

Joshua Hopkins: Flying High

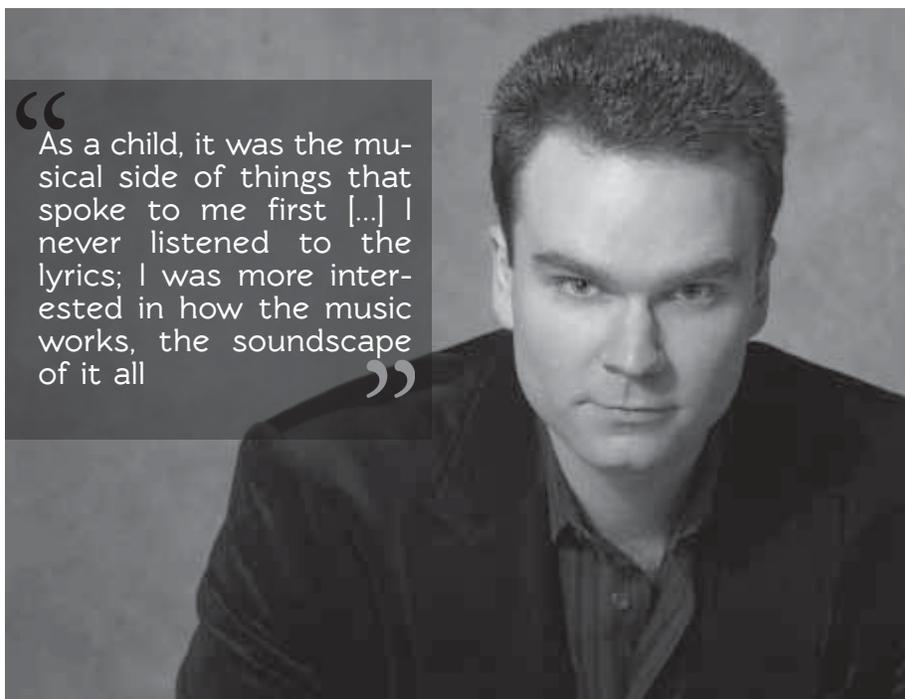
Fast-rising Canadian baritone talks about life onstage and off

by JOSEPH K. SO

Even in the crowded field of up and coming Canadian singers, Joshua Hopkins stands out. He combines a beautiful lyric baritone with solid technique and innate musicality, used with grace and discerning taste. A fine actor, Hopkins' engaging stage persona has made him popular with stage directors and audiences. A native of Pembroke, Ontario, Hopkins studied voice with William and Dixie Neill at McGill University. Early successes include prizes at the José Carreras Julián Gayarre Singing Competition, Plácido Domingo's Operalia, ARD Musikwettbewerb (Munich), George London Foundation, Canada Council's Sylvia Gelber Foundation prize, and the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award. Important engagements have come his way—Papageno opposite French diva Natalie Dessay's first Pamina at the Santa Fe Opera, a role he reprised last summer, together with a devilishly funny Sid in *Albert Herring*, which drew critical raves. An important milestone last season was Hopkins' Met debut as Ping in *Turandot*, seen live by satellite worldwide as part of the Met's Live in HD. This fall, Hopkins takes on the role of Junior in Bernstein's *A Quiet Place* at the New York City Opera, directed by Christopher Alden. Hopkins makes his home in Houston with his wife and fellow singer Zoë Tarshis.

LSM: What was it like to sing at the Met?

JH: It was so exciting just to be singing on that stage, to work with people of that level of experi-



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ence and world renown. I felt comfortable, felt that I really fit in, although the rehearsal process was quicker than I am used to with other companies. I understand that for older productions it's left for the singers to bring whatever they want artistically to the stage and the role, and we only had three or four days on stage before opening night. We weren't given very long to get the movements into our bodies so I took home a rehearsal fan and worked through the routine, so the next day at rehearsal I was more fluent with it.

And all that hard work paid off...

Yes, I was originally contracted to sing only eight performances in the fall, and cover eight more in January. But in December the Met asked if I would be interested in doing all the shows.

Tell us about Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*.

