

MEZZO-SOPRANO
JAMIE BARTON IS A
DEEPLY COMMITTED
ARTIST.

BY LOUISE T. GUINThER

strength, power & kindness

PHOTOGRAPHS
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A BIG, JUICY, BLOOD-AND-GUTS DRAMATIC MEZZO is a rare treasure. Attach it to a thoughtful, progressive, utterly uninhibited and deeply committed artist, and you have the unique phenomenon that is Jamie Barton.

Barton's voice smacks you in the ear with its round, fresh, healthy sound and the confident way in which she wields it. The timbre is luscious, ripe and sensual, with a deep, striking chest register, and the dramatic approach is forthright and emotionally unsparing. It's a package eminently suitable to the great classics of the Italian repertory.

But Barton is full of surprises. When she burst onto the scene, barreling through challenging roles such as Giovanna Seymour and Adalgisa with seemingly fearless abandon, one envisioned a career devoted to the dramatic-mezzo warhorses. Yet the role that is occupying her at the time of our interview for a January run at the Met is *Mère Marie* in Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, and Barton's musical and philosophical interests range widely, embracing brand-new music and courting projects yet to be created.

Her current repertory preferences have as much to do with her connection to the character as with how well the music fits her voice. "I don't have to like the character," she says, "but I have to understand what leads them to make the decisions they make, and sometimes that comes easier than others. I don't come from a Catholic background—I'm not a nun by any stretch—but I feel intrinsically the conviction that *Mère Marie* feels, that leads her to take the actions that she does. In my personal life, I *hope* to be that convicted about the things that are important to me. It's harder for me to connect with a character like Amneris, who is privileged, and she's part of the colonizing aspect of a war. That's a lot to look past to get down to the nuts and bolts—how she would have been raised to expect that Radamès would be who she was going to wed, and it would have been devastating to her on an emotional level to be proven wrong in that. With Amneris, the feeling I get down to is jealousy, and I just don't identify as a jealous human being. The kind of jealousy

As Léonor de Guzman in *La Favorite* at Houston Grand Opera, 2020, with Elena Villalón (Inès)

As Brangäne in *Santa Fe*, 2022, with Nicholas Brownlee (Kurwenal), opposite page

that inspires somebody to ruin the lives of others—that is not something I can connect with. But that's when I'm really grateful for what Verdi has written into it. I can understand the emotion that comes out through the wailing that happens in that judgment scene. That is an outpouring of emotion, even if there isn't a basis of logic in her actions."

Barton refers to her entrée into classical singing as "almost an accidental 'stumbling into.'" Growing up in a deeply rural part of Georgia, where bluegrass and church music were the musical staples, she recalls, "My teenage rebellion based around anything that I didn't come from. Classical music and art and literature was what I dove head-first into. I was in choir from elementary school, and I auditioned for band in fifth grade. I wanted to be on drum line, and I went over to the drum area to try it out. The dude standing there looked at me and said, 'You're an awfully little girl. Are you sure you want to be carrying a big old drum?' Being the good little student I was, I was like"—she puts on a piping child's voice—"I guess not." She tried the clarinet briefly, but the voice won out. "I knew I loved singing, so I asked if I could audition [for the choir]. This is the one time in my life I'm really glad for misogyny being a part of my story," she says with a laugh.

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Barton's early career went largely by the book, boosted by triumphs in the Met National Council Auditions (2007) and the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World (2013). "It was very much, 'My trusted people are telling me that I should be singing these, so I'm just trying to put the schedule together in a way that I'm not having to get my voice out of the basement for one and into the rafters for the next.'" She moved quickly into dramatic-mezzo territory, unveiling her Azucena in 2015, her Eboli in 2018, her Amneris in 2022. "Verdi is just a juggernaut," she says. "It's learning how to drive a Maserati around hairpin turns. You've got to be able to gear-shift, and you have to figure out when do you drop in the chest, when do you not."

But she was wrestling with the bigger picture. "Quite honestly, in 2016, when Trump was voted in as president, it sparked massive fear within me," she says. "There was a good six months in the first part of his presidency that I just really wondered, 'What the hell am I doing here? I come from a single white trailer in the middle of nowhere. Like, I'm already an imposter.' And I've gotten really lucky—I've worked my tail off, let's not put that aside—but here I am in this art form that realistically is sustained by the one percent. We don't have government funding, so it has to be.

"I'll never forget, I was on a gig, and I just had this big come-to-Jesus with myself and realized that I had been questioning for a long time if this was what I needed to do, or if I needed to go into activism—do things on a local level that would actually change lives. And I realized that I might *feel* like an imposter, but the fact of the matter is that I *am* a part of this. And there are other people from similar backgrounds, or ones that I can't even imagine, who are a part of this too. We have all staked our claim in this art form. The reality was that I already had a massive social-media following. People quite literally paid to hear my voice. So I made a deal with myself that if I'm going to stay in this, I have to show up authentically as myself, and that I would

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stick with it as long as I was trying to be honest and to carve out more space for more people."

One of Barton's favorite catch-phrases is "Quite honestly," and it quickly becomes clear that honesty in every aspect of her life is central to her identity. A proud bisexual, she advocates not only for the LGBTQ+ community but for all underrepresented groups. "It is important for me to know that I'm imparting my truth," she says. "I get messages from people who have seen my performances, and they're like, 'I'm a young soprano who is also plus-size, and I never thought I would see myself onstage as a romantic lead, but I just saw you do this, and it was so powerful.' I want people who are my size, or are queer, or are black or—name any marginalized perspective—I want them to have a chance to be *seen* onstage. In the last few years, we've seen the success of that happening, and I think that's powerful. That's got to be the data that we as an industry take forward."

