Ragnheiður Ingunn Jóhannsdóttir

Soprano takes the baton!

Written reflection within degree project

The sounding part consists of the following video recordings:

- Be not afeard – Jóhann G. Jóhannsson
- Fasaskipti – Ingibjörg Ýr Skarphéðinsdóttir
- Djúpalón – María Huld Markan
- Zerbinetta’s aria – Richard Strauss
Abstract

The topic of this artistic research project is the musical performance method where a solo singer conducts an orchestra while singing. The aim is to shine a light on the effect this performance practice has on the quality of the performance; if it hampers the singer’s ability to interpret the lyrics and make theatrical gestures or if the musical performance can possibly benefit from having one person singing and conducting. The core of the project is a concert in Reykjavík organised by this author where she performed as solo soprano and conductor with a chamber orchestra. The research was made from her personal perspective, while the views of instrumentalists also played a significant role. The author observed the internationally renowned soprano and conductor Barbara Hannigan as she rehearsed and performed a concert with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (ISO) at the Reykjavík Arts Festival. For this project the writer enjoyed the cooperation of three composers whom she commissioned to write pieces especially for her to sing and conduct, and together with Zerbinetta's grand aria by Richard Strauss this music was premiered by her and a chamber orchestra at her concert in Eldborg, Harpa at the Reykjavík Opera Days on November 5th, 2022.

Keywords

Singing, Conducting, Conducting Soprano, Chamber Orchestra, Innovative Music Performance Practice, Barbara Hannigan, Contemporary Music, Classical Music
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1. Introduction

While instrumentalists have often conducted orchestras when performing solo concertos, this has not often been the case with singers, even though singers have two free hands to conduct and therefore an obvious advantage. Since the concept of singing and conducting at the same time has not been researched as an artform and written about before, books and writings about conducting are relevant materials, as well as books and articles on concertmasters and soloists who lead orchestras or ensembles. Violinists Joshua Bell and Iona Brown have conducted orchestras while playing as soloists or concertmasters, Håkan Hardenberger and Christian Lindberg conduct while playing their brass instruments and Bernstein and Ashkenazy sometimes conducted piano concertos from their instruments, to name a few well-known conducting soloists. However, conducting while playing an instrument which requires the use of both hands has obvious limitations, leaving the singer with a certain advantage.

In my artistic research project, I have explored the best ways to sing and conduct simultaneously with the following questions in mind: What movements from a conductor are truly needed for an orchestra? Is it more difficult for musicians in the orchestra to play when the conductor and soloist is the same person; do they need to take more initiative? Can the interaction between an ensemble and a solo singer become even more intimate if the singer leads the performance? Does conducting while singing limit the singer’s freedom and ability to be expressive?

These four questions lead us to the project’s main research question: *How is a musical performance affected when conducted by the solo singer?*

It goes without saying that my interest in the combined art of singing and conducting, as well as my idea to launch the project on which this study is based, is largely kindled by the work of the soprano and conductor Barbara Hannigan. Her techniques and achievements are the topic of sections of this study, and references will be made to a long and enlightening interview Hannigan very generously gave to me one morning in June 2022 before she performed (as soloist and conductor) with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra at the Reykjavik Arts Festival. I had Hannigan’s and the orchestra’s permission to watch the rehearsals and included in this study are segments from my interviews with a few members of the orchestra about their experience of playing with Hannigan. In other interviews, documentaries and
articles about Barbara Hannigan the focus is mostly on her being a female conductor and her life, while the aim of this thesis is more directly to explore the concept of singing and conducting simultaneously and to investigate the technical and artistic issues involved.

In Stockholm I had the opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of conducting while playing the violin with Mats Zetterqvist, a violinist who has had a long career of being a “conducting concertmaster”. I also spoke with five students at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm (Kungliga Musikhögskolan, KMH) who played in a project in February 2022 where Mats was leading the orchestra as the concertmaster and some of their observations are cited here. The instrumentalists playing at my own concert in Reykjavik in November 2022 have been a very important source of information for me; their opinions on how I am doing and how they feel while playing with a “conducting soprano” are of great value. Last but not least, my own experience while working on the pieces with the orchestra is reflected upon.

The project revolves around finding the best ways to combine singing and conducting and working with composers to create new music that works well or even benefits from being led by the solo singer. While working with an ensemble as a singer/conductor I, with my background as violinist, have drawn upon my own orchestral experience as a tutti player as well as concertmaster. Hearing the musicians’ opinions has been an important part of the project which has helped me develop a suitable conducting technique and may perhaps even lay the ground for a career path for me in the future.

I received a grant from the Icelandic Student Innovation Fund to work on this research project for three months in the summer of 2022, in collaboration with the Reykjavik Art Festival and the Reykjavik Opera Days. As a result, I performed a concert in Eldborg, Harpa, Reykjavik on November 5th, 2022, that showcased diverse pieces which require different conducting methods for the solo singer. The program consisted of three new pieces which were premiered, written for me and the chamber orchestra in the summer of 2022 by the Icelandic composers Ingibjörg Ýr Skarphéðinsdóttir (b. 1990), Jóhann G. Jóhannsson (b. 1955) and María Huld Markan (b. 1980), along with Zerbinetta’s grand aria from the opera Ariadne auf Naxos by Richard Strauss. Twelve instrumentalists from the Iceland Symphony Orchestra joined me, and the instrumentation of the pieces by Strauss, Ingibjörg and Jóhann is: solo soprano, flute/piccolo, oboe/english horn, clarinet/bass clarinet, bassoon, horn, piano, percussion, string quartet and double bass. María’s piece is smaller; it is written for solo soprano, flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, string quartet and double bass.
1.1 Summary of method and actions

The musical performance method of singing and conducting simultaneously had impressed me ever since I saw a video of Barbara Hannigan performing Ligeti’s *Mysteries of the Macabre* a few years ago. Being a soprano and conducting student myself, I had felt the urge to try it long before I finally had to choose a master’s project at KMH, and this seemed like the perfect time and opportunity to explore it. The sounding and written part of the project are closely intertwined since the sounding part is an experiment, attempting to answer the project’s research question, and the written part is research; a summary of information and opinions from relevant musicians on the performance practice used in the sounding part.

I already knew this performance practice had been done by Hannigan and a few others, knowing it could be successful and that audiences were interested in seeing it. However, what interested me the most was trying to figure out if it was really better than performing with a separate singer and conductor; for the performers, for the music and for the audience. Therefore, I listed all the questions that came to mind regarding this topic and finally chose the few that captured my main interest and the ones I found the most important, leading me to the main research question.

Early on I realised I could not find any written material directly on this subject, having searched thoroughly in libraries and on the internet. Therefore, I chose to use interviews as my main source for the thesis and made a list of people I believed would have relevant thoughts and knowledge for the project. I interviewed people in Sweden and Iceland and luckily Barbara Hannigan was in Iceland in the summer of 2022 and was willing to discuss this with me and help me. I also knew that observing her rehearsals and analysing videos of her would be beneficial, both for the written part and for my experiments of singing and conducting simultaneously. When deciding on questions for the interviews I looked at my original question list and listed the ones relevant for each person, but in the interviews I also allowed each person to feel free to discuss the aspects of this which they found the most interesting. Therefore, various new thoughts were presented to me and other new thoughts came to my mind, which sometimes sparked new questions for the next interview. Since conducting concertmasters and conducting instrumental soloists are much more common than conducting singers, I decided to include short texts about them in the beginning of the thesis and explain the difference between conducting instrumentalists and singers. Finally, I wanted the written part to be largely based
on my own experience, and thereby explain the work I did for the “sounding part” thoroughly in this thesis.

For the “sounding part” I decided early on that I wanted to do a performance where I sang and conducted an orchestra. I had just moved to Stockholm, knew nearly no one and no one knew me, so it was hard to convince an orchestra or chamber orchestra to perform with me, and it was not possible to get funding from the school for this project. I could have tried applying for grants in Sweden but was not familiar with the grant systems and therefore planned on gathering students from KMH to play with me. When the opportunity to perform in Iceland presented itself, it seemed like a good solution, not to mention that I already knew great musicians from the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, making it easier for me to form a chamber orchestra, and I was quite sure that people in Reykjavík would want to attend the concert.

