

6 Qs RE: “ONE ART” an opera / cabaret

November 8, 2017 By Megan Ihnen

Thank you for joining me you fabulous [Femme Lunatique](#) and [The Mosaic Cat](#) artists! I am very excited about your upcoming production **One Art**. I wish that I could transport myself there on my Sybaritic Singer private jet to join you in all this Elizabeth Bishop goodness! One Art is Bishop’s poem transformed by opera composer **Paula M. Kimper** into art songs which, interwoven with Bishop’s letters and life story, create the framework for an intimate and moving performance by soprano **Laure Meloy**. It seems like this will be quite a personal and profound experience for audience members! So, let’s get into the questions...

One Art is described as an opera/cabaret. What are the unique qualities of creating a monodrama that functions in both an operatic and cabaret style?

Brigitte Baden-Rennie (BBR) – Cabaret and opera are all about storytelling; they also both require a mix of art forms. The original songs in One Art were written to be sung without accompaniment, so they really lend themselves to an intimate, cabaret-style setting. Telling the life story of Elizabeth Bishop grew naturally as a framing device for the songs. [The Mosaic Cat](#) is about re-introducing and re-educating audiences to what “cabaret” encompasses. In recent years it has become synonymous with just burlesque and drag, and even though these are legitimate cabaret art forms, many have forgotten that it’s still simply about conveying a story in a way that allows the performer and the audience to share the experience. To have a connection.

How did Elizabeth Bishop and her writing come to be your focus?

Laure Meloy (LM) – It was Bishop’s poem One Art that sparked the whole project. I had been looking for poetry for Paula to set, and stumbled across a ‘10 best poets’ list which featured Bishop, and a link to that poem, which is perhaps her best known. Like many

other fans of her work, I couldn't stop thinking about how many different levels of loss are touched on and how the philosophy she expresses works both as light humour and practical therapy. As M. Mark (professor of English at Vassar) says in her lecture about this poem, 'every time I read One Art, Elizabeth Bishop...opens up a space for me to confront my own losses, my own fears.'

Paula M. Kimper (PK) – As a composer I can say that for me the integration of the tone and style of the writer is a given, it IS the alchemy of blending words and music, for the two together to become one.

Laure, can you talk about how you fashioned your version of Bishop? What is her emotional and intellectual journey?

LM – Elizabeth Bishop left a relatively slim body of literary work, but an abundance of correspondence. For research, I used *One Art: Letters*, edited by Robert Giroux; her personal, private voice comes across very clearly. Real life being more complicated than drama, many people and incidents had to be left out, but once Brigitte and I agreed on the main arc of the story, the script seemed to write itself. Another source of inspiration was the film *Reaching for the Moon*, which focuses on Bishop's intense relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares. What I hope comes across is the contrast between her disastrous love life and crippling self-doubt, (which we see in her self-deprecating humour,) and the gentle, and hard earned, wisdom of her poetry.

What has the logistical process been like for a collaboration like this? Did you start with the idea and then pursue other logistics like funding, venue, and more?

LM – It started with a tiny germ of an idea: that I wanted to commission some songs from Paula. Once I took the plunge, the rest grew from that. When the first song was written, we staged a public reading to try to generate interest in the project, which at

that point consisted of finishing the group of songs, and recording them. Once we got that far, I contacted Brigitte to help me stage a CD launch party and premiere of the songs, which developed into the Opera/Cabaret idea. Funding has come from a combination of personal funds (the commission was paid for through an inheritance from my mother, to whom the CD is dedicated,) crowd funding, and Arts Council funding which Brigitte secured for the premiere in Canterbury.

What advice would you give to other singer and composer collaborations that are looking to create work of a similar nature?

LM – If you have an itch to make a piece of new work, get on and start it. It may not turn out how you originally envisioned it, but stay flexible and you might find that the final product is even better. It was serendipity that I approached Brigitte about using her venue for my CD launch, but then again, I was open to collaboration and told everyone who would listen about this interesting poet and these amazing songs; not just other musicians or producers, but visual artists, writers, entrepreneurs, etc. Keep an open mind.

PK – In my experience it is very rare for a singer to commission new works from a composer. My advice? Be brave, follow your heart, go ahead and do it!

Artist Bios

Soprano **Laure Meloy** has been praised on both sides of the Atlantic for her interpretations of both standard and contemporary opera roles: In 2011 she made her Royal Opera House, Covent Garden debut at Queen of Night, which she has also sung with English National Opera and Welsh National Opera, and in 2016 she made her Hungarian National Opera debut as Ariel in The Tempest. She is a keen proponent of contemporary classical music, and founded Femme Lunatique to create and promote new vocal art music. Ms Meloy appears courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera.

Paula M. Kimper's first opera, *Patience & Sarah*, premiered at Lincoln Center Festival '98. Other operas include *The Captivation of Eunice Williams* (2004, commissioned by the PVMA of Deerfield, MA,) *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (2007,) and *TRUTH*, about the life of Sojourner Truth (2012.) She has received commissions from The Phoenix Concerts, Amy Pivar Dances, Richard Daniels, Downtown Music Productions, The Walt Whitman Project, American Opera Projects, and Opera America.

Brigitte Baden-Rennie is a five star Cabaret performer with many years experience in the arts industry. Brigitte initially tested the idea of a cabaret festival in 2011 with a mini festival, "The Kent Cabaret Soiree", and then a second pilot festival in 2012, which received Arts Council England, Broadstairs and St Peters Council and Kent Council support. This was the start of her company, The Mosaic Cat, which commissions and creates new works and unique collaborations with performing artists of many genres.