The hours of reflection afforded by the pandemic reinforced Barton's resolve. "My metrics for choosing what I want to do have shifted,"

she says. "I realized that I needed more than just 'this is a good vocal fit' for a role to live on my calendar." One project that particularly excites her is this month's world premiere of Jake Heggie's *Intelligence* at Houston Grand Opera. "It's a story of two women, an abolitionist and a Black woman, a former slave, who came together to gather intelligence for Lincoln's people during the Civil War. The Black woman, Mary Jane Bowser, went back into

slavery as a spy in Jefferson Davis's household and sewed messages on the hemline of dresses to send to Elizabeth Van Lew, a white woman from a very affluent family, who passed the information along. It's absolutely compelling, and it's also encountering so many questions that many of us are deeply uncomfortable with. I'm looking forward to making people uncomfortable with this—and I say this as a white person who was born and raised in the South. This is the good kind of discomfort. Those uncomfortable moments are exactly the moments where we find our learning, and we make those changes if we are challenged to do so."

Barton cherishes being in on the ground floor of a new work, and there are other historical characters who call out to her. "One story that is just ripe for the opera stage is Julie D'Aubigny—a very openly bisexual woman back in the time of Louis XIV, whose father raised her like a man. She had

As Princess Eboli in *Don Carlos* at the Met, 2022, with Matthew Polenzani (Don Carlos) and Etienne Dupuis (Rodrigue)



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As Brangäne in *Senta Fe*, 2022



CURTIS BROWN FOR THE SANTA FE OPERA (TRISTAN); © KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA (DON CARLOS); © BALL & ALBANESE (PORTRAIT)





As Azucena in Adele Thomas's staging of *Il Trovatore* at Covent Garden, 2023

As Mère Marie in *Dialogues des Carmélites* at the Met, 2023, with Alice Coote (Mme. de Croissy)

fencing lessons and was a fantastic swordsman. She was also an opera singer. At one point she fell in love with a young woman, and the family found out and sent the young woman to a convent. So Julie followed her, set the bed of a nun who had already passed on fire and kidnapped the girl from the convent. A really fascinating story!”

An enthusiastic recitalist, Barton has also put considerable thought into ways to make the recital format more comfortable “for people who don’t normally go to recitals,” she says. “What if I did a program that straddled the line of classical but had new compositions and also singer/songwriters like Tori Amos or Fiona Apple, and sold ‘merch,’ and invited opening acts that are local upcoming young artists? Some people might think of it as sneaking vegetables in for the kids, but I think it’s introducing people to the different reaches of classical music.

“I love getting to do things outside what my normal job holds,” she adds. “The pandemic was a time when we all got back to playing with music, rather than ‘This is our job. We have to pay our bills with this.’ I’d forgotten how much *play* is intrinsically necessary to creative process. Because of that, I was

trying different vocal styles that had been in the background of what I love but moved to the forefront. I’ve seen other artists step out of their typical zones, and sometimes it’s received really well, and sometimes it’s not. And sometimes it’s hilarious, let’s be real.

“A lot of classical-music fans feel very protective of the art form, and I understand why. But I also don’t think an artist who chooses to do both classical and other things is less of an artist. In fact, I consider them more of an artist. It is all going to add into the art that they put out onstage.”

BARTON’S APPROACH to the development of her voice has been careful and patient. “I think my voice is further geared towards beauty than towards steel, which is really interesting, given that I sing a lot of Verdi and Wagner,” she says. “But to me, it’s the trick of learning how to manipulate the acoustics. In my twenties, I would start to feel I was in a good groove, and then I would wake up and for the next couple of months, I’d feel like I was in the body of a fourteen-year-old boy—‘My voice is going through the change! What’s happening??’ It just felt like the ground was sand underneath me. My teacher, Stephen King, told me, ‘Yeah, your voice is growing and shifting. Every time it makes a little bit of growth that goes outside of the barriers that you’re used to, it feels like unsteady ground until you figure it out. And then it grows, and that’s just the cycle.’”

Though it is indeed a voice more beautiful than edgy, Barton in full throttle can blow your hair back—so much so that a listener can’t help wondering what it feels like to produce that sound. Barton’s response is almost gleeful. “One of the ways that people access their vagus nerve is screaming,” she says—“singing, shouting, laughing—any loud kind of expression really does stimulate that, and it releases endorphins. So there is literally a healing action in my job. Every time I get up there, it’s infusing me with the happy chemicals. I think I didn’t clock what a thrill it was until the pandemic, when I didn’t have that. Part of the depression that I went through, which was really profound and, quite honestly, required help to get out of—part of that was very much due to the fact that I wasn’t singing. So, yeah, scientifically, biologically speaking, I think it is actually healing to me.

“And on top of that, it’s fun! I can think of very few things that are as fun as wailing over an orchestra. There’s something guttural in it. Even if it is controlled screaming, like Pavarotti said, there is still the knowledge that these two little thumbnail-size vocal folds are coming together, and I am creating a noise that is launching itself over a seventy-piece orchestra. How frickin’ cool is that!” ■

ROH © CAMILLA GREENWELL (TROVATORE); © MARTY SOHL / THE METROPOLITAN OPERA (DIALOGUES); © BALL & ALBANESE (PORTRAIT)



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