life into the dry ink. In this way, the twentieth century can be charted in the careers of five singers: Marie Gutheil-Schoder, Bethany Beardslee, Cathy Berberian, Jane Manning and Joan La Barbara. It's not just the voices of these artists that are special; they are all justly celebrated for their life-long advocacy for new music. And rarely is that a smooth or easy journey — tackling the demands of the latest new score can be terrifying, dwelling constantly in uncharted territory is often lonely, battling against conservatism is exhausting. So I pay tribute to them here, by acknowledging their role in the creation of a repertoire that has changed the course of music history and inspired so many subsequent singers, myself included. They are all women, though (and, tellingly, all five of them were married to composers). It's simply not possible to

² Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera: 1815-1930* (Cambridge, 2006), 111.

³ Norman Lebrecht, 'Exclusive: Sir John Eliot Gardiner quits Trojans after singer incident', 23 August 2023, <https://slippedisc.com/2023/08/exclusive-sir-john-eliot-gardiner-quits-trojans-after-singer-incident/>. Accessed 2 September 2023.

⁴ https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=7&case_insensitive=on&content=diva. Accessed 31 August 2023.

⁵ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Diva>. Accessed 31 August 2023.

⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Yi_KxMxvVg. Accessed 3 September 2023, courtesy of Elaine Mitchener.

construct a comparable chronical of male singers, or even just other voice types, doing new music. There are outliers, such as Omar Ebrahim, Nicholas Isherwood or Andrew Watts, but the field is unequivocally dominated by sopranos. What does it mean for young singers that the repertoire is so specific and the role models so analogous?

If we are looking for healthy role models, I think we have to abandon the diva. Where a diva's reputation is founded on a cult of the personality, a trailblazer forges a brave and distinctive path that in some way opens up avenues for those that follow. Cathy Berberian was perhaps the best sort of diva: she qualifies because she did perform opera, and she had enormous talent, extrovert flair, celebrity and, it seems, a great sense of fun; she certainly also blazed a trail for new music. Joan La Barbara fascinates me because she seems to represent the 'anti-diva' — obsessed more with sound than spectacle and always with her hands dirty in the mess of making. Today we need trailblazers who model courage in the form of experimentation, who demonstrate creative agency and personal empowerment, and who contribute to the diversity of our community. It's no longer enough just to be a wonderful singer; there are so many reckonings quite rightly underway.

Classical music exists within a constant tension between those who love it for its tradition, and find within that tradition some respite from the politics of our times, and those who believe it must engage with and adapt to precisely these politics. New music today has its challenges, not least the relentless concern about audience numbers, but in some ways it is more fleet-of-foot and more relevant than a great deal of mainstream classical music. We are a community of outsiders, many of whom have lost a battle to fit in within existing structures; our music emerges from disparate -isms and straddles seemingly disparate tribes. The danger of being an outsider is a sense of isolation: many of the young artists I encounter are desperate for points of contact, for events and gatherings, for ways to find their community. In this context, trailblazers become crucial role models: as the journalist and author Mona Chollet says, 'We must not underestimate our need for examples — whether shared by the majority or drawn from a counterculture — that support us, even if only subconsciously, that provide meaning, impetus, resonance and depth to our life choices.'⁷

When looking to other singers for inspiration, I have often come away with a sense of what I do *not* want to be. Rather, I have drawn strength from Elsa Schiaparelli, who taught me about joyful rebellion, H el ene Cixous, who told me to write, and Rachel Carson, who modelled a personal, poetic politics. I recently surveyed a few singer friends and colleagues, of various ages, about their role models. The answers were fascinating: some of the old divas still cast a spell (notably Cathy Berberian and Kathleen Ferrier) but many of the respondents intuitively sense that they don't quite fit an existing mould, so they either construct composite 'icons' of several individuals (about whom they may even have complex feelings) or turn to trailblazers from other disciplines. Examples include jazz vocalist/poet/composer Jeanne Lee, experimental vocalist Carmina Escobar, countertenor Klaus Nomi and transgender vocalist Lucia Lucas, alongside writer Audre Lorde, choreographer Pina Bausch and sprinter Shelley-Ann Fraser-Pryce.

⁷ Mona Chollet, *In Defence of Witches: Why women are still on trial* (Picador, 2022), p. 49.

