

# Stage by Stage:

Navigating a career in the performing arts

## Valerie Barber

Founded in 1989, Valerie Barber PR (VBPR) has become one of the most respected boutique public relations companies in classical music under its founder's leadership. **Juliette Barber** explores how her relationship-led approach, instinct for storytelling and commitment to excellence have sustained the company through decades of change



**You founded Valerie Barber PR (VBPR) in 1989, at a time when the classical music world – and the media landscape around it – looked very different. What did you recognise or believe then that convinced you there was space for a PR company with a different kind of voice?**

Things certainly were different then. But the value of building strong personal relationships is the same now as it ever was. I ran my own artist management company before founding VBPR. My friend Nina Kay, Managing Director of Kay Artists Management, suggested that I should go into management and Andrew Rosner, from Allied Artists, recommended me to Melvyn Tan. Melvyn was one of my first clients and I became his personal manager at an exciting time in his career. Simon Foster, who was then at EMI Classics, saw what I was doing for Melvyn. When he left EMI to set up Virgin Classics, he asked if I would like to do some freelance work as a PR. That was the incentive for me to move into public relations. I knew from experience that I could build trusting relationships with artists and promoters and felt that I could do the same with journalists.

**Classical music PR has changed a lot over the years. Looking back, what instincts or principles have mattered most in your work or decision-making, and what ideas still guide you today?**

Being honest! It's that simple. Everything comes from a position of honesty. That's how I've built and sustained my reputation. It's about being upfront with people. It's not about saying yes to every request from the media and certainly not about overselling a story. Broadcasters and journalists know that I'm scrupulously honest about what I'm trying to sell. And I would never take on a client unless I thought I could help them. That is my guiding principle.

**VBPR is known for its creative, story-driven approach. Was there a moment when you realised that a powerful story, well told, could genuinely change an artist's career trajectory?**

There was no single moment. But I soon learned about the importance of finding an angle to every story. Keith Clarke, the Editor of *Classical Music*, told me, "Man plays piano at Wigmore Hall – no story". It's a mantra that I repeat to everyone who works for me. If you can't find an angle, then there really is no story.

The power of every story grows out of a creative process involving the client and a lot of careful thought. Helping to build an artist's career is an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, process. We work with them, their managers and others to develop and deliver career-changing strategies.



With journalist and writer Michael Kennedy

### How has your understanding of what artists need – in terms of image, messaging or support – changed or evolved over the years?

It became clear in the early 1990s, with the launch of new monthly titles such as *Gramophone* and *BBC Music Magazine*, that the way artists were presented had grown stale. There was a pressing need for more marketable publicity photographs, for example. I've always been interested in fashion, styling and photography, so I was able to help artists to create relatable images. I also helped them to become PR savvy, in how they talked to journalists and presented themselves in general. We've seen with social media how easy it is for artists to post videos and comments online. I believe that the need for a guiding PR hand, to ensure that what they post or say works to their advantage, not to their disadvantage, is greater now than ever before.

### You've always worked closely with critics, editors and broadcasters. What's the biggest shift you've seen in how the media engages with classical music? How has this shift affected the way you shape campaigns?

When I started, you could sell a story about a great violinist like Aaron Rosand, which I did, on the strength that he was a great violinist. That was the story. Sadly, it would be most unlikely to secure a newspaper feature today. Now media interest falls on the latest bright young thing, the winner of one of the major competitions, for instance, or on established, high-profile artists. It is much harder to secure coverage for someone who falls outside of those two categories, today's equivalent of an Aaron Rosand or a Leon Fleischer, for example – musicians who are not well known to the public but who happen to be wonderful artists. I would say that this has been the biggest shift in the way the media covers classical music. You have to be a realist about that and work creatively with the situation as it is.



With William Lyne at his farewell concert

### Relationships sit at the heart of VBPR's philosophy. What do you look for when deciding whether a new artist or organisation is the right fit, and how do you know when a partnership will be successful?

Success in this sense stems from mutual trust and respect. I feel comfortable when I know that people come to us because of our longevity in the business and our exceptional UK and international contacts, because of the quality of our roster over the years, and because they understand that we're totally committed to promoting the very best in classical music. I'm not interested in PR for PR's sake; it's always about communicating stories that cast light on an artist and their work. The relationship we have with our clients evolves over time, but it always starts with a shared passion for music.