I knew early on that I wanted to perform something new and did not want to do pieces that Barbara Hannigan had already done. I did not want to be influenced directly by her way of singing and conducting – I wanted to develop my own way. I spent some time going through what repertoire could work for a chamber orchestra and a conducting singer and realised that Zerbinetta’s aria, which I had already worked on as a singer and knew very well, could be arranged for the instrumentation of my ensemble, and therefore I did the necessary orchestral reduction during the summer. However, when searching for more pieces for this occasion, the thought of going against composers’ original ideas on how their pieces should be performed (with one person singing and another person conducting) worried me. Therefore, I got the idea that new pieces could be written for a conducting soprano, making the project even more innovative, initiating the creation of new musical works, which would also allow me to experience first-hand the process of working with composers. The initial thought was to ask composing students at KMH to write pieces for this occasion. However, when I got the opportunity to work with the Reykjavík Opera Days (in February 2022) and have the concert in November 2022 it seemed safer within this short time frame to contact composers I knew or knew of, and working with Icelandic composers would also make it easier to receive grants for the projects in Iceland. My father, Jóhann G. Jóhannsson, was an obvious choice, since he knows my voice extremely well. With his experience of conducting, he was likely to write a piece which fitted well for singing and conducting at the same time and luckily he could start composing nearly right away. I had heard orchestral pieces and chamber pieces by Maria Huld and Ingibjörg Ýr which I really liked, so I decided to contact them and explain my idea, and the rest is history. Of course, it was quite risky to commission new pieces and expect them to
be ready in time for me to learn them, both as a singer and conductor, and as I reflect upon in chapter 5.2 I made the mistake of not setting a deadline for the composers early enough.

My decision of letting the concert program consist of new pieces, composed with this performance method in mind, and standard operatic repertoire, like *Zerbinetta’s aria*, was based on a few arguments. Firstly, I believed it would be unrealistic to arrange a whole concert with new pieces exclusively on such short notice. In that case I would have been left with two choices; either to ask the composers to make their works longer in duration, which was not possible within this time frame, – or to commission pieces from more than three composers, which would have been harder to fund. Secondly, I already knew the singing part of *Zerbinetta’s aria* very well and I found it sensible to include one piece I already knew as a singer, considering how little time I had to prepare. Thirdly, as a concert planner, premiering new pieces would make the concert more innovative and increase the odds of receiving funding and media publicity. Fourthly, I believed it would make the project more interesting if I had the opportunity of experiencing and experimenting with how the performance method worked, both with new pieces and standard repertoire.

In chapters 4 and 5 I will explain and discuss my singing and conducting methods, the experiments I carried out at my rehearsals and certain decisions I made following the discussion with Barbara Hannigan and the instrumentalists.
2. Background

This section is divided into two chapters. The first focuses on conducting concertmasters and includes an interview with Mats Zetterqvist and musicians who have played with him. The second is about conducting instrumental soloists, including a short text about the clarinettist and conductor Martin Fröst. This part of the research was mainly intended to provide background information since history abounds with conducting concertmasters and conducting instrumental soloists, while conducting singers are extremely rare.

2.1 Conducting concertmasters

In chamber orchestras, as well as in string and wind ensembles, it is common to perform without a conductor. Then the first violinist/concertmaster or first wind player usually leads as he or she plays, but when that person is not playing the ensemble decides who should lead and decide the tempo. All players need to listen carefully to what the others are playing to stay perfectly together. When a chamber orchestra plays without a conductor and the concertmaster is leading, the concertmaster usually remains at his place but must exaggerate his movements more than when a conductor is on the podium. In the absence of a conductor the concertmaster may also have to prepare differently; he is likely to study the score to look for moments in the music where players outside his instrumental section may need cues or guidance from him; something he normally would not worry about. When there is no conductor, the concertmaster will also be the one who directs the rehearsals and decides on how and for how long each section of the music is rehearsed. In some cases, the concertmaster stands up and uses his bow or hands to conduct.

Mats Zetterqvist has been a guest leader for the Chamber Orchestra of Europe since 1994 and principal second violin since 2009. He has been the leader of the Stockholm Radio Symphony Orchestra, performed as a soloist with all the leading orchestras of Sweden, had numerous solo recitals and been the leader of various string quartets. In recent years Mats has also appeared as a conductor with various chamber and symphony orchestras (Chamber Orchestra of Europe, n.d.). He is therefore very skilled and experienced in leading orchestras as a concertmaster, both with and without a conductor on the podium.
When asked to describe what he does differently when leading an orchestra without a conductor, compared to leading when there is also a conductor, Mats says he gives a few more impulses, but it is “nothing essentially different”. He tries to “distribute the initiative between the different section leaders and solo winds”. For instance, if a movement starts without the first violins, a viola leader or cello leader might be the most suitable person to give the tempo and first impulse (Zetterqvist, interview, 2022).

In his experience, players get more active without a conductor, listen more intensely, play more actively and “make greater efforts to understand the piece as a whole”. He says that there should not be any difference, in the best of worlds, but there normally is, and that this goes especially for non-leading players and for brass players, being used to wait for cues or gestures from the conductor (Zetterqvist, interview, 2022). Ingibjörg Ragnheiður Linnet, trumpet player who played in a project with Mats Zetterqvist as a leading concertmaster, said about the experience of playing Brahms’ 2nd symphony with him: “It felt risky in some ways. Playing a part with a lot of long pauses demanded that I knew the piece by heart, because it was impossible to sit and count empty bars without the conductor” (Ingibjörg Linnet, interview, 2022). In Brahms’ symphonies it is sometimes unclear where the first beat of each bar lies in the music, making it harder for musicians to play without a conductor.

Mats explains that when the concertmaster leads the performance the players may be faced with more “risk taking” than when a conductor is in charge. There can be rhythmical issues, the orchestra can be less together than normally, but “on the other hand the performance gets more energetic and intense, more of a matter of life or death”, he says. He often finds it frustrating to try to play well himself while listening intensively to the orchestra, assessing what needs more rehearsal and how the ensemble playing can be improved. With a lot of focus it can absolutely work well, he says, but it is definitely harder than when only playing the violin and not conducting at the same time. He needs to know the score extremely well, since he finds it annoying to swap between the score and the violin part, since it is of course not practical to play the violin part from the score, having to turn pages very often (Zetterqvist, interview, 2022).

Four of the students playing in Mats Zetterqvist’s project at KMH in the spring of 2022 discussed the experience with me. Isaac Bachs (violin), Veikko Marjamäki (viola), Lavinia Scarpelli (cello) and Ingibjörg Linnet (trumpet) all agreed that the experience was in many ways similar to playing chamber music. All of them had felt the need for great trust between the orchestra members, very active listening the whole time, and they mentioned the importance of the orchestra being a single unit, instead of thinking of it as many individual
instrumentalists who need to play together. They had to dare to take risks to be able to build something together and be extremely aware of what the other instruments were playing, something which they might not normally pay as much attention to when a conductor was on the podium.

“Of course, you listen and you look in an orchestra even if there is a conductor, but without him everyone is forced to become a chamber musician, there is no other choice”, says Veikko Marjamäki. Of course, it depends on repertoire and how well the orchestra knows the piece, but in his opinion there can be more musical possibilities than with a conductor. “There is not a conductor through whom everything has to go, so the reference point is everyone else, not one person in the front.” While it can be more difficult and riskier, it gives more opportunities, he says. With a conductor the concertmaster is still leading and showing what he feels is necessary, but sometimes it is enough to have one person leading (Marjamäki, interview, 2022).

The students said that this situation was more demanding than when there is a conductor on the podium and that they needed some time to get used to it, but they were surprised by the results at the concert after four days of rehearsals. The string players found it easier and more natural than some of the wind players, since the string players are more used to following a concertmaster by looking at his movements and following his bow. For example, while doing pizzicato, it can be more precise for string players to watch the concertmaster or their section leaders instead of the conductor, to make sure the pizzicatos are placed exactly together. Many string ensembles perform without a conductor and the students have grown accustomed to that. However, the wind players must breathe at the right time to be able to start phrases together, and they said that the concertmaster’s movements may have worked better for the string ensemble, since sometimes the concertmaster’s indications were not clear enough for the wind players to know when to breathe. Sometimes they found it hard to catch the concertmaster’s beginning tempos, since they were not used to following a concertmaster, but it got easier every day.

Having a concertmaster leading the performance is easier for an orchestra which is used to playing together, when people know each other and each other’s ways of playing very well. Therefore, it is understandable that students find it hard to try this out for the first time in an orchestra which has not played a lot together. “You need to have enough intuitive knowledge and know how your colleagues play, know how to read the concertmaster’s gestures, know where to breathe. This is a demanding concept and easy to see why it is not usually done, especially in school orchestras, but from a pedagogic view it is very healthy”, says Veikko
Marjamäki (Marjamäki, interview, 2022). Lavinia Scarpelli says that it is definitely riskier, but that makes it a better experience. “Everyone pays much more attention and is more active. Since there is no conductor to give you the cue, you must count and listen. Knowing how to play without a conductor can really help you while playing with a conductor,” says Lavinia (Scarpelli, interview, 2022).

“A professional orchestra should be capable of playing tightly together without a conductor, but the conductor’s role is also being an artistic leader, an artistic director,” says Veikko. “It shakes people up to realise that the motto of orchestral playing is chamber music, all the time,” he adds. In this case, the instrumentalists are forced to play as chamber musicians since the conductor is not there, and when it works out and the orchestra plays well together on its own, Veikko claims that a “new musical intuitive flexibility” can be reached, which is not possible in the same way when a conductor is on the podium (Marjamäki, interview, 2022). In Ingibjörg Linnet’s opinion, the orchestra’s level was higher in the project with Mats Zetterqvist than usually when it performs with a “regular” conductor, because of the enhanced focus and listening (Ingibjörg Linnet, interview, 2022).

