

JONAS KAUFMANN THE GERMAN TENOR by ROGER PINES

Jonas Kaufmann has triumphed internationally in roles of spectacular diversity. But, as a German tenor, he naturally feels a –special musical connection with works written in his native tongue. Following his Decca debut recording of familiar arias in the three central operatic languages, Kaufmann is now returning home, musically speaking.

“The first disc was my calling card,” says Kaufmann. Now he is ready to concentrate on particular areas of the repertoire, with that of his homeland seeming to him the logical take-off point. “It was my initial target in making this second disc, because I am German. I have grown up with this repertoire, it is has been with me from the time of my first musical memories — you might say it is in my genes!”

Kaufmann is especially happy that this album has also given him the chance to renew his association with Claudio Abbado, whose affinity for German repertoire has always deeply impressed him. “He is an extremely passionate musician,” says Kaufmann, “always trying to discover the layers under the surface of the music. He does this intimately, almost shyly, but the result is unique — and fantastic! It’s like he’s recreating every piece for the first time, but in such a gentle way.”

Kaufmann’s journey into German opera began in childhood, hearing his grandfather play from piano scores of Wagner’s works. “Obviously, I never dreamt that I’d sing any Wagner roles,” the tenor recalls. “When I heard them, they always seemed to me like giants shouting.” He responded very differently to Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, “which really is popular music and something kids understand. It’s in my blood and part of my culture.” Recordings of German tenors inspired the young Kaufmann, especially Fritz Wunderlich, who died tragically early, three years before Kaufmann was born. “He was the last in the royal line,” says Kaufmann of his idol, “and perhaps not typically German in that it was always the heart that spoke through his voice.” Wunderlich’s singing taught Kaufmann that “once you learn to control the voice 100 per cent, then you must fill it with so much emotion that people would bet all their money that you really, really feel it. It’s not just something made up to impress the audience — it feels true.”

As a student at Munich’s Hochschule für Musik, Kaufmann treasured the opportunity to sing Tamino in a concert performance of *Die Zauberflöte* under Sir Colin Davis: “He enjoyed that music so much, spreading his spirit over it.” Mozart’s prince is now a signature role for Kaufmann at the Metropolitan Opera and in Munich, Vienna and Zurich. The tenor did initially need time to make Tamino his own — “not the music, but the character. He’s trying to be dominant and heroic, but that’s just a shell. I enjoy showing the humanity behind it.”

In Tamino’s Portrait Aria (“Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön”), Kaufmann’s mastery of the daunting technical hurdles leaves him free to revel in Mozart’s lovestruck legato phrases. He finds a greater challenge in the Flute Aria (“Wie stark ist nicht dein Zauberton”): “It needs lightness, freshness, which I’m always working on.” What particularly sparks Kaufmann’s interpretative imagination is Tamino’s preceding confrontation with the Speaker: “It’s my favourite episode, really the key scene of the whole opera. Even though Tamino has been brainwashed by the Queen of the Night and her ladies, here you see his intelligence and that he’s able to think for himself.”

Kaufmann learnt his first leading German role, Beethoven’s Florestan, at the urging of Helmuth Rilling, who conducted the tenor’s debut *Fidelio* performances in Stuttgart and

Bonn. Kaufmann admits to finding Florestan comparatively one-dimensional: "There's suffering, then disbelief, then belief, then joy — but that's not enough for me. I love characters where there's more variety in their development." The role does offer Kaufmann great musical satisfaction, especially the scena that opens Act Two, "which really does describe this man's desperate situation. The aria's middle section is so beautiful, so warm, as if he's creating his own paradise garden within the dungeon. Then out of this paradise comes a shadow: 'What is that? It's an angel — no, it's more than an angel, it's my wife who's going to save me!' And then the vision dies, as he faints and is completely broken." Schubert's more than fifteen operas have nearly all been neglected because, says Kaufmann, "the texts just aren't good. He would have been a good operatic composer, except that he chose the wrong stories!" Kaufmann has helped to reacquaint the public with at least one of them, *Fierrabras*, having sung the title role in Zurich, Paris, London and Vienna. This music demands the heroically scaled voice of a Florestan. Also represented here is another rare Schubert opera, *Alfonso und Estrella*, which Kaufmann chose on the enthusiastic recommendation of Claudio Abbado. Alfonso's aria requires the superb grace acquired by Kaufmann in part through his considerable experience in German song literature.

Having sung the Third Squire in *Parsifal* as a very young artist, Kaufmann portrayed that work's protagonist in Zurich in 2006, closing a circle with his first leading Wagner role. Like so many of his predecessors, Kaufmann has found the experience of portraying Parsifal profoundly affecting. For him, this character's second-act aria is "a very deep emotional outburst. He's the 'reine Tor' — the 'pure fool' — but because of that purity, he's the one who sees the world as it really is. It's as if someone pulled a mask from his face, letting him look from darkness into bright light. He feels the wound of Amfortas, and he understands the attraction of Kundry, who is a symbol, like Eve in Paradise — the temptation. Everything is so crystal-clear to him now, and suddenly he becomes mature. It's extremely interesting to make this credible in those six or seven minutes." When Parsifal returns in Act Three, "he's very philosophical, not saying much. His experience with Kundry has changed him completely." The finale is "heroic and, at the same time, the real holy moment in the opera, when Parsifal relieves Amfortas from his endless suffering. It's very thrilling, and the whole opera has worked towards making it possible." In 2006 Kaufmann sang his first Stolzing in *Die Meistersinger* in a concert performance at the Edinburgh Festival. This disc includes previews of two eagerly awaited debuts in other Wagnerian roles. Kaufmann plans to sing Lohengrin for the first time in Munich in July 2009: its style appeals immensely to him — he considers it the most Italianate of Wagner's operas. The challenge, he says, is "to make Lohengrin a very human person, someone you can live with and feel for onstage". Further down the line, Siegmund in *Die Walküre* should profit from his dark timbre and exceptionally secure low notes: "Siegmund has very long passages in the lower register, which need to be full and grounded. The role should be regarded as almost 'baritenor'!" A priority for Kaufmann in Wagner is to pay close attention to the composer's expressive markings, which many singers ignore: "The challenge is not only to sing piano wherever the score asks for it, but to have this accepted as how it should be!" Kaufmann keeps in mind, too, that "in so many letters Wagner wrote that he wanted legato singing and Italian technique. Wagner composed beautifully for the voice but you have to approach his music with all the techniques of the best bel canto style."

The tenor is, however, wisely continuing to resist jumping headlong into the heaviest Wagner roles: "Of course the great dramatic Wagnerian roles appeal to me greatly, but they lie much further away in my future. You will have to wait quite a long while for the Siegfrieds — even longer for Tristan and Tannhäuser!"

With this all-German disc, Kaufmann declares, “I’m trying to recreate part of my culture. I hope I’ve approached it in the right way, and that people trust me to be honest with what I’m doing. That’s the most important point for me as an artist—not to play the roles, but really to feel them, to make them a part of myself and me a part of them.”

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