

Rachel Barker-Asto wants 'people to sing'

Rachel Barker-Asto combines her love of opera with her desire to "get people to sing."

"I am very committed to being a voice teacher, and I think my career is going to be centered as a teacher who also performs. I would like to have a steady studio in New York City and perform in regional opera houses. I would like to create interesting recital opportunities and collaborations and find ways to get people to sing.

"I also work as a teaching artist in NYC, which means I do workshops with NYC public schools. Currently, I do a workshop with third graders where we write original folk songs and a ukulele workshop with fourth graders. But it's really just part of my plot to get the whole world singing. Being an opera singer is a great way to get kids singing well because you can go in to the classroom, sing for them and say, 'Hey! I'm an opera singer. Now let's make big, silly, sighing sounds together."

"Voice lessons have always been my happy place. It's a place I feel safe to completely be myself. I love working hard with my teacher on singing and musical concepts. I think that's why I love teaching voice now. Beth McCoy was instrumental because she grounded me in continually asking 'why?' Why did the composer write this passage like this? Why is this important? Evelyn Thomas brought out the dramatic flair of performing, and Mark Davis brought what I call 'the joy of vocal pedagogy' as well as the knowledge to help me prepare for graduate school," she says.

This dual focus leads to days that are never the same. Some are filled with teaching, some with practicing and others with paperwork for auditions or performing.

Barker-Asto works with a voice teacher because "an outside ear keeps your technique honest." She also studies with coaches who work with her on style and language. "I practice every day, at least 30 minutes of vocalizing and a lot of score study. I try to be economical with the way I practice, especially since I sing really high repertoire. If I do a lot of singing in one day, I take the next day off. I still take voice lessons, though not every week. You're always learning as a singer, so literally anything you study can have an application.

"I love the way singing opera feels. It's all about creating unusual sounds; super high or low and big, beautiful tones that carry, and all with efficient effort. When you figure out resonance, it's the best. I often joke that I may have become an opera singer, because I wanted to make acceptable loud noises. But I think that what has really kept me going has been the thirst for more knowledge about singing. How do you put all the pieces together to create something so magical and life-altering? As Michelangelo said, 'Ancora imparo,' 'I'm still learning.'"

One aspect of opera she's still working on is the combination of music and acting that it requires.

"It's sometimes a challenge for me to mix both. Singing operatic rep in a language that is not native to you while acting in a believable manner can sometimes feel like walking a tightrope. But if you do your preparation, again, it feels amazing. It's something I am still honing and working on. I don't think I will ever be finished trying to tie it all together. That's part of the fun too," she says.

Barker-Asto's first job was singing the soprano solos from "Messiah" with the Symphony of the Mountains, while she was a student at King University. "Singing solo with an orchestra is the most thrilling experience, and I'm so happy my first experience was with my hometown orchestra. Cornelia and the symphony are a dream to sing with, and I was very happy to get to sing with them again for King's anniversary performance," she says.

One role includes the American premiere of Salieri's "La Cifra" in New York City with the Dell'arte Opera Ensemble. Other roles include Queen of the Night, Adina, Pamina, Drusilla, Gilda and Susannah. She has been a participant in the Caramoor Festival, Katonah, New York, studying and performing operas from the bel canto period.

She is a frequent recitalist, often focusing on music from the 20th and 21st centuries. She has premiered works of current composers such as Paul Moravec, Beth P. McCoy, Evelyn Kopitzke, Ann Holler, Mark L. Williams and Kenton Coe.

Performances with chamber groups include The Sebastians and The Paramount Chambers Players. Other solo engagements include various oratorio works such as Barber's



Brian E. Long | Photographer

Rachel Barker-Asto was in the American premiere of Salieri's "La Cifra" in New York City. (Photo by Brian E. Long)

"Prayers of Kierkegaard," Handel's "Messiah," Mendelssohn's "Elijah" and Brahms's "Ein Deutsches Requiem."

"I like what my graduate school teacher, Sally Wolf says, 'My favorite is what I'm working on now.' I love singing Queen of the Night and am looking forward to touring with a company soon. I'm loving singing Mozart these days, especially after my recent American debut of Salieri's opera "La Cifra." I loved learning the Salieri, but it made me appreciate Mozart's finesse. Salieri does have better comic timing. A favorite scene was a sisterly fight in the second act. My character was this sweet, demure, Cinderella-like character, but occasionally, you gain glimpses of her impressive strength and swagger (my character just finished shooting a boar in the finale of the first act). As the tension escalates, my character says, 'I dare you to touch a hair on my arm.' The director was going to have me only pinch the sister, but I had been watching 'Glow,' a show about ladies' wrestling, so I suggested a wrestling move that put her in an extreme headlock (but positioned so she could still sing). She later sings about how impressively strong I am," Barker-Asto says.

Barker-Asto, soprano, was born in Bristol, Tennessee to parents Johnny and Barbara Barker. She attended Tri-Cities Christian School for her pre-college education where she was very active in the arts. She was also a member of the Highlands Youth Ensemble and studied voice and piano privately with Beth P. McCoy. She



Rachel Barker-Asto

attended King University, where she double majored in performing and visual arts and French. While there, she studied voice with Evelyn Thomas and Mark Davis. She earned a Master's Degree from Westminster Choir College in vocal pedagogy and performance. Since then, she has created a career that embraces both performance and music education. Barker-Asto has been praised for her nimble, lyric voice, capable of immense artistry and vitality.

You can listen to her vocals at <https://soundcloud.com/rachelbarkersoprano>. A!