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Living and Breathing Music: Cellist Amy Barston on Practice, Teaching, and Performance

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Only one thing comes between Amy Barston and her cello each morning: coffee. After rising at 5:30 a.m., this Swarthmore resident drinks a couple of cups, stretches, then launches into the first of three hours of daily practice.

“I love it,” she says.

But the solo cellist, revered teacher, and faculty member at the Juilliard School wasn't always that into music.

From ‘No thanks’ to ‘Yes please’

As a child, Barston had no choice but to play an instrument. Her grandmother was a Juilliard-trained pianist. Her mother was a Juilliard-trained cellist and pioneer of musical instruction who



helped bring the now-famous Suzuki method to the United States. Barston's sister, Elisa, practiced the violin diligently every day. But Barston?

"I was the kid that was like, 'Yeah, no thanks. I'd rather play games with my friends,'" Barston recalls.

Nevertheless, music coursed through her life. There were group classes and music summer camps. There were her mother's students, with whom Barston often played. Music was in the air. "My sister was always practicing," Barston recalls. "My mom was always teaching." The family would listen to musical recordings together, and Barston would walk by, embarrassed.

Then one day, when Barston was 13, something happened. She was walking by her family as they listened to yet another recording. "I heard this gorgeous part," she recalls. "Two cellos interwoven. And I felt like – even though I'd heard music my whole life – this was the first time I ever stopped and listened. It was so beautiful."

The life-altering recording was the Schubert String Quintet in C Major. Barston says the piece is considered by many to be the pinnacle of the form.

After that, Barston became more engaged with practicing. At the age of 17, she won first prize in the Illinois Bell Young Performers competition and appeared on live TV as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. But in the context of her family, she recalls, Barston still was not considered serious enough to become a professional musician. That role was reserved for her sister, Elisa, now a principal violinist with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra.

Because her parents would not allow her to attend a conservatory, Barston went to the University of Southern California for college. There, another thing happened that would change the course of her life.

Getting 'Godfrey' to Sing

The music department at USC had a cello, affectionately nicknamed "Godfrey," which almost no one was allowed to play.

When Barston arrived, she learned that the 300-year-old instrument had been stored in a vault for two years because her teacher thought it could only be played by a student who was 'worthy' of it. She told her she could try it out.

Barston was excited the first time she sat down to play, but, she recalls, "it sounded awful, *awful* – like a vacuum cleaner."

Barston's teacher explained that the cello was like a person who hadn't spoken in two years. She charged her with coaxing it back to life by playing with awareness of how it responded to her.

"It was an awful thing for a 17-year-old who thought they were going to be given a sports car," Barston recalls with a laugh.

Eventually, the instrument started to come back. "It was like a wild animal," Barston says. "So responsive. But the other side of being responsive was that it was barking back at you if it didn't like what you were doing." The relationship between the player and her cello went both ways. Barston helped Godfrey make a beautiful sound, and Godfrey, in return, helped Barston learn how to play.



Cellist Amy Barston says learning music teaches children that they can do anything. *Photo: Ashley Lefrak*

Pedagogy: It's Personal



During the pandemic, Amy Barston (right) has been teaching cello on her porch and in her yard. Pictured here with her student, Thomas Bovard, his mother, Elizabeth Morgan, and a chicken. *Photo: Ashley Lefrak*

Barston currently has 14 private students, who often travel great distances to her home in Swarthmore for lessons. A few drive weekly from Washington, D.C. and New York City, while another flies in from Seattle once a month. Some students — from Brazil and China — study with Barston primarily via Zoom.

Barston also uses Zoom when she cannot travel to New York to teach her eight Juilliard students. (Barston earned a master's at Juilliard in 1996). Whether she is teaching beginners or near-professionals, her approach is based on Shinichi Suzuki's method.

Suzuki's pedagogy is more focused on the student than on the teacher, Barston explains, adding, "With the old methods, it was 'You do it this way.'" With the Suzuki method, by contrast, the teacher responds to what

students need at any given moment. "Sometimes it's about helping them deal with their anxiety," Barston says, "working on the same five notes until everything else falls away, and those are the most beautiful five notes they have ever played."

