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Lyric baritone Takaaki Onishi, in Chicago this month for *Bel Canto*

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• **Take 5:** mezzo **Ginger Costa-Jackson**, who this month sings Rosina in *Met Barber* performances, sits for a video interview.

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Plácido Domingo



He's been a courtier and a sea god, performing over 140 roles and counting. Already the world's most famous tenor, he went on to become a conductor. And then, opera company director. Now he's cast himself in a new role: baritone. But no matter what part he plays next, Plácido Domingo's Rolex will accompany him. Like his passion, it is perpetual. And every minute is an opportunity for another perfect performance.



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Takaoki Onishi.

Right now, he's a promising lyric baritone — who dreams of conquering Verdi one day.

TAKAOKI ONISHI remembers that he spent several of his teen years singing bass arias “without the top.” But he unexpectedly made the transition to high baritone. “I suddenly found my top. My teacher was very surprised. I came back from summer break, and there it was.” In recent seasons, he has honed his evenly produced lyric baritone into an instrument of considerable beauty. Last May he joined Lyric Opera of Chicago’s Ryan Opera Center.

After winning the IFAC–Juilliard Prize Singing Competition in Japan, Onishi was given a scholarship to the Juilliard School. “I got in after I passed the English test, which took me a year and a half to pass,” he says. “That was the hardest transition I had to make. My temptation in my first two years at Juilliard was to push a bit. American voices are for me so big!”

While at Juilliard, he performed the title role in *Eugene Onegin*. “I was lucky to have that performance in a safe environment,” he says. “The orchestra was reduced, so I didn’t have to push. I studied the Pushkin poem. Onegin is so complicated—it’s hard to see him as one character in the end.” Onishi also scored victories in the Opera Index and Licia

Albanese–Puccini International Voice Competitions, among others. His winning arias included Valentin’s “Avant de quitter ces lieux” and Silvio’s “E fra quest’ansie.”

Down the line, Onishi, now thirty, would like to go after some of the big Verdi roles, such as Don Carlo in *La Forza del Destino*. (“That opera has been in my head, always.”) In the meantime, he’s happy to be working at a slow, steady pace at the Ryan Center. This month he appears there in the world premiere of Jimmy López and Nilo Cruz’s *Bel Canto*. (*Bel Canto* features some passages written in Japanese, and Onishi has been pulling double duty, learning his part as well as serving as the company’s Japanese-language coach.)

Onishi counts Seiji Ozawa as a great role model and is also an admirer of the distinguished author Haruki Murakami. “Because of him,” says Onishi, “I studied American literature. He has translated lots of great American works, like *The Great Gatsby* and *Catcher in the Rye* and all of the Raymond Chandler books. I think that’s why American readers are so interested in his novels. He’s kind of my connection to American culture and literature.” ■



GROOMING BY AEFAN MALIK

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