I'm singing the role of Junior, the son in *Trouble in Tahiti*. *A Quiet Place* is the sequel; Junior is now 40 and he has a mental disorder. All the neglect he had in *Trouble in Tahiti* has seriously affected his mental health. In the opera, he has to deal with certain childhood incidents that help explain why he's the way he is. I'll also be in the Jazz Trio from *Trouble in Tahiti*, which Bernstein incorporated into the revised *A Quiet Place* as flashbacks. The opera wasn't well received when it premiered in Houston and had never been done in New York until now. I'm also going to be in excerpts of Bernstein's *Mass*, as part of a concert of his music that also features other members of the cast.

Tell us about your upcoming *St. John Passion*...

It's a project with Matthew White and his Les Voix Baroques. We are going to be performing Bach's *St. John Passion* as part of the Montreal Bach Festival in November, followed by a recording. There's a European flair to this project, as the soloists are also part of a very small chorale of nine people. We'll also be doing it in March on the west coast, mostly in Oregon but also in Seattle and Vancouver. I love to sing Bach!

Tell us about your first solo recital disc for ATMA.

I wanted to feature *South of North—Images of Canada*, a song cycle by (Srul Irving) Glick. I'm very passionate about these very approachable songs,

Let Beauty Awake

Songs by Vaughan Williams, Glick, Bowles, and Barber
Joshua Hopkins, baritone; Jerad Mosbey, piano

ATMA Classique ACD2 2615

★★★★☆☆

In a carefully chosen program of English songs on the theme of nature, Joshua Hopkins combines chestnuts (Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel*) with the comparatively rare (Paul Bowles' *Blue Mountain Ballads*). The centerpiece is the first recording of Glick's *South of North—Images of Canada*. VW's cycle is often mentioned in the same breath as Schubert's *Winterreise* and Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, given the common theme of the wanderer in all three cycles. But *Songs of Travel* doesn't have the



unrelenting darkness, or, dare I say, neurosis, of the Schubert or Mahler. The vocal writing of VW and Glick tends to push at the extremes of the singer's range. Hopkins' beautiful baritone remains solid and assured, a few uncomfortable moments in the low register notwithstanding. Perhaps a bit more variation of his timbre for dramatic expression would have been nice, especially in the Barber. Also Hopkins' enthusiastically rolled r's in 'Bright is the Ring of Words' take some getting used to, but that's quibbling, as his affinity for these songs is never in doubt. His 'Whither Must I Wander?' and 'Let Beauty Awake' are lovely. If Hopkins' delivery of the VW cycle and the Barber songs tends to be a bit straightforward, the contrasting moods of the Bowles songs are nicely done. Pianist Jerad Mosbey offers solid and sympathetic support. This is an auspicious debut disc and hopefully the first of many. JKS

a group of eight for baritone. I found this gem in the stacks at the Canadian Music Centre in Toronto four or five years ago, and I've always wanted to bring this cycle to a wider audience. I've performed it a few times, and was pretty sure they had not been recorded in full. Glick composed it in 1998 and it was premiered at the Arts and Letters Club in December of that year with James Westman and Albert Krywolt. The very descriptive poetic text by Richard Outram is based on paintings of nature. The main idea is man's appreciation of nature. The title, *Let Beauty Awake*, is from the second of Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel*, and I think it reflects the theme of the disc well.

In your blog you mentioned that some songs are trickier to sing than others. Is Glick difficult?

His songs are challenging, with a large range. Sometimes certain words are difficult to sing at certain pitches, and some of the text settings go into extremes of my range. The program is quite a big sing—with the limited amount of time to record, it was very challenging.

Do you have a favourite song on the disc?

I'm very much in love with *Let Beauty Awake*—that's why I chose it as the title. The scope of the song is so vast and the images created the text are so vivid! The piano part describing the sunset composed by Williams is very striking. I am also very fond of *Wither Must I Wander*, such a reflective song. The Bowles songs are jazzy and give the disc a different flair.

In recital, the music or the text, which is more important to you?

