



The Vocalist

Julianne Baird is that rare thing: a performer with a Ph.D. She is an acclaimed, widely recorded singer of baroque music and, as a musicologist, a top authority on it, too.

If you find yourself at the crack of dawn at Philadelphia International Airport, at the arrival gate of US Airways, don't be surprised if you spot Julianne Baird trudging down the corridor after returning on a red-eye from the West Coast. It's a common enough sight. Baird—one of the most recorded female opera singers in the world and one who has graced its great stages—would be returning from one of her performances with a professional music ensemble. She would be hustling back because she has classes to teach on the other side of the Delaware River, where she is a Distinguished Professor of Music at Rutgers–Camden. Grueling as the pace is, she abhors the idea that her students might think she is not vested in them, concerned about only her career. For many years after she began teaching at Rutgers in 1989, she refrained from telling them who she was outside the classroom.

What they would have learned is this: Baird is that rare thing, a performer with a Ph.D.—in her case, a renowned soprano and a musicologist particularly versed in baroque music (1600 to 1750). The successor to Renaissance music, it introduced vocal musical forms such as opera, cantata, and oratorio, and it influenced the direction of the subsequent classical music era and its famous composers, namely Beethoven and Mozart. The baroque era itself produced two prodigious composers, George Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music and genius still take Baird's breath away. She has lent her angelic soprano to countless recordings and performances of their canons, and she has infused the music with hints of her own gregarious, risk-taking personality, bringing an expressive verve to the music—music that has produced its share of technically superb, but emotionally barren, performers. Baird is cherished for her vibrato and her ornamentation techniques, which, revealed during improvisational passages, showcase the ethereal nimbleness of her voice.

Students at Rutgers get a glimpse of this in class. To guide students through a difficult passage, to instruct them on how to articulate and strengthen throat muscles, to show them the way to unleash emotion, she has only to break into song: her trusty teaching prop. Whether students are there for a master class or simply to take an introduction to music to gain self-confidence, they are changed. "I try to open doors for my students," says Baird. "I like to

make connections, whether it's between literature and music, or history and music, or my students and a job. I want to be in the background, making things happen."

Outside the classroom, in her role as a musicologist, she has excavated, arranged, and then performed the forgotten compositions of many baroque composers, some of whose work had never been heard. But, if you were to know Baird, you wouldn't expect anything less. For her doctoral dissertation at Stanford University, she translated an 18th-century Italian singing manual into English—first translating the Italian into German and then the German into English (she is fluent in French, too). Raised in Kentucky, the eldest of three daughters whose parents were tireless scholars of medieval English literature, Baird adored classical music from an early age. She secretly coveted the idea of a singing career, though wise enough to know it was a long shot. A precocious singing talent in junior high and high school, she hedged her bet by the time she went to college, deciding to pursue music performance and music scholarship simultaneously.

She attended the Eastman School of Music to chase the two disciplines, and she took the same game plan to Stanford. Serendipity struck when the Waverly Consort performed on campus. Hearing that the musical ensemble needed a soprano, Baird auditioned, got the gig, put her doctorate on ice, and hit the road with the troupe of singers and instrumentalists, which performs Renaissance music. Halfway through her maiden 1979 world tour, after reading a review of her performance at New York's Alice Tully Hall—"... Julianne Baird stopped the show with her haunting singing ..."—she knew she wasn't returning to academia any time soon. "If I had turned my back on singing, it would have been like stuffing my soul into a suitcase," says Baird, who completed her degree 11 years later. "Singing had fanned the flames. I had to go on."

After six formative years of touring with the group, the requests began flooding in for Baird to perform as a soloist, to accompany small ensembles and full orchestras. She retooled her repertoire, infusing it with solo-friendly baroque music. Two decades later, she continues to have her cake and eat it, too, having hit the trifecta of performer, scholar, and teacher. And her faithful companion remains baroque music, the joyful reason why she gets up every day—or stays up through the long night. ■