It's no surprise that those from any minority group may feel a need to look further afield for inspiration: one young singer explained that, for them, this is because of 'a lack of people [they] can relate to in classical music'⁸ and that, in the absence of meaningful role models, they looked for 'allies'. I perceive in this language a powerful desire to stand shoulder to shoulder with other artists, sometimes across centuries as well as disciplines, to march *beside* rather than follow behind. For solidarity is horizontal. As Sara Ahmed writes in *Living a feminist life* about her 'flooding experience' of discovering feminist literature: 'I will always remember that feeling; a sense that there are others like you out there, that you are not on your own, that you were not on your own.'⁹

It was Sara Ahmed who introduced me to the killjoy, whom I now present to you as an alternative archetype. In the introduction to *A Killjoy Manifesto*, Ahmed writes: 'Feminist principles are articulated in unfeminist worlds. Living a life with feminist principles is thus not living smoothly; we bump into the world that does not live in accordance with the principles we try to live'¹⁰. She then lays out her manifesto in ten principles — ten principles to cling to, to fight with, to live by, for, as she says, 'Feminism is praxis'¹¹. Of these ten principles, I will share two with you. First, **PRINCIPLE 2: I AM WILLING TO CAUSE UNHAPPINESS**. Or, to put it another way, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. The question is: which eggs, and how many, am I prepared to break? Then, **PRINCIPLE 6: I AM NOT WILLING TO BE INCLUDED IF INCLUSION MEANS BEING INCLUDED IN A SYSTEM THAT IS UNJUST, VIOLENT, AND UNEQUAL**.

An effective killjoy, I believe, is strong, defiant and driven as much by love as by rage, for there is much to be angry about but it is surely a love for a community, an industry, a society or an idea that drives the passion for change. If we have Sara Ahmed on one side of the scales of justice, perhaps we put bell hooks on the other, the great champion of an ethics of love which she defines as 'showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate'¹². We also need to be very clear what we are fighting for. Marianna Ritchey expresses this well in her book, *Composing Capital*: she writes, 'we need to think critically about our goals, our values, the rhetoric we repeat, and the survival techniques we practice, as well as how we work to justify those practices to ourselves.'¹³

Being a killjoy is not fun but it is necessary. Attitudes that appal us today have been learned, and therefore have been modelled, and they are rarely sequestered only to one area of bigotry, such as race *or* gender *or* sexuality *or*, particularly in the UK, class. And this is where intersectional feminism really matters, for there cannot be liberation for some without equality for all. Unfortunately, classical music finds itself in a double bind in this regard because an alarming chunk of its regular audience consists of boomers who, for reasons of familiarity, comfort or bigotry, have no interest in the industry updating itself. So, as I seek to help the next generation find their place in an industry

⁸ Anonymous, WhatsApp correspondence with author, 25 August 2023.

⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Living a feminist life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 256

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 255

¹² bell hooks, *All about love: new visions* (Harper Collins, 2000), p. 101

¹³ Marianna Ritchey, *Composing Capital: Classical Music in the Neoliberal Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. xx.

which has yet to have its own #metoo reckoning, I am adamant that, yes, we do need feminism. This is women's work in music.

It's tempting to stop there. (The killjoy tends to have the final word!) But I promised you hags. Unlike the witch, the hag is pleasingly ordinary. She might be seen in the village shop or even in the mirror, some days. Technically, she may or may not be a witch; she must be barren; she should be old and ugly. She seems to me, then, a ripe foil to the diva: where one is celebrated, the other is ignored; where one is voluptuous, the other is shrivelled; where one courts attention, the other decries it. In a society obsessed by youth, archetypes of the older woman provide some much-needed counterpoint. In her book *Hagitude*, Sharon Blackie exhorts us as beautiful, mythical old women 'to become influencers and transformers'¹⁴. The hag is powerful *because* she is old: age buys us time, to find our power, to understand our creative desires.

Look to the edges and you'll find trailblazers, killjoys and hags aplenty, living archetypes that give us permission to jettison cultural expectations and tap into our intuitive desires. There are singular and wonderful people out there making transformational work — singers such as Meredith Monk, Jennifer Walshe, Audrey Chen, Elaine Mitchener, Neo Hülcker, Sofia Jernberg, to name but a few. (I know we need more men on that list, and I'm working on addressing the structural issues but, at the risk of undermining my whole message, I can also testify that most of the male singers I know are lazy bastards, who prefer to moan about how there is no repertoire for them than to get up off their backsides and commission it.) Anyway, back to the trailblazers. These artists are re-writing the rules; each of them is creating and collaborating in a way that blurs entirely the traditional categories of performer and composer. Their work is political and personal and, for that, powerful. Their voices defy categorisation: in each case a rigorous training is in service to something liberated and holistic. On a good day, I hear the winds of change.

Juliet Fraser, 2 September 2023

¹⁴ Sharon Blackie, *Hagitude: Reimagining the Second Half of Life* (September Publishing, 2022), p. 145.