It is safe to assert that more rehearsal time is needed for an orchestra to rehearse and prepare pieces without a conductor. Every instrumentalist needs to know the score and be more aware of what other instrumental sections are playing, since no one is showing the beats. Sometimes, conductors are needed, simply because there is not enough time or resources to rehearse the piece well enough to be performed without a conductor. It can also be much easier for orchestras to perform without a conductor in classical and baroque repertoire where the orchestration is quite small. Therefore, it can work out very well when performing a Mozart symphony but be nearly impossible when playing a Mahler symphony.

The knowledge and experience of playing chamber music is extremely useful and necessary in this kind of music-making. One needs to be able to react fast and listen and look out for various things at the same time. Veikko mentions that with a conductor, the orchestra has a “fail-safe”, a person who can keep the orchestra on the right track and in the event of the orchestra falling apart, can get it back together and show the beats in a clear way. When this “fail-safe” is removed, one never has the “luxury” to relax and stop counting beats, one needs to stay focused every second. “If you slack off, you might potentially set a small fire in the orchestra,” says Veikko (Marjamäki, interview, 2022).

The conductor’s role is of course not only keeping the orchestra together; he also leads the musical intentions and expressions and leads the rehearsals, choosing what and how to rehearse. The conductor should be inspired by the music, aspire to inspire the orchestra and last
but not least, be inspired by the orchestra. Thereby, while initiating and sharing musical intentions without making a sound, the conductor receives sound and music from the orchestra and reacts to what he hears.

In the opening chapter of Elizabeth Green’s book, *The Modern Conductor*, she says:

> To stand in front of an orchestra, band, or chorus and beat time does not make one a conductor. But to bring forth thrilling music from a group of singers or players, to inspire them (through one's own personal magnetism) to excel, to train them (through one's own musicianship) to become musicians themselves, personally to feel the power of music so deeply that the audience is lifted to new heights emotionally or gently persuaded, through music, to forget momentarily the dust of earth and to spend a little time in another world – yes, this can be called conducting (Green 1969, 1).

**Summary**

In conclusion, a conductor should guide and inspire the orchestra and give the musicians all he has to offer to help bring the best out of every instrumentalist. Even though it is not completely democratic, it can be quite practical to have an artistic leader who decides how each rehearsal should be planned, is in a position to listen for balance and quality of sound and has the final say when orchestra members might disagree on interpretation. When playing without a conductor, the concertmaster takes on this role, at least partially.

Playing without a conductor can open up new possibilities, making the orchestra freer and more flexible, but in order for this to work and bring about a successful performance the orchestra needs to have played a lot together, every instrumentalist must know the music and score very well and be aware of what all the other sections are playing. This method works better with “simpler” repertoire where the tempo seldom changes and the orchestra can maintain a steady and stable performance, and it works better in smaller orchestral ensembles than in larger ones. It can be helpful for orchestras that usually perform with a conductor to try this method to enhance focus and listening, qualities that are also essential when playing with a conductor.
2.2 Conducting instrumental soloists

When a conductor conducts the performance of a symphony or other orchestral pieces, he usually makes most of the artistic decisions and leads the performance, but when a soloist joins an orchestra to play a concerto (or other pieces for a soloist and orchestra) there can arise the question of who of them has more power and whom the orchestra should follow. Thankfully, the conductor and soloist usually agree on tempos and musical performance style, according to musicians from the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, but occasionally the connection between the two can fall apart during performances.

The orchestra members I interviewed agreed that sometimes soloists and conductors are not completely synchronised when performing, sometimes they have different artistic opinions or sometimes the conductor does not quite 'catch' the soloist if the soloist – acting upon his or her musical instinct or following the tempo markings in the music – slows down or moves forward in the music. At such unfortunate moments in the midst of the music the orchestra members are faced with a dilemma: Should they follow the soloist, the conductor or the concertmaster?

Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, concertmaster of the ISO, said that she usually follows the soloist in those cases and hopes that the orchestra follows her, and therefore the soloist, rather than the conductor (Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, interview, 2022). Bryndís Þórsdóttir, principal bassoon, agreed with that, and said that in those cases she tries to follow the soloist, if she can hear him properly. At least, she tries to look at the concertmaster if she thinks that the conductor and soloist are not together. “This can be tricky. Sometimes I feel as if the conductor is just following the soloist instead of leading the orchestra, and that results in the orchestra being late and falling behind the soloist,” says Bryndís (Bryndís Þórsdóttir, interview, 2022). By this, she refers to the conductor’s efforts to try to pick up and pass on to the orchestra all the timings and tempo changes made by the soloist as the music unfolds, instead of really leading the orchestra at those moments. Obviously, in a situation like this the conductor acts as an intermediator between the soloist and the orchestra, a condition which can make the orchestra fall behind the soloist, as the orchestra follows the conductor who follows the soloist. The relationship and cooperation between the conductor and the soloist has to be good so that the orchestra can trust and rely on them to agree on musical interpretation and timings, and in an ideal world the soloist and conductor would be able to read each other’s minds.
Similarly, it is quite customary for a soloist when playing a concerto with an orchestra or an ensemble, especially if the music is from the classical or baroque era, to take on the role of the conductor. In orchestral introductions or other passages where the soloist does not play with the orchestra, he would sometimes face the orchestra and conduct in an ordinary manner or let them keep the musical flow and rely on the concertmaster and other section leaders to lead the performance. When the soloist is playing, the orchestra takes on an accompanying role and follows the soloist. His movements need to be clear and more rehearsal time will usually be needed when performing without a conductor, but in this case there is never a question of whom to follow. “In some ways it is easier to play when the soloist leads the performance, since the orchestra always knows whom to follow and one person has full power over the orchestra,” says Bryndís (Bryndís Þórsdóttir, interview, 2022).

When the question arises whether to perform with or without a conductor, the orchestra must look to the music for a deciding factor. In the case of a conducting soloist the same principles apply as mentioned above in the section about concertmasters. If the pieces are relatively steady in tempo, not too rhythmically complex and the orchestra is not too large so that everyone can hear the soloist well, this performance method can work with a professional orchestra provided that the soloist is willing and able. Therefore, this method is most common when performing repertoire from the classical or baroque era and then the soloist would usually either conduct the “tutti” sections of the music or play them with the orchestra.

When considering what the soloist has to do differently when he is also leading/conducting the performance, it also needs to be taken into account how the piece is structured. The soloist/conductor is responsible for keeping the pulse and transmitting it to the orchestra and needs to be aware of what all instruments are doing at all times. Some conducting instrumental soloists have the tendency to focus only on leading the first violins, or whomever has the melody, while they might at times need to put more effort into leading the middle voices (for example violas and second violins) which often have very rhythmically precise parts. To set the right tempos the soloist needs to execute a very clear preparation at the beginning of each piece or movement and similarly whenever he needs to control the tempo changes called for in the music. The concertmaster may need to take on the role of the leader in some instances and all instrumentalists need to be more focused; they must either know the music very well or count all beats when they have a passage of rest, since no conductor will be on the podium to help them and ‘cue them in’. The above also applies when the soloist is a singer; a situation which will be delved into and discussed further in a later section.
The conducting soloist needs to be sure that his playing will not in any way be hampered by his leading the orchestra or ensemble. When evaluating the pros and cons of this method various factors need to be considered: How much will the overall quality of the performance gain (or lose!) when the soloist takes on the role of the conductor? How much will the quality of the soloist’s playing be affected (for better or worse!) when he also leads the performance?

This performance method has been used by renowned soloists and conductors such as the conducting pianists Bernstein and Barenboim, the leading violinists Joshua Bell and Iona Brown, brass instrumentalists Håkan Hardenberger and Christian Lindberg and clarinettist Martin Fröst, to name a few conducting instrumental soloists of international repute.

2.2.1 Martin Fröst

Martin Fröst, Swedish clarinettist and principal conductor of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, is well-known for performing multimedia projects in collaboration with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. In his projects Retrotopia and XODUS, where he performs both as soloist and conductor, he takes the audience on “a musical journey that explores new repertoire and challenges the traditional conventions of the classical concert” (Tour pour la musique, 2022).

In an interview with Sarah Baker for the Sonograma magazine, Martin describes why and how he wants to try to change the direction of classical music, “instead of protecting the graveyard of how classical music is currently being performed”. While he says that he likes going to traditional concerts with an overture, concerto and a symphony, he gets “provoked by the fact that we all are stuck in this performative corset”. He mentions the pandemic and on-going wars as reasons that give us the need and opportunity for change and says: “My way of being part of this is the creation of projects that live this change. I am changing my own way of performing to open doors for others.” (Baker, 2022).

