



JACQUELINE PRESLEY CALDARELLA

Using My Voice Almost Like an Instrument

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Based in Southern California, nine-year-old soprano Jacqueline Presley Caldarella balances classical vocal repertoire with a vibrant passion for musical theatre and instrumental music. A multi-instrumentalist who began studying music in early childhood, she has received recognition in several international competitions across both classical voice and musical theatre categories. In this conversation, she discusses her introduction to opera, how playing instruments supports her vocal training, and her ambitions for the stage.

YOU HAVE WON PRIZES IN BOTH CLASSICAL VOICE AND MUSICAL THEATRE RECENTLY. WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT SINGING THESE TWO STYLES?

They are really different, and I like them both for different reasons. I like musical theatre because there is so much acting. You get to become a character, show different emotions, dance, and sometimes sing with other people.



1st Place - World Stage Tour Competition - Colburn School

Classical singing feels different. I really get to focus on my voice and how it sounds. I like singing in my higher head voice, especially coloratura pieces. With classical music, I can concentrate on making my voice smooth and beautiful and focusing on all the little details in the music.

I like that I don't have to choose between them. I get to be an actress in musical theatre and use my voice almost like an instrument in classical music.

HOW DID YOU FIRST DISCOVER YOUR LOVE FOR SINGING, AND WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO START TAKING VOICE LESSONS?

I think I loved performing before I was even old enough to know what performing was! When I was a baby, just seven months old, my mom and dad took me to Sesame Street Live on Father's Day. I was bouncing, kicking my legs, squealing, and getting so excited about everything happening onstage that everyone sitting around us seemed to be more entertained by watching me than by watching the actual show! My parents still have a video of it.

When I was five, I went with some of my classmates to see Annie because one of my classmate's brothers was in the show. I loved it so much that we signed up for the next musical production, and I've been doing musical theatre nonstop ever since. I've already performed in 22 shows—I did six just this summer! And they haven't all been children's theatre. I've also had the opportunity to perform in multi-age productions and professional shows alongside adult performers.

After that, I joined a singing group, started performing solos, and began taking private voice lessons. Then I joined a musical theatre triple-threat competition team, where I was singing, acting, and dancing, and I started getting much more serious about my vocal training.

A huge turning point for me was *The Phantom of the Opera*. I performed three numbers from *Phantom* and completely fell in love with the music and with Christine Daaé. I've now seen *Phantom* four times—once in London, twice at the Pantages in Los Angeles, and once near home at the Segerstrom Center in Costa Mesa.

I wanted to learn how to sing like Christine, so I began working with a teacher on the East Coast who had actually performed Christine in the West End in London in the 1990s. That led me into classical voice training and eventually to serious opera training.



Jacqueline and Dolly Popcorn

Then I discovered Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. I saw it at LA Opera and fell in love with the Queen of the Night and her famous aria. I started learning it myself, and I was so excited when I discovered that I could actually reach those really high notes! I'm already singing the aria and working on it with my teachers, but I know it takes years of training to sing something that difficult really well. One of my big goals is to someday perform the Queen of the Night onstage.

Since then, I've seen *Akhnaten* and *Turandot*—I've actually seen *Turandot* twice—and I'm going to see *Carmen* soon. We have season tickets to LA Opera now, too.

So I started out loving musical theatre, but one thing kept leading to another until I discovered opera. Now my dream is to become one of the world's great coloratura sopranos someday.

ALONG WITH SINGING, YOU ALSO PLAY THE PIANO, CELLO, AND GUITAR. HOW DOES PLAYING THOSE INSTRUMENTS HELP YOU WHEN YOU LEARN A NEW SONG?

I started playing cello when I was eleven months old, so learning an instrument has always been part of my life. I think playing instruments has given me a really strong ear for pitch. Sometimes I can hear something and figure out how to play it without looking at any music.

For example, I know “Think of Me” so well from singing it that I taught myself how to play the melody on my cello completely by ear. I didn’t use sheet music—I could hear the notes in my head and find them on my cello.

I just started learning piano this past year, and I really like it. In some ways, I think it’s easier than cello because I can see all the notes laid out in front of me. Piano is especially important to me because one of my goals is to be able to accompany myself while I sing.

My vocal teachers use the piano during my lessons, and that helps me hear the exact notes I’m supposed to sing. I can hear the note on the piano and then match it with my voice. It helps train my ear and my voice together.

I haven’t learned how to play piano or guitar and sing at the same time yet, but that’s something I really want to learn.

Playing instruments has also taught me how to read music and understand rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and music theory. Cello has taught me how to listen to the other musicians around me when I’m playing in an orchestra and how my part fits together with everyone else’s.

