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A Conversation with Ana María Martínez

Melissa Treinkman



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In a video interview with *Journal of Singing* Associate Editor Melissa Treinkman on April 22, 2024, Ana María Martínez discussed her thirty-year operatic career that continues to flourish. She described her musical upbringing, shared advice regarding repertoire choice, and emphasized the importance of finding a sense of purpose. A QR code is included at the end of the article which contains the link to the recorded interview with Ana María Martínez, posted on the NATS YouTube channel.

“I REMEMBER THE MOMENT WHEN I REALIZED: I think I can do this better than I could do anything else. And I would love to have that be my mission. And the reason I emphasize that is that it’s important for all of us, every single human being to have a sense of purpose. Because when you have a sense of purpose, there’s this validation, this existential validation.”¹ Throughout our interview, opera star Ana María Martínez returned frequently to this idea of having a sense of purpose as one of her guiding principles. Remaining true to her mission has delighted opera audiences across the globe for thirty years and she shows no signs of slowing down. She remarked, “When you do what you love, I think it just keeps you very vibrant. And that twinkle in your eye is always there.”²

Ana María Martínez was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico into a very musical family. Her mother was Evangelina Colón, an opera singer who sang professionally throughout the world and specialized in the repertoire of Puccini and Verdi.³ Shortly after Ana María was born, her parents moved their family to Tallahassee, Florida to pursue doctoral studies at Florida State University. Her mother earned a doctorate in music and her father earned a doctorate in psychology. After completing their degrees, the family moved back to Puerto Rico for two years before relocating to New York City. Ana María described those happy years in Puerto Rico from the age of four to six in which she, an only child, was surrounded by her warm and lively extended family. Family gatherings quickly turned into musical soirées, with Ana María’s aunts,



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uncles, and cousins playing instruments and singing together in harmony. At the time, she didn't realize how unique her family was in this regard. She laughed, "I thought everybody's family did this."⁴ Although Ana María's father was not a musician and, according to her, "couldn't match pitch to save his life," she admiringly described his charisma and brilliant mind.⁵ Born in Cuba, he escaped shortly after the Cuban revolution with nothing but the clothes on his back. Ana María considers her father one of her most important mentors and the person who instilled in her the importance of education "as the one thing that no one can take away from you."⁶

Ana María's informal musical education continued after moving to New York City at the age of six. Ana María remembered her mother dragging her to the Metropolitan Opera when she could not get a babysitter, giving Ana María the opportunity to hear some of the greatest singers of all time, including Franco Corelli, Birgit Nielsen, Teresa Żylis-Gara, and Eleanor Ross. Teddy bear in hand, she complained when the singers were not dramatic enough for her and told her mother she wanted more than just beautiful singing, perhaps foreshadowing her commitment to fully embodying the characters she portrays on stage.

As time went on, it was clear that Ana María was a child with obvious musical gifts, and she became enamored with musical variety shows on television. However, it wasn't until she got the lead in the musical *Oklahoma!* as a sophomore in high school that she thought perhaps she might have the talent to pursue a performance career. She decided to study musical theatre in college at the Boston Conservatory of Music. However, it was not long before her voice teacher recommended that she shift her focus to classical music, due to the innate qualities of her voice. Ana María's disappointment upon hearing this advice was profound and she confessed, "I wept for a week."⁷ However, after she picked herself back up, she decided to prepare to audition for The Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music in classical voice. After being accepted to both schools, she chose to attend Juilliard for both her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees. Upon graduation, she won First Prize in Houston Grand Opera's "Eleanor McCollum" Competition and subsequently joined the Houston Grand Opera Studio for one year. Since then, she has sung leading roles at the world's major opera

houses, won a Latin Grammy award, toured with Andrea Bocelli, and provided the singing voice for a character in the television series *Mozart in the Jungle*.⁸

In addition to her busy international performance career, Ana María currently serves as a professor of voice at the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. She expressed gratitude for the exceptional voice teachers who guided her own singing journey, making her keenly aware of the significant role she plays in the lives of her students. When asked about her own youthful-sounding voice, she emphasized that she had made a conscious choice to sing lighter repertoire as long as possible. She viewed this as one of the keys to her long career and now counsels her students to resist the temptation to take on heavier repertoire too early. She noted that singers may get professional offers to sing roles that they are not quite ready to do, and it can be agonizing to turn down contracts in such a competitive industry. Still, she cautioned that singing heavy roles featuring thick orchestration can tempt the singer to push, leading to vocal trouble.

