

# Two milestones in one week

## Pembroke-bred baritone performs in New York, releases first solo CD

BY STEVEN MAZEY, OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 24, 2010

It's been a month of exciting back-to-back debuts for Pembroke-bred baritone Joshua Hopkins: in the same week in late October, he gave his first performance for New York City Opera in a musically challenging opera by Leonard Bernstein and he saw the release of *Let Beauty Awake*, his first solo recital CD, a collection of 20th-century songs for Montreal's ATMA Classique label.

Hopkins, whose burnished voice and sensitive musicianship have won him many awards and a fast-developing international career, will be in Ottawa Sunday, to perform as a soloist in Bach's *St. John Passion* with Les Voix Baroques and Orchestre Arion at Dominion-Chalmers Church, as part of the Ottawa Chamber Music Society concert series.

In New York City, where he and wife Zoe enjoyed the city's sights, theatre and restaurants, he concluded his run Nov. 21 in Bernstein's rarely performed 1983 opera *A Quiet Place*. It followed Hopkins' debut last year with the Metropolitan Opera in the role of Ping in Puccini's *Turandot*.

In Bernstein's opera about a troubled suburban family, Hopkins sang the role of the troubled gay son.

"The baritone Joshua Hopkins won your heart as the tormented, yet charming Junior," wrote New York Times critic Anthony Tommasini, who praised the entire cast and mentioned a prolonged ovation on opening night.

Tommasini noted that stage director Christopher Alden said it's difficult to deal with "a somewhat dated character: a gay man who is 'punished' with mental illness."

"Yet Bernstein's music ennobles and animates Junior, and with his mix of anguish and vitality, Hopkins triumphs over stereotype," Tommasini wrote.

Written late in the composer's life, the opera was written in a more experimental mode than Bernstein's more conventional musical-theatre style in pieces like *West Side Story* and *On the Town*.

"It's a real mixture, with all sorts of musical styles," Hopkins told me from New York during the run of the production.

"It's a piece that you need to hear a few times to hear how it all fits together. My role is challenging and the range is quite large, though Bernstein was pretty smart in how he wrote for the voice. It's still comfortable. It's really been rewarding to explore this character."

On his debut solo CD for the ATMA label, *Let Beauty Awake*, Hopkins is accompanied by pianist Jerad Mosbey in four sets of songs from the 20th century: Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel*, Canadian composer Srul Irving Glick's *South of North-Images of Canada*, Paul Bowles' *Blue Mountain Ballads* and Samuel Barber's *Three Songs*.

Hopkins recorded it in three days in May of 2009, and says he's proud of the disc. He should be. He's in superb vocal form, singing with warmth and expressiveness, and Mosbey accompanies him sensitively. The two musicians work wonderfully together. (Samples are available at [www.atmaclassique.com](http://www.atmaclassique.com)).

But getting there had its challenges. For the website of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust, the British organization that supported Hopkins with an award to help fund the project, Hopkins has written a fascinating diary of the process of recording the disc. ( [www.bbtrust.com](http://www.bbtrust.com)).

In the diary, Hopkins writes about the pressure that musicians face on tight recording deadlines and how intimidating it can be for a young singer to know that something you're recording is going to be on record forever, judged and dissected by music critics and music lovers.

But in the end, Hopkins told me, "I was happy with everything. One of the strengths that Jerad and I had was that we knew exactly what we wanted to do and we were organized, given the limited amount of time we had to lay down what we wanted and to know what we wanted to fix. Having the opportunity to record in this day and age, with the sad status of the classical recording industry, is fantastic. I'm grateful for it."

Hopkins says the sets of songs on the disc work well together. "They share an appreciation, love and observation of nature and man's existence in nature. For me it kind of follows a storyline."

Other exciting performances this season for Hopkins include his coming debuts with Dallas Opera (*Mercutio in Romeo et Juliette*) and San Diego Opera (*Valentin in Gounod's Faust*).

And he says he's looking forward to performing Bach's *St. John Passion* Nov. 28 in Ottawa, where he had some of his early performance experiences. The ensembles will also perform in Montreal and will record the work for ATMA. Hopkins has sung the piece a few times, but

not with the smaller ensemble that will perform in this pared-down format. Other singers will include Ottawa counter-tenor Matthew White.

"This format will be with reduced choir, and all the soloists comprise the choir, so we sing the chorus parts and we have the solos. I love singing Bach. It's honey for the voice."

The performance starts at 3 p.m. at Dominion-Chalmers Church, O'Connor Street at Cooper. Tickets, from \$29 to \$47, can be reserved through 613-234-6306 or [www.chamberfest.com](http://www.chamberfest.com).

Read Steve Mazey's blog at: [ottawacitizen.com/classicalottawa](http://ottawacitizen.com/classicalottawa)

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