Daily practice may not always be easy or immediately gratifying for children or their families, but Barston says she believes strongly in the benefits of doing it anyway. Music "ties us to history," she says. "It is living, breathing art."

Perhaps an even greater benefit, Barston says, is the confidence musical training can give a child. "Teaching shows a student that they can do *anything* if they just break it down into enough steps, and learn it step by step," she explains, "and at the end you have this amazing thing! You have the Bach Double!"

Sculpting Sound

In addition to running a busy teaching studio, Barston is a seasoned soloist. She performs about 30 times a year, with many of her performances clustered in the summer so her family can join her. A regular at festivals in Seattle, New York, and Chicago, Barston also travels — every other year — to Xiamen, China, where she performs and teaches. Highlights of her career, recalls Barston, include playing the annual opening recital at the National Cello Institute in Los Angeles, performing with Yo-Yo Ma at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago in 2000, and playing Brahms sonatas with pianist Leon Fleischer at the Caramoor festival in 2002.

"I love playing with people who are amazing musicians," says Barston. "I tend to rise to the occasion."

Barston says performing music is akin to being a storyteller. "You're appealing to the emotional availability of your audience, except there are no words, so it's even more open to interpretation." This act of making impressions through sound to evoke an emotional response can sometimes yield surprising results. Once, after Barston played a Schubert piece she considers uplifting, a woman approached her, sobbing. Barston soon learned that the woman had played a recording of the same music to her dying father. "A piece of music can be a portal to memory," Barston explains.

While there may be limits to a performer's control, Barston believes there is still an incredible amount a musician can do to sculpt the sound of composition.

"Amateur musicians focus on the notes," Barston says. "Professionals focus between the notes — the way they connect or don't connect with each other." Describing the move from one note to the next, Barston uses words like "abrupt," "unravelling," and "receding." Notes may "widen or narrow" toward each other. Vibrato further colors the sounds, says Barston. "A composer may say 'loud,' but it's like a visual artist telling you to use red; there are infinite shades of red, and some are fiery and bursting with energy, and some are pale, and make you pull back."

Even after decades of playing, Barston says she is still improving. "The thing I keep learning, over and over," she says, "is that it's all about listening. I'm learning how to get out of my own way, to listen to the speed of my bow, the width of my vibrato, the acoustics of the room, the feedback from the audience." Barston explains that this ability to listen has larger implications, informing her experience of what's going on in the world at large. "Our ability and bandwidth for listening is always able to increase," she says.

Why Swarthmore?

Barston and her husband, Adam Silverman, a composer, were living in New York City when he accepted a teaching position at West Chester University. As they considered a place to land, they noticed that many other members of the music department lived in Swarthmore. "We came here for a few department parties and totally fell in love with it," Barston recalls.

Swarthmore is home to "an astounding number of really good musicians," Barston says. Every New Year's Day, she participates in a chamber music crawl, in which a group of amateurs and professionals play music as they move together from house to house.

Her love of the community has only been reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemic, Barston says. For months, she has been teaching students outside on her front porch. At first, she worried she would bother neighbors. Instead, people stop to listen. "In New York, not only would people tell you to shut up," she says, "they might yell at you, even if you were Yo Yo Ma."

The Next Generation

Barston says it's important to her to pass on a musical tradition to her children. When her older daughter, Marka, was 18 months old, Barston gave her a cello. By age 4, Marka declared she had "finished" cello and was switching to violin in order to be more like her aunt Elisa, whom, according to Barston, Marka adores. Barston and Silverman's younger daughter, Zoey, is the cellist now.

Do the girls take to their instruments cheerfully every day? Are they inspired by the music that lives around them, starting with the cello melodies that serenade them each morning?

"In our house, practice is like brushing our teeth," Barston explains. "You may need a little help from a parent at the start, but then you learn that it's just what everyone does every morning."



Amy Barston at ages 2 (left) and 3. Photos courtesy of Art Montzka

And if the girls protest? “I tell them that their grandma got us all magic music blood,” Barston says. “So we have to practice. It’s just a requirement.”

Barston smiles as she recites the line she repeats to her daughters, like a song, “Magic music blood!”

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