One highlight of our interview was when Ana María shared about her experience raising her now seventeen-year-old son, while in the midst of a demanding international career that requires frequent travel. Balancing an opera career and family life is no easy feat and like many other industries, the burden of childcare may be disproportionately placed on mothers.⁹ Ana María always made sure (and continues to make sure) to negotiate time off into her contracts so that she can go home briefly during rehearsal periods and between performances to see her son. Nonetheless, she admitted, "There's obviously stuff you're going to miss in the day to day. And, and I feel very badly about that." The love in her voice was palpable as she described the special relationship she shares with her son and how much she cherishes the time she has with him.

A turning point in Ana María's journey came in conjunction with the concerts she was required to give as a Gluck Fellowship recipient while a student at Juilliard.¹⁰ Ana María realized the profound healing power of music while performing in homeless shelters, soup kitchens, nursing homes, cancer centers, and hospitals. These experiences helped alleviate her nerves and performance anxiety because she could see that, as she said, "It's not about me. It's about something far, far greater."¹¹ In

those moments, often “performing for patients hooked up to IV machines,” she realized, “If nothing else, we can distract them with something beautiful. We can distract them for a moment. And when you distract away from pain and stress and you distract yourself through beauty and love, you really do open your mind, your heart, your soul, to something beautiful.”¹²

Readers are reminded to scan the QR code found at the bottom of this article to view the full interview with Ana María Martínez on the NATS YouTube channel. You can also visit her website: <https://anamariamartinez.com/>.

NOTES

1. Author’s interview with Ana María Martínez, April 22, 2024. This and all previous “Vocal Point” interviews with host Melissa Treinkman can be found on the NATS YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/user/officialnats.
2. Ibid.
3. “Evangeline Colón,” *Fundación Nacional para la Cultura Popular*, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://prpop.org/biografias/evangelina-colon/>.
4. Interview with Ana María Martínez, April 22, 2024.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. “Ana María Martínez,” accessed July 1, 2024, <https://anamariamartinez.com/about/>.
9. Julia Haines, “Gender Reveals: Data Shows Disparities in Childcare Roles,” *US News*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2023-05-11/gender-reveals-data-shows-disparities-in-child-care-roles>;
- Jennifer Rivera, “Motherhood, Stress, and Opera Singing,” *HuffPost*, May 20, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/motherhood-stress-and-ope_b_5358497.
10. “Gluck Community Service Fellowship Program,” *Max H. Gluck Foundation*, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.gluckfoundation.org/projects/community-service-fellowship/>.
11. Interview with Ana María Martínez, April 22, 2024.
12. Ibid.

Melissa Treinkman is an assistant professor of musical theatre vocal performance at the University of Southern California, where she teaches applied voice and vocal pedagogy. She serves as associate editor for the *Journal of Singing*, where she is the author of “The Vocal Point” column.

Treinkman has presented her work for many national and international organizations including NATS, PAVA, the Association of Popular Music Education, the College Music Society, Northwest Voice, the Voice Study Centre, and the Voice Foundation. Her publications can be found in the *Journal of Singing*, the *Journal of Voice*, and the *Musical Theatre Educators’ Alliance Journal*. Treinkman was the 2020 recipient of the Voice Foundation’s “Sataloff Award for Young Investigators,” and was the first researcher to win the award in the category of vocal pedagogy.

As a mezzo-soprano, Treinkman has sung with Chicago Opera Theatre, Sarasota Opera, Opera North, Utah Opera, and Cedar Rapids Opera. At Los Angeles Opera, she sang in the featured ensemble for the GRAMMY award winning production of *The Ghosts of Versailles*, performed the role of the Vendor in *Carmen* and performed the role of a Noble Page in *Tannhäuser*. She is also a regular member of the LA Opera Chorus. www.melissatreinkman.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8512-0743>



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