



JONAS  
KAUFMANN  
ROMANTIC  
ARIAS

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JONAS KAUFMANN  
A TENOR WHO  
MAKES HIS OWN RULES

Roger Pines

Today's operatic world tends to place singers in compartments by composer — Mozart soprano, Rossini mezzo, Verdi baritone. Tenors, too, are regularly subjected to this sort of vocal straitjacketing, but Jonas Kaufmann resists it, uncompromisingly maintaining his remarkable versatility. During the 2006–07 season alone he triumphed as Verdi's Duke of Mantua and Don Carlo (Zürich), Wagner's Walther von Stolzing (Edinburgh International Festival), Mozart's Tamino (Metropolitan Opera, New York), Berlioz's Faust (Rome) and Bizet's Don José (Royal Opera House, Covent Garden). Master of style, possessor of a thrillingly distinctive sound, an actor of spectacular imagination — here is a tenor whose artistry and musical curiosity know no boundaries.

Kaufmann takes pride in having won acceptance when singing particular operas in the country of their origin, whether France, Italy or his native Germany. His diverse repertoire continually renews his energies. "It was once absolutely normal that someone would sing Mozart one night and Wagner the next," he observes, "and no one would say, 'How can he do that?' Now it's extremely unusual, which is a pity. I love moving from one style to another — I never get bored! I always need a challenge, both vocally and interpretatively."

Varied repertoire enriches Kaufmann's vocal flexibility, enabling him to embrace Mozart's *Così fan tutte* as gladly as Wagner's *Parsifal* or Puccini's *Tosca*. Yet he still regularly confronts preconceptions as to which roles he should sing. When he first sang Florestan in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, for example, he recalls that "every theatre wanted me for this role and for all the German parts, including Wagner. People said, 'Now that he's starting to do those roles, within a few years that's all he'll be singing.'" That, of course, would hold no interest whatsoever for Kaufmann. As he explains, it's like driving: "You can't just go full speed on the motorway, and you can't just drive slowly around town — there has to be something in between."

This debut disc gives a broad, if not complete, idea of Kaufmann's vocal and stylistic range (Mozart, a vital component of his career, has been left for another day). As for the title, "I love all the romantic stuff! Although it sounds kitschy, I'm a romantic person. I enjoy playing romantic

parts and singing romantic music." The excerpts have been chosen from operas Kaufmann has either already performed or is planning for the near future. The exception is *Martha*, seldom staged nowadays but remembered for its beloved tenor aria "Ach, so fromm" (perhaps better known in Italian as "M'appari").

Whether shaping the legato of Flotow's melody, ascending to the soft high B flat of the "Flower Song" from Bizet's *Carmen*, or moving from the soaring climax to the gentle conclusion of Rodolfo's "Che gelida manina" from Puccini's *La Bohème*, Kaufmann's voice takes each hurdle with assurance. Opera-lovers dream about such a sound — smouldering in its manly, dark timbre, yet exhilarating in its ring on top. The vocalism astonishes, while the dramatic involvement can move the listener to tears. Kaufmann creates a three-dimensional figure in every aria, communicating a freshness even in the most familiar music.

This recital offers souvenirs of such memorable characterisations as Kaufmann's Don José, which, according to the veteran critic Michael Kennedy writing in *Opera* magazine, "set a new standard for the role" in 2006 at Covent Garden. Considering his persuasiveness in Verdi and Puccini, it comes as no surprise that Kaufmann speaks fluent Italian and often has difficulty convincing new acquaintances that he is, in fact, German ("People say, 'Your parents probably run a pizzeria!'"). In his native repertoire, Kaufmann's voice is tailor-made for Max, hero of Weber's *Der Freischütz*. Most *Freischütz* tenors eventually take on Walther in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, which Kaufmann hadn't anticipated performing for some years yet. In 2006, however, he sang the role in concert at the urging of Brian McMaster, then director of the Edinburgh Festival. Writing in *The Times*, critic Neil Fisher hailed Kaufmann's performance as "a revelation ... his ardent spontaneity was the evening's highlight".

Growing up in Munich, Kaufmann never envisioned singing as his future vocation. He did enjoy recordings by such great German tenors as Rudolf Schock, Peter Anders and the "fantastic" Fritz Wunderlich, whose wide-ranging repertoire set a precedent for his own; and at Munich's famous opera house, the Bayerische Staatsoper, he was struck by hearing Pavarotti, Carreras and especially Domingo. But after high school Kaufmann initially studied mathematics before his attraction to singing finally led him to his hometown's Musikhochschule. His voice was then "a very light, typically German sound. My teacher expected me to sound like that. The voice I'm using now is what I used in the shower or the elevator!"

After small roles at both Munich houses, Kaufmann spent two years as an ensemble member in Saarbrücken. Increasingly he felt his trained voice was not his true sound, but luckily a new teacher set him right. Now confident vocally, Kaufmann left Saarbrücken with no offers but was soon successful in Stuttgart, prompting invitations from other German theatres. The

rest of Europe took notice — Milan (La Scala), Zürich, Brussels, Salzburg. America first heard him in 2001, as Cassio in Verdi's *Otello* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Five years later he arrived at the Metropolitan Opera as Alfredo in the same composer's *La traviata*.

The press's enthusiasm for Kaufmann often focuses on his theatrical flair, which he regards simply as a basic requirement of his profession ("Nobody can just stand there and sing"). His good looks, too, have attracted considerable attention, and certainly he recognises the importance of a singer's appearance in this visual age. On the other hand, "I hate being measured in terms of sex appeal. As long as that is an extra, added to the vocal performance, I'm fine with it, but if that's the only thing people talk about and no one takes notice that you sing well, something is wrong!"

Kaufmann is fully aware of the fleeting quality of singing itself: "You do a performance and it's over — it's rarely something that can be preserved. So to be able to achieve that with this CD is a dream come true. People may own recitals by other tenors, but we're all individuals, and every artist sees things from a different point of view. I do what I do on this CD not because it's necessarily new, but because it's my particular way of interpreting and singing this music."

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