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A Conversation with Jamie Barton

Melissa Treinkman



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In a video interview with *Journal of Singing* associate editor Melissa Treinkman on April 8, 2025, Jamie Barton discussed her successful operatic career. She spoke candidly about her rural roots, her unwavering commitment to vocal technique, and her passionate advocacy within the opera world. A QR code is included at the end of the article that contains the link to the recorded interview with Jamie Barton, posted on the NATS YouTube channel.

> I know a couple of friends and colleagues of mine who magically seem to have always had "the setup." They don't have voice teachers—they do it themselves. For me, I need vocal technicians to check in with. . . . I need a tune-up . . . this thing's like a car, you know, I gotta take it into the shop every once in a while . . . make sure it's running as well as it can be for the age that's on it.[1]

For mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, even a career marked by international acclaim doesn't lessen the need for disciplined, ongoing attention to vocal technique. In our interview, it was clear that her commitment to her craft is rooted not in ego, but in a grounded awareness of where she came from, a recognition of how hard she's worked to get where she is, and a desire to make the path wider and more welcoming for those who follow.

Born in a small Appalachian community in northern Georgia (so rural it only received running water about six years ago) Barton's origins are far from the glittering stages she now commands. "I grew up in the middle of nowhere," she said with a laugh, describing a musical household rich with classic rock and bluegrass.[2] Her family regularly hosted "pickins and grinnins," informal jam sessions where Barton found herself drawn to the music more than playing outside with the other kids. "I was that little music nerd inside, sitting with the instrumentalists, like trying to figure out how they know where the harmony's going."[3] These sessions turned out to be master classes in aural skills training, which would give Barton an advantage in her college music theory classes and, eventually, her professional career.



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Jamie Barton

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Barton began her formal vocal training at Shorter College, where she initially majored in music education. At the time, opera wasn't even on her radar. However, she loved musical theater, a common entry point for many American singers who eventually find their way to opera. She spoke fondly of her first voice teacher, Brian Horne, who notably provided her with solid technical grounding and who truly understood, as she put it, "the science of the voice."[4] She went on to earn her MM degree from Indiana University. From there, she was invited to join the prestigious Houston Grand Opera Studio, launching a vibrant professional career. Though she was already gaining momentum as a working artist, her major breakthrough came in 2013, when she won the renowned BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition. She also won the Richard Tucker Award in 2015, further cementing the upward trajectory of her career.

From a vocal technique perspective, Barton prioritizes the pursuit of balance. While the Wagner and Verdi repertoire she's known for demands moments of vocal intensity, she's careful not to let that quality dominate her singing. As she put it, "Treat those moments like they're spices, like nutmeg—you don't want a whole dinner of nutmeg!"[5] On performance nights when she has "overindulged in those moments," Jamie said she can "feel it the next day."[6] She also noted that, "The more you age, the more your body shifts. The more you're going to have to recalibrate how you maintain that balance."[7] She credits her longtime teacher, Stephen King (whom she first encountered at the Houston Grand Opera Butler Studio and with whom she continues to train with today), for helping keep her voice in shape and serving as the trusted pair of ears every singer needs. She referred to him as, "Dr. King, the voice whisperer himself."[8] He is now emeritus faculty at Rice University and serves as the principal voice teacher for the young artists of both Houston Grand Opera and Los Angeles Opera.[9]

At the time of our interview, Barton was in the midst of performing *Carousel* at Boston Lyric Opera, in which she was singing the role of Nettie Fowler. This production marked her first professional foray into the musical theater repertoire. It was a full-circle moment for Barton, whose first love growing up was musical theater. "Even when I went into undergrad as a music ed major, I wanted to do musical theater," she recalled. "But I'll admit the fatphobia messaging had gotten to me," she added candidly. "Big girls don't dance . . . And that, as it turns out, is a full lie, and I'm a great dancer, or I should say I'm a great mover."[10] Her lack of dance training and confidence in that arena led her to pursue classical music and, as she said, "the rest is history."[11] Vocally, returning to musical theater has required Jamie to make thoughtful adjustments. As she noted, working with a microphone allows for greater nuance and opens up space to experiment with vocal color and production. She described how different the experience is from opera, where the singer must project over a full orchestra without any amplification.

A key focus of Barton's advocacy centers on inclusion, representation, and equitable access within the classical music world. "By every metric, I should not be doing this," she said, referencing her rural upbringing and lack of exposure to classical music until she first heard symphonic music on NPR and fell in love with it.[12] She is now committed to making sure others feel that they belong in classical music audiences. "A lot of people, especially from particular socioeconomic backgrounds, they don't feel welcome . . . They don't feel like that is their place. If there is one message I could get across to the whole world, it is that there is a place and we want you in the audience, we want you to come experience this."[13]

Her advocacy extends to promoting more diversity in operatic casting. She emphasized the need for more performers from diverse backgrounds and cultures, believing that audiences deserve to see themselves reflected in the stories and characters portrayed on stage. Barton regularly receives messages from women of size who tell her, "I've never seen my love story told on stage until I saw you up there doing it."[14] Voice researchers like Elizabeth Benson and Kate Rosen have written extensively about how body size is often overlooked in diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations.[15] Fortunately, advocacy from artists like Barton is helping to bring this important issue into the spotlight.

As for young singers looking to follow in her footsteps, Barton offers both realism and hope. "Don't do it because you want to be famous. Don't do it because you want to be rich. Do it because you can't imagine doing anything else and being happier, and then give it all you've got for a certain amount of time."[16] She encourages young artists to devote five to seven years to pursuing an opera career wholeheartedly, while also

exploring potential alternate career paths. "Music can be for happy," she said.[17] She repeated this endearing phrase several times, expressing the idea that even if music isn't your career, it can still be a meaningful part of your life as a source of personal fulfillment. The philosophy of music as joy and music as belonging runs through Barton's artistry like one of Wagner's leitmotifs.

NOTES

1. "Jamie Barton: A Conversation with Melissa Treinkman—*Journal of Singing* 82, no. 2 (2025)," posted June 27, 2025 by OfficialNATS, YouTube, 20 min., 40 sec., https://youtu.be/Hiyi19fgHZw, 0:58.
2. "Jamie Barton," 10:10.
3. "Jamie Barton," 11:11.
4. Author's interview with Jamie Barton, April 8, 2025. This quotation was not included in the final edit of the online video.
5. "Jamie Barton," 3:55.
6. "Jamie Barton," 4:09.
7. "Jamie Barton," 3:20.
8. Author's interview with Jamie Barton, April 8, 2025. This quotation was not included in the final edit of the online video.
9. Renee Salick, "Maestro of Resonance: An Interview with Dr. Stephen King," BRAVO 43, The Opera League of Los Angeles, October 13, 2016, https://www.operaleague.org/Home/News-Articles/maestro-of-resonance-an-interview-with-dr-stephen-king-1.
10. "Jamie Barton," 12:15.
11. "Jamie Barton," 13:08.
12. "Jamie Barton," 14:00.
13. "Jamie Barton," 14:52.
14. "Jamie Barton," 16:21.
15. Elizabeth Ann Benson and Kate Rosen, "Anti-Fat Bias in the Singing Voice Studio, Part One: Culture and Context," *Journal of Singing* 79, no. 4 (2023): 503–12, https://doi.org/10.53830/aprf3860.
16. "Jamie Barton," 17:32.
17. "Jamie Barton," 18:30.

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