Martin Fröst’s aim is to educate young musicians to become “composers, conductors, improvisors and performers – all in one person” and to make sure that they embrace their creative side and are open-minded, instead of being “educated out of their creativity” by always trying to play correctly and to be “as good as the ones before them. This culture of pure comparison is killing classical music and all creativity”, Martin says. If young musicians do
not get the chance to try out different musical styles and let their imagination lead them onto the paths they find interesting, Martin believes “they will end up stiff and old at a young age” (Baker, 2022).

3. Conducting singers

In this main section the concept of singing and conducting simultaneously is discussed, including an interview with Barbara Hannigan and instrumentalists from the ISO who performed with her in Iceland in June 2022. Lists of questions for the interviews can be found in the Appendix at pages 38-40.

3.1 Introduction

As well as being a singer, I have studied the violin for many years and, as a student of conducting, my orchestral experience as a violinist has been invaluable. I have often played where a solo singer performs and a conductor conducts and the experience has been different depending on repertoire, orchestras, conductors and soloists. At a concert with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra in Reykjavik on September 16th, 2022, I had the pleasure of playing with soprano Disella Lárusdóttir when she sang Ach, ich liebte, an aria by Mozart, and Glitter and be Gay by Bernstein with conductor David Danzmayr. Playing in the 1st violin section I felt that in certain moments it was better to listen to Disella, since she was very clear in her actions and at those specific moments the conductor was mostly following her as well. When she was not singing, of course he was the leader, and everyone followed him, but there were moments while Disella was singing when she was in charge. In situations like that, of course it matters where on the stage you are and how well you can hear the singer. I could hear and see her quite well, and therefore it was easy for me to follow her and play with her.

I also played with the orchestra at “Viennese favourites” in January 2023 where Disella and Jóhann Kristinsson, baritone, sang arias and duets by F. Lehár, J. Strauss, W.A. Mozart and C. Millöcker with conductor Ross Jamie Collins. The stage was bigger and the singers stood further away from the orchestra and walked and danced across the stage while singing, making it harder for the instrumentalists and conductor to connect with them. However, the
singers had small microphones hidden in their hair, and monitors on the stage helped the orchestra and conductor hear them. Some of the pieces turned out to be quite demanding for the performers at first, mainly because of lack of contact between the singers and the conductor. This resulted in either the orchestra being late when the conductor did not quite ‘catch’ the singers, or the orchestra being too early when the conductor took initiative and gave impulses which the singers were not able to see. If the primary focus during the performance is to keep the singers and orchestra tightly together it would definitely be beneficial to have a conducting singer, but the extra burden of leading the orchestra would obviously make it nearly impossible for the singer to move across the stage, act a lot and dance while singing.

When deciding if a solo singer should conduct as well or if a conductor handles that part, it needs to be taken into account how the acoustics are on the stage, if all the orchestra members can hear the singer when he turns to the audience (or if he perhaps has a microphone). If not, it is harder to follow the singer and then the singer cannot rely on the orchestra to follow him, unless he is consciously and actively leading the orchestra. The repertoire is also an important part of the decision, raising the questions if it is more important for the performance (and for the audience) to give the singer freedom to act and make theatrical gestures with the body to express the lyrics – or if the singer can stand on the podium and perform with conducting gestures without affecting the character he is portraying?

Two singers have become renowned for singing and conducting at the same time: the soprano Barbara Hannigan and the contralto Nathalie Stutzmann. While Barbara focuses on modern repertoire, Nathalie mostly performs Baroque arias while conducting.

3.2 Barbara Hannigan

Barbara Hannigan is a Canadian soprano who has specialised in contemporary music. In 2011 she started conducting while singing Ligeti’s Mysteries of the Macabre, and now she is a conductor of international repute, having worked with orchestras such as the Berlin Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic and London Symphony Orchestra (Hannigan, n.d.). In June 2022, she performed with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra in Reykjavik and I had the opportunity to watch her rehearsals and have conversations with her. In the first half of the program she only conducted, but after the intermission she sang and conducted parts of Lulu Suite by Alban Berg and Girl Crazy Suite by George Gershwin.
When rehearsing the movements in which she both sang and conducted, Barbara started with turning towards the orchestra and conducting in a “normal” way, showing each beat, not singing every note and not singing with full voice. Then she slowly started to conduct less and sing more and eventually turned away from the orchestra, towards the auditorium. She made certain that the musicians knew how she wanted the music to sound and told them when they should look out for her impulses and when they should for example follow the concertmaster or listen to a particular instrument such as the basses. She had an assistant sitting in the auditorium who checked if her voice carried through and told her where the orchestra should play less and so on, and then she fixed what needed to be fixed.

The two pieces in which she sang with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, *Lied der Lulu* from *Lulu Suite* by Alban Berg and *Girl Crazy Suite* by George Gershwin, are very different from each other and call for different approaches from the orchestra and the conductor. *Lied der Lulu* is quite complex in rhythm even though the metre is ¾ throughout the song. It has *rubatos*, *ritardandos* and *accelerandos* marked by certain motifs in various instruments but most often led by the singer. However, sometimes the singer has long notes and other instrumentalists need to take initiative and like Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, concertmaster, said in my interview with her, Barbara asked her to lead the orchestra and be very precise in her movements in some particular places in the music, where it was harder for Barbara to conduct since she was singing and turned away from the instrumentalists (Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, interview, 2022).

In the interview, Barbara discussed the set-up design on the stage and mentioned a few possibilities, apart from the ‘traditional’ orchestra set-up like she used in the *Lulu Suite* and *Girl Crazy Suite*. In Ligeti’s *Mysteries of the Macabre*, Barbara placed the orchestra on the side of the stage. “That makes perfect sense because Ligeti is about a power freak. It is about control. That is why dramaturgically it makes sense,” she says. She also mentioned the option of placing half of the orchestra on each side of the conducting singer, facing the singer placed in the centre of the stage, but of course this depends on the instruments and the size of the orchestra (Hannigan, interview, 2022). In her version of Poulenc’s *La voix humaine* the stage orchestra set-up is traditional but she faces the orchestra the whole time while singing. Cameras are placed in front of her and the audience sees her on a big screen over the stage. Sometimes she uses amplification to steer clear of worries about not being heard, both by the audience and the instrumentalists.

Barbara said it was hard to find pieces that worked for this purpose – if the piece is an opera aria it must suit the character and it has to be better than having another person conducting
it has to benefit the music. “The service of the music has to be first. The service of the music and the sound and the acoustics, all that has to be first. Because it is also a relationship with ego. If someone else can do a better job, if it is too much, then you have to let someone else do it, or you share it within the ensemble. I think of it as really really high level chamber music.” She mentions that when she sings and conducts the final movement of Mahler’s 4th symphony she conducts it in rehearsals, but in the performance she hardly conducts at all. “La voix humaine is the only piece that I really created to sing and conduct at the same time, because dramaturgically it is theatre, it is almost choreography.” (Hannigan, interview, 2022). And Barbara goes on:

I feel like it has to make sense. Because when you have a text, your job as a singer is to communicate that text. And if the conducting adds to the communication of the text, like when I do Luonnotar by Sibelius, that makes sense. But if it does not add to the communication of the text, and the singer is up there doing all this extra stuff, there is a problem. So you have to integrate it in a way that dramaturgically makes sense. Gershwin is made for that. The pieces that I did with arranger Bill Elliott were created for that, like your pieces are created for you (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

In the interview she told me about herself and her career and gave me advice. She said that she did not recommend singing too much at a concert; that I should rather just conduct most of the program and then have one or two pieces in the end where I sing and conduct. She explained that when she was younger and had just started exploring the option of singing and conducting simultaneously, she sometimes filled her concert program with too many pieces in which she both sang and conducted. Now, she would rather separate it and either perform as a conductor or a singer, or combine it with short pieces at the end of her program when conducting orchestras (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

Barbara also talked about how tiring it is for the voice to talk a lot at rehearsals, especially having to talk loudly in big halls and then start to sing. Therefore, she tries to spare her voice during rehearsals, tries not to talk more than she needs and does not talk loudly. Sometimes she explains this to the orchestra and asks them to spread her words amongst themselves so that she does not have to. When I asked her if she had looked into using a microphone while talking to the orchestra, she explained that a “whole sound system” would have to be created to make that work and worried that she would probably not have been taken seriously if she had done that, at least not when she was starting out. Finally, she mentioned that she gets tension in her shoulders when singing and conducting, since she must place her
arms and 'conducting beat' more to the sides when she faces the audience, to make sure that the orchestra can see her hands (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

When discussing if conducting while singing affects her singing ability she said that she sometimes has to breathe more often but finds the tension worse. While remaining “grounded” and “anchored in the hips” with a “very low centre of gravity and breathing pelvic floor” she isolates her arms to be able to conduct without affecting the singing. Barbara said: “When I do something that I need to conduct, I try to get it to the level of chamber music so much that I hardly do anything.” (Hannigan, interview, 2022). And that is what she did with the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. She rehearsed so well that she almost did not have to conduct it at the concert.