That's the age-old question (laughs)! I just sang Olivier in *Capriccio* – the whole opera is based on the argument of words versus music. I would say I'm a music guy. I first want something I'm happy to listen to before I go to the text. As a child, it was the musical side of things that spoke to me first. Like the pop songs I listened to on the radio. I never listened to the lyrics; I was more interested in how the music works, the soundscape of it all. When I started listening to lyrics, I realized there is a whole different level to the songs that I was missing. When I started studying singing, I became aware of the importance of words. If I were to choose a selection of lieder for a concert, I would do it from a textual basis, choosing what fits together in a theme.

You're singing a lot in New York. It must be quite an adjustment after spending the summer in Santa Fe...

It's fabulous—being able to spend time in New York is exciting. It does take time to get used to, especially when compared to the slow pace of Santa Fe. One of the greatest advantages to a career is travel.

So you don't mind the travel?

I enjoy the travel for the most part. I don't enjoy the days when I am traveling—I don't think anybody does! But once we're settled in, and have made that initial connection with the city... We like to explore, to walk a lot and check out the different neighbourhoods. It's slightly different from my other colleagues, as my family travels with me. We have our standard poodle with us so we can travel—we're a family on the road, whereas a lot of my colleagues have to leave their family behind.

LSM



BREAK DANCE au FESTIVAL BACH DE MONTRÉAL

JULIE BERARDINO

Du 28 au 30 novembre, la troupe allemande de danse urbaine Flying Steps célébrera l'audacieux mariage du hip-hop avec la musique des 12 premiers préludes et fugues du premier volume du *Clavier bien tempéré* de J.S. Bach dans le spectacle Red Bull Flying Bach, acclamé de par le monde. Performances athlétiques de haut niveau, pluie d'effets visuels et arrangements de musique électronique se superposent aux interprétations irréprochables et épurées de la claveciniste Sabina Chukurova et du pianiste Christoph Hagel, également directeur artistique. Les danseurs se départagent chacune des voix des fugues avec une précision et une énergie ahurissantes.

Frondeur et résolument engagé dans la promotion de la musique baroque, Hagel ne craint pas d'amener le *break dance* à la salle de concert, de le faire art, pas plus qu'il n'a craint d'amener Bach dans la rue et de l'offrir ainsi aux jeunes. Ce délicieux appel à l'ouverture d'esprit, ce mélange inusité est loin de présenter des styles irréconciliables. Au contraire, comme le souligne le chorégraphe Vartan Bassil, le *break dance* se combine à merveille à la musique classique et baroque, grâce à toute la force, la fébrilité et le dynamisme qu'elle renferme. De quoi donner un nouveau souffle à la musique intemporelle de Bach! Église unie St-James, www.festivalbachmontreal.com

AU FESTIVAL BACH: LA PASSION SELON SAINT JEAN SOUS un NOUVEL ÉCLAIRAGE

RENÉE BANVILLE

La 4^e édition du Festival Bach de Montréal se déroulera du 26 novembre au 8 décembre et soulignera le 325^e anniversaire de la naissance de J.S. Bach en 22 concerts et événements qui se tiendront en 13 lieux de diffusion.

Arion Orchestre Baroque amorcera en beauté sa 30^e saison en présentant le 26 novembre, au concert d'ouverture du Festival Bach de Montréal, l'œuvre dramatique exceptionnelle de J.S. Bach. Suivant la vision intimiste du compositeur, les arias illustrent le propos, les chorals le magnifient et le chœur devient symbole de l'assemblée des fidèles. Chef invité: Alex Weimann, orgue. Solistes: Les Voix Baroques (13 voix, dont Matthew White). Causerie préconcert à 19 h 15 par Philippe Gervais, collaborateur à *La Scena Musicale*. Le concert sera repris le samedi 27 novembre.

Le Festival se poursuivra, le dimanche 28 à 14 h, avec le Chœur Saint-Laurent qui interprétera des extraits de l'*Oratorio de Noël* et des cantiques traditionnels. À 19 h 30, vous avez le choix d'aller entendre des cantates par le Theatre of Early Music ou de vivre toute une gamme d'émotions en assistant à la soirée Red Bull Flying Bach, du «break-dance» sur *Le clavier bien tempéré*. Le FBM réunit plusieurs de nos organismes musicaux et quelques-uns des meilleurs artistes de la scène musicale mondiale. Pour connaître tous les détails: 514-581-8637 www.festivalbachmontreal.com