

Keeping it real

Jamie Barton, who appears in *Il trovatore* next summer, tells us why portraying a character's humanity is so important



Hellbent on revenge, Azucena may be one of Verdi's most horrifying anti-heroines, 'But she's one of my favourites,' says the American mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, who will be singing the role in The Royal Opera's production of *Il trovatore*.

'One of the things that attracted me to the role was its honesty. I view it from the standpoint of a mental-health journey. She is a woman who has suffered tremendous post-traumatic stress, who has been trying to process the fact that she threw not just a child, but *her own* child, into a fire,' the remains of the pyre on which her mother had been burnt for witchcraft.

'There is so much shame and guilt wrapped up in the role. It's a juggernaut of a story to tell, so it's endlessly fascinating – and heartbreaking – to sing.'

Rather than caricature her as a monster, Barton is much more interested in humanising the role. 'I think audiences connect more with characters they can see honesty in. And while there's nothing in the music or the text that says "I am suffering from PTSD", there's no doubt that she has gone through hell and is living in a world of trauma.' But in truthfully communicating Azucena's struggle comes catharsis. And ultimately that's what audiences want. 'Pardon my

French, but they pick up on bullsh*t from a mile away. And though I sing everything from witches to fantastical creatures, when I have an opportunity to portray a human in human circumstances, I want to honour that story and lose myself in it.'

Of course, Barton loves Verdi's vocal writing too. *Il trovatore's* score is so taxing that acclaimed tenor Enrico Caruso once observed that all you would need for a good performance are the four greatest singers in the world. 'Verdi's music for mezzos especially tends to be quite tricky – it requires the extremes of my voice,' Barton explains. 'And the emotional throttle that goes into

it! It's a bit like driving a stick shift [manual] car when you're used to an automatic. There's a ton of that gear-shifting in Verdi and a lot of planning that goes into it.'

Born on a farm near Rome, Georgia, and now based 'within driving distance of my family' in Atlanta, Barton grew up listening to 'bluegrass, rock and church hymns'. But at 16, she was given a CD titled *Chopin and Champagne*, 'which I'm sure was purchased from the Blockbuster bargain bin', and another called *Italian Opera's Greatest Hits*. Her response was a kind of epiphany, inspiring her to major in music education at her local college.

At that stage she had no idea of her talent. 'I thought I could be a high-school choir teacher or work in a shop,' she says, speaking from Santa Fe, where she is rehearsing Brangäne in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, another role she has recently made her own.

Halfway through her second year of music study, however, her voice teacher sat her down 'and said, "I think you actually have a real chance at this, but you're going to have to buckle down and work at it."' It was tough love, 'but I started doing extra classes and competitions, trying to go to as many concerts and operas as I could'. At 25, she made her professional debut as Annina in *La traviata* in St Louis and the following year she joined the Houston Grand Opera Studio. Thereafter she 'strung together an income from whatever gigs came in' but, hitting 30, was 'making far below the poverty line. It was, in some ways, a really difficult year.' So with time on her hands, in 2013 she entered BBC

Cardiff Singer of the World, the international competition that perhaps predicts greatness more than any other, where she carried both the main and the song prizes – the first woman ever to do so. Within three months, her schedule was full for the next five years. 'And quite honestly it's been that way ever since.'

Not that Barton, who spends about 70% of the year away from home, is content to take things easy. Describing herself on Twitter as a 'proudly queer opera singer into drag queens, bluegrass, social justice, equality, and cats', especially her own (whom she takes on the road – 'though not to Europe' – and is curled up on her lap as we speak), she is determined to shake up operatic convention when it comes to casting.

Last year she sang the titular role in *Carmen* opposite a Don José sung by Stephanie Blythe, the compass of whose vocal range extends into tenor territory. And Barton longs to see Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* as an LGBTQ relationship. 'The role of Orfeo was written for a castrato.' It tends now to be sung by a woman *in travesti*. 'Why not an actual woman and a queer love story? We live in an age of queer culture being a normal part of life. We see it on TV, in the theatre, in musical theatre. I'm not saying that all the classics need to change forever, but it's a direction we should be taking. Opera is an art form that's already out there when it comes to gender-bendiness. Love is love. I want to see it at Covent Garden!' ●

Written by Claire Wrathall

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