Conducting is almost like a sign language that you can develop for yourself that makes sense. That is what I am doing, and in a way that is what every conductor does. They develop a sign language that is “them”. … I have my own palette and you will develop your palette of gestures (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

She also mentioned the concerns she often has as a conductor of not having enough time to rehearse everything as well as she would like to. “You have to choose what you want to fight for,” she says. Barbara finds it important for conductors to study psychology to be good leaders, know how to communicate and use the power they have in the best possible way.

One has to be so strong. You must have this combination of being very vulnerable and very strong at the same time. You need to be very open but within your force field. Because it hurts sometimes, the criticism or when people do not understand. And you have to have incredible compassion for this, because everyone really wants the same thing (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

She finds it interesting how culture varies between different orchestras and says that she changes her behaviour depending on where she is (Hannigan, interview, 2022).
3.3 Instrumentalists on performing with Barbara

I interviewed a few players from the Iceland Symphony Orchestra after the concert with Barbara and they were all very pleased with working with her and thrilled with her performance. They said that playing with Barbara when she also sang was a lot more like chamber music and required more focus, more contact and listening to each other, since Barbara hardly conducted. While leading the orchestra with her gestures, she also led with her voice. “This was a unique and unusual experience for the orchestra and I think we all really enjoyed it”, says Bryndís Þórsdóttir, bassoon player of the Iceland Symphony (Bryndís Þórsdóttir, interview, 2022). “When Barbara was singing and conducting it completely felt like a chamber music performance where the key was to listen and respond to her and the colleagues. Barbara’s approach was creating a conversation between herself and the orchestra since she both led the orchestra and reacted to how the orchestra played, which created a ground for a more free performance,” says Þórdís Gerður Jónsdóttir, a cellist in the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (Þórdís Gerður Jónsdóttir, interview, 2022).

Þórdís felt that Barbara managed brilliantly to use her whole body and body language to conduct the orchestra and that it did not really matter which way she was facing. She has developed her own “conducting language”, like all conductors do, and if the instrumentalists understand it and are willing to engage in a musical conversation with her, the opportunities are endless (Þórdís Gerður Jónsdóttir, interview, 2022). Bryndís found her movements very clear and was happy with how Barbara explained how to interpret and react to her movements and which cues and movements she would use in particular spots (Bryndís Þórsdóttir, interview, 2022).

The concertmaster, Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, found Barbara’s movements to be minimalistic, delicate and focused in general, and enjoyed sitting so close to her on stage. Sigrún said that as a concertmaster she moved more than when a “regular” conductor is on the podium, was clearer in entrances and focused more on breathing clearly before entering. She prepared more than normally, listened to different recordings and watched videos of Barbara performing Gershwin and Alban Berg. “I was quite nervous before the first rehearsal, but I soon realised that we could trust her completely and we were quick to adapt to her ways of leading” (Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, interview, 2022).

In Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy Suite*, Barbara was in character and managed to maintain the character and use the character to make the body movements make sense. The jazzy melodies
make it natural for Barbara to conduct almost like a dancer, and percussive beats in the end of the suite prompt her to make big gestures which are helpful for the orchestra and enjoyable for the audience to see. In this piece she had a microphone so that the orchestra could hear her through monitors on the stage, but the instrumentalists found it more difficult to play together in Lulu’s aria when they could not hear her as well, her voice not being amplified in that number and she facing the audience. Here Bryndís felt as if the orchestra sometimes had to take more initiative and responsibility, and that they were sometimes a bit on their own, also because the piece is demanding and the orchestra had never played it before (Bryndís Þórsdóttir, interview, 2022). As a tutti cello player, Þórdís said that she had to watch her leader more than usual since the orchestra was a bit insecure in Berg’s suite. However, Þórdís found the “untraditional conducting methods” in the Lulu Suite refreshing and believes it helped make the interpretation more free and intimate (Þórdís Gerður Jónsdóttir, interview, 2022).

Þórdís experienced the performance as risky, without ever feeling insecure, which is in her opinion the most enjoyable feeling you can have while playing a concert. Bryndís Þórsdóttir also found it risky and admitted that the performance was not perfectly together all the time at the concert and that Barbara conducted more than she had intended in some places. Even though Barbara gave the instrumentalists more responsibility, Bryndís always felt that Barbara was in control and could react and fix if something was falling apart.

“Sometimes the orchestra falls into “autopilot mode”; follows the conductor but forgets to really listen and be in contact with the colleagues. While playing with Barbara we were much more aware of what was happening around us as if our hearing and vision somehow got sharpened“, says Bryndís. She found this to be very demanding for the orchestra, but at the same time extremely rewarding (Bryndís Þórsdóttir, interview, 2022). The instrumentalists I interviewed agreed on having to prepare more than usual to be able to know the other instruments’ parts and the singing part. Sometimes Barbara told the orchestra who they should listen out for in particular places, which helped a lot.

Barbara is a very experienced performer and a talented actress as well, and the instrumentalists noticed this while working with her. “I could sense a lot of musical information from her facial expressions,” says Þórdís Gerður, and adds that her “presence” was an indication of how she wanted the music to be expressed. Þórdís felt like she invited the whole orchestra to play with her by using theatrical interpretation and that she communicated with the whole orchestra, not just the section leaders (Þórdís Gerður Jónsdóttir, interview, 2022).

The instrumentalists were impressed with how well Barbara could hear and notice things to fix and rehearse even though she was both singing and conducting. Áshildur
Haraldsdóttir, flutist in the Iceland Symphony Orchestra, found it “amazing” to perform with a conductor who is also “a part of the sound picture of the music”. “I could hear the person leading and harmonise with her sound. And of course being a singer, it comes from her body, it is her innermost voice. It was a lovely, incredible interpretation. In all my years as a musician this has never ever happened to me, so I think that is what stood out for me. And the surprise, it wakes you up completely, the surprising element. It was a once in a lifetime kind of thing!” (Áshildur Haraldsdóttir, interview, 2022).

Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, concertmaster, believes that performing this repertoire with Barbara as a conducting singer worked better than if they had performed with a separate conductor. “It was more natural, since we removed the middleman, which is the conductor. I think this was very positive for the orchestra. She opened us up, kept us on our toes and made everyone feel independent and confident,” she says (Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir, interview, 2022).

4. My own project

In this chapter I write about my own experience as a conducting soprano and the interviews with the players from my project.

4.1 Preparation

I was contacted by Guja Sandholt, an organiser from the Reykjavik Opera Days, in February 2022 and when I told her about my singing and conducting project she was very interested in having my concert as part of the festival. I therefore applied for a grant from the Icelandic Student Innovation Fund and got to know in April that the application was accepted. I asked three Icelandic composers to write new pieces for the project, presumably the first pieces ever to be written for a singing conductor. I only knew one of the composers personally before, and quite well, since he is my father. I knew that I could count on him to compose a piece that would challenge my potential both as a soprano and conductor, and that his intimate familiarity with my intentions and abilities, coupled with his experience of conducting, would lead to something interesting for me to tackle. I had been following the other two composers for a while and liked their compositions. Both were eager to write pieces for me and, in particular,
the idea of composing for a singing conductor appealed to them as something exciting and well worth trying. The process was fast and fruitful.

During the summer I met with the composers a few times to discuss the compositions and issues relating to singing and conducting at the same time. I got to see their pieces at different stages and try them out, which was very interesting for all of us. I am grateful to the three composers for their hard work and our good collaboration, and needless to say, it was a happy moment for me when I finally had in my hands the three new pieces commissioned by me, all printed out, both the scores and the instrumental parts. By then it was September, leaving me with the task of learning the three works both as soloist and conductor. At this point I contacted the twelve musicians whom I had chosen for the project’s ensemble earlier in the summer, gave them their parts, asked them to look at the full scores and listen to the supplied audio-files, and in general to be as well prepared as possible at our first rehearsal.

Another task I undertook during the summer months has to do with the fourth piece on the program, Zerbinetta’s grand aria from Ariadne auf Naxos by Richard Strauss. It is originally scored for an orchestra somewhat larger than my chamber ensemble and therefore, if played by my group with no further amendments, some instrumental parts would inevitably have been left out. To ensure that all the instrumental voices would be present in my performance I therefore ventured to reduce the original orchestration, most notably with respect to the wind instruments.

Guja and I applied for other grants to meet the cost of renting the largest hall at the great concert hall Harpa in Reykjavik and to be able to pay the instrumentalists and composers. We applied for a big Nordic grant, “Norden 0-30”, and I applied for various Icelandic grants as well, and got a grant from the “Music Fund” and the “Music Recording Fund” (both of which are Icelandic national funds) to cover a part of the instrumentalists’ salary and the recording of the concert – in addition to the “Composers’ Fund” (RÚV - Icelandic National Broadcasting Service and STEF - Composers’ Rights Society of Iceland) for the composers’ salary. It has been a very good experience for me, applying for all these different grants, and the collaboration with Guja Sandholt and the Reykjavik Opera Days was very good.