And I think playing instruments has taught me something important about singing: my voice is an instrument, too. Just like I have to practice my cello or piano to make them sound the way I want, I have to practice my voice, learn how to use it, and take care of it.

WHEN YOU ARE NOT SINGING OR REHEARSING FOR A SHOW, WHAT DO YOU LOVE DOING MOST JUST FOR FUN?

I love spending time with my rescue pony, Dolly Popcorn. She’s a little blonde (cremello) Shetland pony, only about ten hands tall. When I named her Dolly Popcorn, my mom laughed because it reminded her of Dolly Parton. So, of course, we made her tack room Dolly Parton themed! It has pink wallpaper, a puffy tufted pink ceiling with rhinestones, Dolly Parton sayings, and a gold-framed picture of Dolly herself. And we sang “Jolene” as we decorated and mucked her stall.



I learned dressage on Dolly Popcorn and learned how to lunge her, but I'm too big to ride her now. I still take care of her, though. I groom her, walk her, clean her stall, get her fresh water, and turn her out with her miniature-horse friends. She even has a boyfriend named Little Mack who is completely in love with her!

I also have a black-and-white Rex/Lionhead bunny named Oreo. He hangs out with me while I read in my bedroom, and at night he watches TV on the couch with my parents and me. His favorite show is Big Brother. When he hears the music at the beginning, he comes running down from his hutch, sits on the couch between us, and watches the whole show. He doesn't do that with other shows!

I love hanging out with my best friend Isabella, too. At night, I play Roblox with Isabella and my friends Zach and Lexi. We all get on the phone together and play from our own houses. I love going to Knott's Berry Farm and Disneyland with them on playdates, too!

And I love going to the theatre, even when I'm not the one performing. I've been going since I was really little. I've seen A Christmas Carol every year since I was two, and usually we see more than one production each Christmas season, including South Coast Repertory and Riley's Farm. I've also gone to The Legend of Sleepy Hollow at Riley's Farm every year since I was two. Those have become family traditions.

My parents have season tickets to the Pantages, and we also go see my friends in their shows and productions I've never seen before. I've seen more than 51 live plays, and I've personally performed in 19 productions.

I guess even when I'm taking a break from performing, I still really love being around animals, my friends, and the theatre. I also love art and sports. I like drawing and painting, and I play tennis and golf. I also do competitive ballroom dancing, which is really fun because it combines music, movement, performance, and competition. I've learned different styles of ballroom dance, and I think dancing helps me in musical theatre, too, because I'm more comfortable learning choreography and performing in front of an audience.

WHAT NEW SONGS, ROLES, OR MUSICAL PROJECTS ARE YOU MOST EXCITED TO TRY NEXT?

There are so many things I want to do next! Right now I'm learning a lot of new repertoire with my voice teachers because I'm preparing for more vocal competitions. I'm trying to learn music from all the different periods—Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Contemporary—because every style teaches me something different about my voice.

One of my biggest goals right now is to sing with a live orchestra. We've been looking for competitions where the winners get the opportunity to perform with an orchestra, because I've never done that as a solo vocalist before and I really want to experience it.

I've also been invited to perform "Think of Me" from *The Phantom of the Opera* at winners' concerts at Carnegie Hall and Harvard University. I've performed that song many times, but now I'm going back and working on it again. I don't just want to sing the notes correctly. I'm working on the acting, understanding what Christine is feeling, and making it into a real performance where the audience feels the story, too.

Before my tenth birthday, I have another goal: I want to record some pop songs and some of the original songs I've written. I even wrote a Christmas song for choir that I would love to have my choir sing at a Christmas tree lighting.

And I just recorded "The Star-Spangled Banner." Now my mom and I are trying to find my first opportunity to perform it live, maybe at a sporting event or a city event.

I have a lot I want to accomplish before I turn ten. I think what I'm most excited about is trying things I've never done before and finding out what my voice can do next.

Right now, I'm playing Young Nala in *The Lion King*, which I'm really excited about. I love getting to combine singing and acting and become a character instead of just standing onstage and singing a song.

There are also two shows coming up that I'm hoping to audition for: *Scrooge* and *The Sound of Music*.

Tiny Tim in *Scrooge* is one of my dream roles because I would get to sing "Beautiful Day." That song sits in this really pretty, sweet part of my head voice. I would love to make it sound almost otherworldly and ethereal, because I think that fits Tiny Tim and that moment in the story.

Playing one of the von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music* is another dream of mine. I recently got a callback for the National Broadway Tour for Marta/Gretl, and for a little while I could actually picture myself going on tour for a year and performing all over the country. I didn't end up going on the tour, but getting that callback made me want to keep working toward that role.

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