

A FRENCH CONNECTION

ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY PRESIDENT MARIE-HÉLÈNE BERNARD BRINGS A JOIE DE VIVRE TO HER NEW JOB AT POWELL HALL

BY JEANNETTE COOPERMAN



Marie Hélène Bernard

DILIP VISHWANAT

“It’s a humidity that’s just fascinating,” Marie-Hélène Bernard says—and not with the sarcasm of a native. She’s genuinely interested in St. Louis’s humidity. And you get the sense she can adapt to just about anything.

The Symphony’s new president is French-Canadian, and even her syntax sounds it. “I don’t know how you would call this,” she says, picking up a starry midnight-blue glass sphere. It was a parting gift from a board member at the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston, a memento that had been in his office, and she placed it on the window sill in her new office and emailed him a photo with the Gateway Arch in the background. “It’s bridging where I come from to this new place,” she says. “It’s about the relationships you build with people who help you bring music to the community.”

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Bernard was executive director and CEO of the Handel and Haydn Society, and she stayed through its 200th anniversary. She'd brought H+H out of the doldrums—now almost one-third of its audience is under the age of 40, and its Friday-night concerts hold their own among Boston's hippest destinations.

How'd she manage that? A Gallic shrug. "It was all about listening to the community and seeing what people really wanted, which was to find meaning in music, to have an experience that would bring a form of intimacy. There are a lot of things in our lives that make us strangers." She leans forward, trying to explain. "St. Louis has a lot of things that make it St. Louis. When you travel, you look for something that makes the place really special, and your memories will be shaped around that." It's the same with cultural institutions.

Coming to this one was a no-brainer: "I think it's artistically one of the finest orchestras in the country," she says with feeling. "And I think I can make a difference. This orchestra has the nimbleness, the willingness, the appetite. And they are in a very interesting place artistically. We can do things I couldn't do elsewhere."

When Bernard moved into her office this July, what mattered first to her was "opening a welcoming environment. The desk was back-to-the-door, so I moved it around. The sofa was by the window and no one sat on it, so I put it over there"—she nods to the far wall. "And then, a little table, to make conversations—and listening—more comfortable."

She smiles and leans back, crossing legs clad in black and white print slacks. Even her look is French: put-together but simple, with a feel for design that's never fussy. Her world has been all about sound: learning the viola da gamba while her brother, Charles (now an assistant principal with the Cleveland Orchestra) practiced his cello; practicing corporate and tax law in her years as an attorney; racing back to music with a master's in arts administration. For recreation, though, her mind goes visual, craving the latest in contemporary architecture and modern dance.

"I'm very much an amateur—I don't know the technical terms," she says. "But it's the fascination of movement and creativity—music is a platform for creative movement—and I love to watch young choreographers coming up with new things that the body can express."

Bernard's partner, a journalist, is still based in Montreal, and she—raised by a veterinarian—is here with all their dogs: the two male shih tzus his daughter pressed upon them and Bernard's uber-friendly pug Lucy. Unfazed by a spinal in-



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Bernard in the Powell Hall foyer: "Music is always relevant."

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jury, Lucy has charmed the neighbors by barreling down the Central West End's sidewalks in her little wheelchair.

Bernard pays the same calm attention to children's needs, and she's passionate about the importance of music education—not just to cultivate future audiences, but to improve the kids' academic performance. In Boston, the tiny H+H Society educated 10,000 kids annually, working with five youth choirs and inviting them, once a year, to perform onstage, making the community work visible.

She'll do the same here. "I want to celebrate the diversity in this community. That's something that's very dear to me." She wants the Symphony's programming to be diverse, too. "Sometimes orchestras are a little risk-averse. I think people have an appetite for a variety of programming. I don't mean the sort that makes it esoteric or inaccessible. But varied, so they know classical music is not boring."

Though she's the new president of Early Music America, her loyalty to historical performance doesn't constrain her enthusiasm. "I have very broad musical interests—from medieval to heavy metal," she confides. "I send a friend of mine a song a day. Yesterday it was Metallica; today it was—do you know him? Jim Croce?" Her pronunciation is soft and hesitant. "I was barely born. But I discovered his songs recently."

Which fits with what she says when asked how to make classical music "relevant." "Music is always relevant. And it is never old. Classical music is anything from the Renaissance to now, and a lot of people are hearing it for the first time,

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so it doesn't matter when it was written. It's how you present it and deliver it and make people pause to listen, create an experience in their life that's different from any other experience they will have. Different from a movie, different from Facebook.

"An organization I worked with years ago, the ultimate goal we had was to make sure people came no matter what. People didn't even look at the schedule; they just came every week because they knew it was going to be good. I'd like to make Powell Hall that kind of destination." She grins. "I will know the moment we have engaged the audience that is not your typical symphony audience, and I will say, 'Ah.'"

She's equally determined, though, that people who already love classical music not "get intimidated by their own knowledge. There's so much people haven't heard. And even if they have heard a piece performed years ago, I hope they come with as open a heart as possible. I want them to feel they are hearing it for the first time—that sense of amazement and pure joy."

Joy is never irrelevant.

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