I was pleasantly surprised in the days prior to the concert with how interested in the project the Icelandic media turned out to be. My project was the focal point of a popular radio program on culture at Rás 1 (The Icelandic National Broadcasting Service’s main radio station) where I discussed the project, my background and my studies and the rise of the female conductor in general. At the general rehearsal in Harpa I was interviewed by Stöð 2 (one of the two Icelandic television channels) and appeared in the news that evening.
4.2 Rehearsal period

We had four rehearsals (Oct. 30th and 31st, and November 2nd and 4th) before the concert on November 5th in Eldborg, Harpa. All the rehearsals were filmed so I used the time between rehearsals to evaluate what I could do better technically and what to focus on at the next rehearsal. I was surprised by how well the orchestra responded to my conducting already at the first rehearsal. I had planned on facing the orchestra the whole rehearsal but was pleased to find that everyone seemed comfortable when I turned my back to the orchestra while conducting. The goal was to conduct a lot in the first rehearsals and then start to conduct less and less as I started focusing more on the singing part. When I started conducting less, I asked the orchestra members what they thought and they told me it was more “solid” when I conducted more. Therefore, I conducted some parts I had intended to do in two, in four, since they felt they needed the subdivision, but in other parts I could do less than I had intended which was also a nice feeling. I always felt in control, even though I could not see them, and I was very lucky to have such good and experienced musicians performing with me.

This was actually the first time I conducted without a baton, which was interesting for me. Clearly, conducting an ensemble this size did not necessarily require the use of a baton and, moreover, waving a baton at the audience with my back to the orchestra might seem strange or even inappropriate. When I met with some people from the audience after the concert, I asked them if they had found my gestures disturbing or hampering their musical appreciation in any way while I was singing. It pleased me to hear that this was not the case; on the contrary, the movements had, according to them, added an extra dimension to the performance, making it even more interesting and enjoyable for the audience.

While conducting and singing, facing away from the orchestra, I had to beat with both arms so that everyone in the orchestra could see my beat. I also had to make an effort to keep my arms to the sides, not in front of me, so my body was not blocking the musicians’ vision of my hands. This is an unusual conducting technique, since we normally beat with our right hand and try to centre the beat in front of the body - leaving it for the left hand to show dynamics and musical interpretation. I could not help thinking that people in the audience might find my gestures amateurish, mirroring the beats with my left arm to such a great extent. But, all things considered and most importantly, this was the only way all the musicians could have a clear view of my beat at all times, unblocked by my body – secondly, it seemed to me that my singing and breathing would be more affected by the asymmetrical physical strain arising from using
predominantly one arm compared to using both arms in good balance – and thirdly, although I sometimes gave cues to the musicians with one hand I had a notion that making my gestures more or less symmetrical might look better to the audience.

4.3 Collaboration with composers

When I asked Barbara if she had some advice on what to tell the composers when writing a piece for a conducting singer, she mentioned that it would be beneficial if it was not always the singer who had to lead, so it would not have to be “constant conducting”. Therefore, the composers could always keep in mind who should lead, making it clear for all instrumentalists who the leader is at each part in question. Then she recommended that parts of the music would be instrumental, where the conducting singer could rest the voice for a while and face the orchestra. She also suggested that the composers could work with me on the set-up design, trying out different ways to place the orchestra on the stage (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

My collaboration with the composers was an interesting part of the project and the pieces turned out to be quite different from each other and difficult in different ways. I found all of them challenging both as regards singing and conducting, but when looked at from the combined 'singing and conducting' point of view, some of them have provided the soloist/conductor with more technically diverse challenges than the others.

The first piece was by Jóhann G. Jóhannsson. As indicated by the subtitle, “Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Chamber Ensemble”, the concept was the classical concerto in three movements abounding in dialogues between the soloist and the orchestra and interspersed with instrumental sections. The structure of the work made it clear when I should turn towards the orchestra and conduct and when to face the audience and sing, sometimes even leaving a gap or fermata for the moment of turning around. Sometimes I did not have to conduct all the beats; I had some lovely solo cadenzas and sometimes I could act and dance a little bit. The text was Be not afeard: Shakespeare’s “Caliban’s Speech” from The Tempest. The first movement had the text in English, the second movement in Icelandic and the third in Swedish. Although the three movements all have the same words (in three different languages) they differ in character and style, somewhat in the manner of a typical Mozart concerto; the first movement providing the tension, the second sweetness and the third joyfulness as the soloist and the ensemble finally unite in a happy twelve-tone waltz leading to the final 'cadenza' which
calls to mind the climatic phrase of Mozart’ Queen of the Night second aria. The musical language is mostly modernistically tonal as the composer engages in various methods and scales, e.g. the whole-tone and pentatonic scales, and toys with the twelve-tone technique, never letting go of the natural melodic flow as befits Shakespeare’s beautiful words.

The second piece was by Ingibjörg Ýr Skarphéðinsdóttir. It was written to a long modern prose poem by Þórdís Helgadóttir named Fasaskipti and was the hardest piece for me to learn since the metre very often changed from 4/4 to 7/4 to 5/4 to 3/4 and so on. Therefore, I decided not to do this piece by heart at the concert in November, but I will try to do it by heart at concerts later on. At my suggestion the instrumental parts all had an extra staff showing the vocal part above the music so that the players could follow my singing (while I was turning away from them) and in that way keep better track of where the beat was. Since I was more or less singing throughout the piece, and with all the frequent changes of tempo markings, this proved very helpful for the musicians at the rehearsals (as well as in the concert), at times relieving them of the burden of counting beats or rests.

We did the same in the third piece by María Huld Markan, Djúpalón, which she composed to the words of Þóra Hjörleifsdóttir; the musicians could follow the vocal part as they read their own parts. This piece was easier to learn, it was written for seven instrumentalists and soprano, but dwelling in a relaxed and fragile atmosphere, at times minimalistic, it turned out to be demanding for the performers in a different way from the previous piece. I felt as if this piece sometimes gave me more freedom of expression, and it contained a passage where I stopped beating time, a passage which the composer wanted to be free of time – ‘senza misura’ – as if the clock had stopped – and only the words (or my gestures) in a space without time propelled the sparse music. This matched the lyrics of the piece; it was about having time to do various things – to rest, to feel, to open up, and to remember.

As a final piece of the program, we performed Zerbinetta’s aria from Ariadne auf Naxos by Richard Strauss. It is a very long and demanding aria for coloratura soprano (13 minutes) but I knew the vocal part very well from before, having performed it with piano, so now I just had to learn the orchestral score and the conducting part. I soon realised that the impulses and gestures that had become natural to me when I was only singing the aria were now getting in the way and not at all beneficial for the orchestra. Obviously, my task was to lead everyone except myself – to give them the impulses and beats that were important for them and take care not to do the beats that were important for the singer and could lead the orchestra astray. Therefore, I somehow tried to ignore the vocal part from my brain and just think about the orchestra – and then just sing while I did the gestures the orchestra required.
4.4 Discussion with instrumentalists

After our concert I interviewed a few members of my ensemble, and during the days of rehearsing I also had conversations with many of them, asking them if there was something that I should do differently and how they felt. It was helpful to hear their opinions and observations and I tried to change my movements where they asked me for clearer cues or to conduct more beats, subdivide more.

Rannveig Marta Sarc, the concertmaster, said that she really enjoyed approaching music performance in such a different way. As a performer it was easy for her to understand what I wanted to do because the interpretation was absolutely mine and coming directly from me. It was also harder in some ways, she said, especially when I was turning a lot – but it was a matter of getting used to; it got easier and more natural all the time, she said (Rannveig Marta Sarc, interview, 2022).

Birkir Örn Hafsteinsson, clarinettist at the concert, thought some pieces worked better than others in regard to singing and conducting at the same time. He said that Jóhann’s piece, Be not afeard, worked especially well with this performance method and he thought it was written very well for a conducting soprano. He mentioned the importance of the conductor’s eye contact with the orchestra members. He said that he found my beats clear and thought that it was easy to follow me even when I turned away from the orchestra, but admits that he sometimes missed not seeing the conductor’s eyes and facial expressions. He also mentioned that in particular spots in Zerbinetta’s aria, some parts in the winds could have been more precise with more subdivision from the conductor (Birkir Örn Hafsteinsson, interview, 2022). In those passages I had decided not to subdivide since the orchestra sounded quite precise and well together to my ears; more movements would have disturbed my singing and I wanted to ensure a good flow in the music.