With Melvyn Tan, signing a contract in 1989

### You've steered VBPR through seismic changes – from the digital revolution to social media to shrinking arts coverage. Was there a moment of real challenge that tested your instincts as a PR leader?

Like any established business, there will be times when big challenges arise. What counts is how you deal with them. Inevitably some clients will move on and, when they do, you must be ready to respond. That happened to us about 10 years ago. I used it as an opportunity to broaden our international reach. We found new clients in Europe and beyond who proved a very good fit for our company. I've been able to build the international side of our roster from there. I believe that has been one of the most important developments in VBPR's work as it has enabled us to establish strong relationships with key journalists and broadcasters overseas.

### VBPR has deliberately stayed boutique rather than scaling up. Why was that choice important to you, and how has it shaped the work and clients you've been able to champion?

I have always wanted to look after my clients. My personal relationship with them and the press is what I enjoy and want to develop. Although I feel I'm very good at delegating to my staff, I never wanted to create a huge company and operate under a generic name. I choose the people who work for me very carefully and am proud of the incredibly talented people who began their careers here, were trained by me and





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Valerie Barber Public Relations today: (L-R) Imogen Alely, Valerie Barber and Katherine Blake

have since risen high in the profession. When artists or organisations come to Valerie Barber PR, they get me. I am the business, so to speak; my name is there for everyone to see. So many clients have stayed with the company because I'm the one they can call at any time. I'm there at their concerts, and I'm always ready to listen to them and to offer advice when required. That is at the heart of how I work. I know that this personal touch would have been lost if I had grown the company.

### What do you find clients most misunderstand about PR, and what do you wish more people appreciated about it, from your experience?

I think artists and managements often misunderstand what is and is not possible. They need to know that we don't have a magic wand – nobody does! We will always talk to the right journalists and editors about our clients, but if the story doesn't work for them or for a particular paper, then we must take a step back rather than push harder. We can develop the story, we can find the best angle, we can be incredibly enthusiastic about it (which we always are). But if the story isn't something that a journalist wants to cover, then we must accept that. Pushing people when they're clearly not interested is going to be bad for the artist and bad for our relationship with the media. There will always be another story that will work for them. It is in the client's interest for us to wait for that moment rather than risk alienating our contacts.

### In an age of direct-to-audience communication and algorithm-driven visibility, is classical music PR still essential – and what will it take to maintain its influence?

Yes, it is still essential. Of course social media is vitally important, and has a central part to play in public relations. But I would say it's of equal importance to the coverage we secure in the mainstream media, certainly not more important. Above all it's about the content of your stories and the depth of your contacts. One should never underestimate the power of personal contacts. I meet with journalists and editors regularly, see them at concerts, and often travel with them to hear our UK and international clients. I believe those face-to-face relationships are central to PR and will remain so, no matter how media develops in future.

## In the Spotlight



### What was your first job in the performing arts?

My introduction to the business came when I began managing artists. I studied acting before that, so I already had some experience of the performing arts world.

### Who has been the most influential mentor or figure in your journey, and what did they teach you?

So many people have helped me and offered their support over the years. In the early days of VBPR, I learned lasting lessons from experienced journalists and editors that remain relevant to the work we do today.

### What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given, and how did it shape you?

It would have to be Keith Clarke's comment about "Man plays piano at Wigmore Hall – no story", and what that says about the importance of finding a strong angle. The other invaluable advice I received long ago was not to judge what you're doing against someone else's business.

### What advice would you give someone starting out in the industry?

You must have a passion for classical music. You've got to do your research. Read the papers and the magazines – do your homework. See who is being interviewed, read the reviews. That is never a waste of time, quite the opposite. And don't send dozens of follow-up emails to a journalist if they haven't replied.

### What's one unexpected skill you've picked up during your career that surprised you?

Hand on heart, I can't think of one. But dealing with artists, their managers and journalists sometimes demands a level of diplomacy I never knew I possessed!

### What's always at the bottom of your to-do list?

Tidy my office!

### If you weren't working in the performing arts, what would you have been and why?

A Wimbledon tennis champion would have been nice! But seriously, my passion for watching and playing the game is important to me, and something I cherish in my spare time.