In general, Birkir thinks the performance would not have been better with a separate conductor. Even though he considers it a “risk factor”, not having a separate conductor, he believes that this performance practice prompted the orchestra members to be extremely focused instead of relying on a conductor to give them all the beats and cues. He thought it was beneficial for the soloist to have artistic control of the orchestra, believed the rehearsals were well-structured and thought the performance went extremely well (Birkir Örn Hafsteinsson, interview, 2022).
4.5 Advice from Barbara

Barbara Hannigan told me in my interview with her in June 2022 that she did not recommend singing too much at a concert; that I should rather just conduct most of the program and then sing and conduct a small part. Of course, it was a bit too late for me to change the plans for my concert, since I had already commissioned the three works, decided to sing all of them, and was looking very much forward to doing so. To be sure, had it been a full 90 minute concert, singing the whole time would have been far too much for me (and the audience!). But my concert was 52 minutes of singing and conducting and that was quite a lot, but it worked out very well.

Barbara also told me it was important to study conducting a lot before I did this since I needed to be extremely clear to make this work. Therefore, I asked her if she thought I should wait and postpone the whole thing, and she said: “No, absolutely not, just go for it” (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

I know people who have never taken their chances because they were waiting to be ready. That is an ego question in a way, but it also has to do with philosophy and the idea of perfection, because you can never be perfect. The idea of getting something perfect is really very interesting. The ego has to accept a situation and it has to push limitations and also accept limitations and enjoy that stake and be enthusiastic about that stake (Hannigan, interview, 2022).

4.6 Performance and self-assessment

I felt very good – moving while singing. As a singer and violinist, I have usually had the “problem” of moving too much while performing, but in this case that came in handy. Sometimes I find it hard to stand still while I sing and sometimes I can get nervous when I think too much. In this case having prepared so well, I relied on my vocal and conducting technique, focused on expressing the emotions within the music and lyrics and allowed myself to truly enjoy this experience.

I believe some of the advantages of having a separate conductor were lost, but other benefits were gained. In some places (especially in Zerbinetta’s aria), I felt like I lost the freedom to be able to act and express the character’s feelings since I was too busy conducting
and could not do any movements that might disturb the orchestra. However, I never had to fear that a conductor’s musical interpretation might not agree perfectly with mine and I could always decide on tempos and style and shape the music exactly the way I wanted.

I was extremely well-prepared and in a good mindset during the rehearsals and before the concert and all this resulted in a successful performance. I was lucky to collaborate with wonderful musicians and composers who supported me every step of the way, and it was a privilege to perform in Eldborg, the extraordinary concert hall in Harpa Concert Hall in Reykjavík.

This was an extremely interesting project for me, also because I had to be quite independent, prepare the music mostly on my own and lead rehearsals with an orchestra by myself for the first time. No one really knew how this would work before we tried it, since we were premiering three new pieces with an unusual performance method. I tried to be as prepared as possible, to adapt to the needs of the orchestra, ask them for feedback and follow my instincts. I am determined to take Barbara’s advice and study more conducting and singing to be able to develop this further, but this experience has been a huge step for me and I am truly pleased with the outcome. Looking back, it feels surreal that three new pieces were created for me and I hope to be able to launch and work on similar projects in the future.
5. Conclusion

5.1 Pros and cons of singing and conducting simultaneously

*How is a musical performance affected when conducted by the solo singer?*

This research project has shown that there can definitely be a positive impact on the performance when a solo singer also conducts. For the audience this can be interesting and enjoyable to watch. Among the orchestra members it can result in enhanced focus and listening as everyone has to be ‘on their toes’ during the entire performance. Instrumentalists need to take initiative since they do not always get direct cues and do not have eye contact with the conductor, and they need to know the score well to know what the other musicians are playing and how their own part matches with the solo singer’s part. However, they never encounter the dilemma of not knowing whether to follow the soloist or the conductor, and moreover it can be beneficial that the soloist has full artistic control of the performance.

Admittedly, this performance method can limit the singer’s freedom to express the emotions of the character the singer is depicting, since the conducting singer’s movements should all be beneficial for the orchestra. Therefore, the conducting singer must be aware that every gesture he makes with his arms or body can be interpreted by the orchestra as conducting movements. At the same time, the conducting gestures can seem unnatural for the character and in that way, the singer’s role as an actor may have to be compromised. Therefore, this performance method would not be used in a traditional operatic setting, but rather in a symphonic setting. However, conducting while singing does not have to affect the voice and the sound of the music. The singer needs to be able to express the lyrics and feelings of the piece through the vocal technique, dynamics, sound and vibrato, even though the singer is conducting as well. Singing and conducting simultaneously can sometimes force the singer to take more breaths, cause tension in the body and make it hard to hold long high notes steadily, but everything can be trained and can improve with practice. It definitely requires more energy and focus from the conducting singer, in comparison to just singing, and the pieces need to be extremely well prepared, both from a conductor’s and singer’s point of view. Knowing how big the movements must be and how much has to be conducted depends on how much rehearsal time the conducting singer has with the orchestra and of course on the level and experience of the orchestra, as well as on the pieces being performed. Of course, tempo changes need to be
shown very clearly, but when the tempo is steady it is often possible to conduct with very small movements or in certain cases with none at all.

Some of the instrumentalists, both from my concert and Barbara Hannigan’s concert, described this experience as “performing as one unit”, instead of looking at a conductor and listening to a singer who at certain moments might not agree perfectly. When performing with a conducting singer, they just follow one person. Therefore, I believe this method can make the performance feel more “whole” and “intimate”, knowing that the artistic decisions and impulses come from one person, leading an orchestra that needs to be focused, have good internal contact and where each instrumentalist must dare to take initiative when needed.

5.2 Reflection/Critical afterthought

Looking back, five months after the concert, I am very happy with the project as a whole and proud of everyone’s performance at the concert. I am quite certain that I will never forget how magically I felt at the performance and really managed to enjoy every moment. However, I realise that certain things could have been better and could have made the process less stressful for me. I made the mistake of not setting a clear deadline for the composers to hand in the scores and parts early enough for myself to have time to prepare and “digest” them. I received the score of Be not afeard way before I got the other pieces and felt most secure while rehearsing and performing that piece, even though it is technically the hardest to sing. If I had gotten Fasaskipti and Djúpalón a couple of weeks earlier, I would have been able to learn all the pieces by heart, feel more comfortable with them and let them settle better into my voice and body. Furthermore, with more time I would probably have managed to adjust my conducting movements so that my body could better deal with the singing.

Three of the four pieces on the program were just recently finished works written for me, and certainly my performance would have improved if I had had the opportunity to work more on them with my voice teacher and a conducting teacher. As it turned out, neither time nor place allowed for much guidance, leaving me on my own two feet with the challenge of preparing fast for this concert, studying the scores and trying to grasp the essence and the potential of the new music, memorising a good deal of the music, and eventually finding the way which I thought was right for each piece and most suitable for me to perform them as I
ventured to explore this artform of singing and conducting for the first time. I enjoyed the great benefit of having an ensemble of musicians whom I had chosen and whom I could rely on for helpful comments, not to mention the extra luxury of having my four rehearsals in the presence of the three still-living composers – the fourth one, Richard Strauss, being absent for a very good reason. Had it not been for the support of all these good people, who believed in me and made me feel good at all times, things would not have turned out as well as they did.

Watching the recordings from the concert, I realise that I could have done some particular spots better if I had only been singing them (in particular the long high notes in the end of Zerbinetta’s aria and in the end of the first movement of Be not afear’d). However, in general I believe the performance was better with a singing conductor than it would have been if two people had those roles, since it was extremely well in sync the whole time, the musical ideas were very clear and as a singer I felt free to do whatever I wanted and needed at all times, not to mention how interested the audience was in this method of musical performance.

My conducting movements at the concert were bigger and more active in general than I had intended. Instead of trusting the orchestra to be able to play without me showing every beat, I made nearly every beat very clear and quite large. It would have been interesting to experiment more with smaller movements, a more “economical” way of conducting, following the idea that “less is more”. By so doing, larger movements would have been more effective if I only used them in a few important places, and for the audience, conducting less (and sometimes maybe not at all) would have drawn the attention from the conducting and instead given me more space and opportunity to focus on the singing and act as the character I was portraying.

Regarding the concert and project planning, I have a problem of wanting to handle and decide everything by myself to have complete overview, causing way too much time to go into the planning; financial aspects, applying for all the grants, being in contact with all the instrumentalists and the composers, organising all rehearsals, printing the parts, finding rehearsal locations, advertising the concert, doing interviews, etc. This turned out to be way too much work, while also preparing the music and trying to find time to relax and rest during these months, and looking back it was not really healthy to take on all this responsibility by myself. However, since this was all my initiative and I did not have funding to hire planners or assistants, I did not really have a choice. After the concert I was extremely tired and needed to “crash” for a few days to be able to move on and start focusing on other things. I had planned on doing the whole concert in Stockholm this spring as well but changed my mind after realising how much work and time goes into the planning and organising, since I really wanted
to be able to spend all my time on music during my final semester at KMH. However, I will sing and conduct Be not afeard at my master’s concert with a chamber ensemble on May 14th.

Regarding the written part, I knew early on that I was heading into a research where very little written material existed, leaving me no other choice than to rely on information existing in the heads of a few experienced musicians in addition to the experience I would gain by exploring this field myself. I took the risk of expecting that I would get an interview with Barbara Hannigan, even though that was not confirmed when I decided on this project - and planned the whole project without even having tried singing and conducting at the same time. I took some huge risks along the way and was very lucky, but I know I cannot expect to be so lucky in all projects and need to be a bit more realistic in future projects.

The whole project would have collapsed if I had not been so lucky with getting grants and excellent people to work with to make it happen. It was a crazy project which could have gone terribly wrong – but luckily it did not.

5.3 Next steps and interesting experiments

Since I am quite happy with the outcome of this project, I would really like to keep experimenting and performing as a conducting soprano. Commissioning more pieces and looking for existing pieces suitable for this method is something I plan to do in the future.

At my concert in Reykjavik, we did not get a chance to experiment much with the placement of the orchestra. We decided on a traditional chamber orchestra set-up, with the podium in the middle at the front, surrounded by the string quartet, with the piano, winds, percussion and the double bass behind them. I turned towards the orchestra when conducting instrumental passages of a few bars or more, but when singing I faced the audience. I tried to turn as seldom as possible, since too many turns might be disturbing for the orchestra, but in one place in Fasaskipti I sang vocalises while facing the orchestra, which worked quite well.

When Barbara Hannigan sings and conducts Poulenc’s La voix humaine she faces the orchestra the whole time, but the audience sees her on a big screen above the stage. I would be interested in trying this method as well, or perhaps facing the audience and having a camera in front of me and screens for the instrumentalists to be able to see me from the front. It will also be interesting to experiment with other orchestra set-ups in different halls and acoustics;
perhaps having the orchestra in a circle around me on the stage and placing the podium higher so I can be seen, or placing the orchestra on each side of the stage with the podium and myself in the middle.

Barbara Hannigan will return to Reykjavik in June 2023 to sing and conduct Mahler’s 4th symphony. I look forward to observing her rehearsals and hope to have the chance to discuss this art form with her further. The video recording of my concert in November 2022, which lies at the heart of this project, has recently been edited and made ready. Hopefully, when I meet with Barbara in June she will have had an opportunity to watch it, and I will cherish any feedback and assessment she might give me to bring along to my future projects.
Sources


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Barbara Hannigan, soprano and conductor, 2022.
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Nondirect sources – supplementary material


Documentary films on Barbara Hannigan:

I'm a Creative Animal: *A Portrait of Barbara Hannigan*
directed by Barbara Seiler (2014)

Barbara Hannigan – Taking Risks: *The singer and conductor debuts as an opera conductor*
directed by Maria Stodtmeier (2019)

Concert video recordings of conducting soloists:

Barbara Hannigan performs Ligeti’s *Mysteries of the Macabre* with the Gothenburg Symphony (2013): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ireZYjEkpac

Barbara Hannigan performs Gershwin’s *Girl Crazy Suite* with LUDWIG orchestra, Amsterdam (2014): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHvOTaxRwNA

Joshua Bell performs Beethoven’s Violin Concerto with the Belgian National Orchestra:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqWl8K3svoI

Martin Fröst performs with Kungliga Filharmonikerna in Stockholm (2018):
https://www.konserthuset.se/play/retrotopia/
Appendix A

Interview questions for Barbara Hannigan

1. I am curious to know a bit about your musical background and studies. Did you study an instrument along with your vocal studies?

2. What inspired you to start singing and conducting at the same time?

3. How do you choose pieces to sing and conduct?

4. Which part do you usually find more difficult, singing or conducting?

5. Do you prepare both at the same time or start with studying either one of them?

6. In my project, I am working with three composers who are writing pieces for me and a chamber orchestra. Therefore, I’d like to know: When you have been working with composers or arrangers, is there something special you tell them, regarding how to compose or arrange for a conducting soprano?

7. Do you feel like you have to change something in your singing technique when you are conducting as well? Do the movements from conducting disturb your singing? Does it affect your breathing?

8. Do you have any favorite pieces where you are doing both?

Interview questions for Mats Zetterqvist

1. Can you describe what you do differently when you are leading an orchestra without a conductor, compared to leading when there is also a conductor?

2. Do you think it makes the instrumentalists play or focus differently, compared to when there is a conductor on the podium? Do you think it changes the musical communication within the orchestra?

3. Do you think the overall performance/concert result is different when you are leading/conducting the orchestra from the concertmaster seat vs. when there is a conductor on the podium? What is better, what is worse (pros and cons)?
4. Do you find it difficult to do both, especially in rehearsals when you are playing the violin and at the same time focusing on what and how to rehearse?

5. Do you sometimes feel as if this is riskier than having a conductor on the podium?

6. When rehearsing the orchestra as a “conducting concertmaster“ do you feel that you talk differently to the players since you are also playing yourself, or do you control the rehearsal just like a conductor would do?

7. When you are leading/conducting the orchestra and playing a concerto/solo part, do you think it affects your violin playing?

Questions for KMH students, performing with Zetterqvist

1. In what way did you think playing in an orchestra led by the concertmaster was different from playing in an orchestra led by a conductor?

2. Did you feel that you played differently or as if you had to be more aware of your orchestra colleagues than usually?

3. Did you feel that this was in any way risky, not having someone on the conductor’s podium?

4. Did you like this better or worse than playing with a conductor?

5. Was the experience perhaps in some ways more like playing chamber music?

Questions for ISO instrumentalists, performing with Barbara

1. Can you describe how or if your playing changed when Barbara sang and faced the audience? (as opposed to the 'normal' conducting practice)

2. Did you feel the need to listen more carefully and watch the other musicians more closely?

3. Did this performance method require more preparation on your behalf, i.e. did you feel as if you had to know the music better and have a better sense of other instrumental parts?

4. Did you find this risky? – Did you feel insecure when she was facing the audience?
5. Did you find her conducting movements easy to follow, e.g. her pattern and tempo? Was her beat clear enough?

6. Did she rehearse more thoroughly or spend more time rehearsing the music/movements where she also sang compared to the music where there was no singing part? Did she have a different approach or different rehearsing methods depending on whether she had a singing part in the music or not?

7. When she turned her back to the orchestra, did you watch your section leader more closely than you normally would have done, or did you watch Barbara?

8. Did you feel as if you were playing chamber music when she turned her back to the orchestra?

Questions for instrumentalists in my project

1. Can you describe how you felt when I turned away from the orchestra to face the audience?

2. Did you find it more difficult to play well when I turned my back to you?

3. What is your opinion of this performance practice? – Was it in any way an interesting experience for you?

4. In your opinion, did the music benefit from being performed this way?

5. If I do this again, do you have any advice for me? Something I should keep in mind?

6. What did you think of the rehearsals?

7. For you as an orchestra player, what is the main difference in playing with a singing conductor compared to the normal practice of having both a conductor and a soloist?

8. As a concertmaster, did you feel the need to move more while playing? Did this performance method call for more preparation on your behalf? (only for the concertmaster)
Appendix B

Information on sounding part

*Soprano takes the baton!*

In Eldborg, Harpa on November 5th, 2022 at the Reykjavík Opera Days festival finale. Ragnheiður Ingunn Jóhannsdóttir, soprano and conductor.

Program:

Jóhann G. Jóhannsson: *Be not afeard – Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Chamber Ensemble* (2022), premiere

Lyrics: William Shakespeare (Caliban’s Speech from The Tempest)

I: *Be not afeard* - lyrics: William Shakespeare

II: *Ekkert að hræðast* - translation: Helgi Hálfdanarson

III: *Var icke rädd* - translation: Carl August Hagberg

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Ingibjörg Ýr Skarphéðinsdóttir: *Fasaskipti* (2022), premiere

Poem: Þórdís Helgadóttir

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María Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir: *Djúpalón* (2022), premiere

Poem: Þóra Hjörleifsdóttir

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Richard Strauss: *Großmächtige Prinzessin* (1912), Zerbinetta’s aria from Ariadne auf Naxos

Lyrics: Hugo von Hofmannsthal
Chamber orchestra:

Rannveig Marta Sarc, violin
Gunnhildur Daðadóttir, violin
Anna Elisabet Sigurðardóttir, viola
Guðný Jónasdóttir, cello
Xun Yang, double bass
Kristín Ýr Jónsdóttir, flute
Julia Hantschel, oboe
Bírkríð Örn Hafsteinsson, clarinet
Bryndís Þórsdóttir, bassoon
Stefán Jón Bernharðsson, horn
Helga Bryndís Magnúsdóttir, piano
Helgi Þorleiksson, percussion

Recording: Stúdíó Sýrland

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