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## **New Artist of the Month: Baritone Takaoki Onishi**

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NEW YORK--For lovers of great singing there are few thrills equal to hearing a truly important voice for the first time. The young Japanese baritone Takaoki Onishi has been providing that thrill a lot this past year, especially in New York City, where he is pursuing an Artist Diploma at

Juilliard while generating a considerable—and growing— amount of excitement in the music world.

I heard him in September 2013 in an “Eve Queler and Friends” concert at Alice Tully Hall, in a program of Donizetti, Bizet, Korngold, and Verdi. The voice is dark-hued and sumptuous with a wonderful metallic sheen in the upper register that makes for very exciting climaxes. But what is even more impressive is his ability to communicate the emotion and the drama of the music, and to do so within the style of each composer. “In the past I just wanted to sing beautifully and make very pretty sounds,” he said in a recent interview, “but now my goal is to communicate with the audience through the music and the language. Even if the audience does not know the language they should understand what performers are singing about.”

During a very hectic three-month period last season, he sang Jesus in Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* at Tully Hall, Eugene Onegin at Juilliard, was the baritone soloist in *Carmina Burana*, and portrayed Pandolfe in Massenet’s *Cendrillon*—a role he jumped into for an ailing colleague at Juilliard on literally a few hours’ notice. *The New York Times* took note: “Takaoki Onishi sang Jesus [in the *St. Matthew Passion*] in a strong but pliant voice, as he did Onegin in Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* last month at Juilliard.”

Key members of the music world have also taken note. A couple weeks after the Eve Queler concert, I heard him in Richard Bonyngé’s master class at Juilliard. His initial singing of “Ah! per sempre” from Bellini’s *I Puritani* was thrilling, but as he worked with Bonyngé the music quickly gained nuance and became emotionally richer.

“He is a talent that has a guaranteed future,” Bonyngé told a writer for the Japanese edition of *Newsweek*. The conductor promptly offered Onishi a scholarship to the Accademia Georg Solti in Italy this summer, where the young baritone is working with the likes of Leon Nucci, Thomas Allen, and Thomas Hampson, and where he will be reunited with both Bonyngé and Mariella Devia.

Last spring Onishi covered the role of the Duke of Nottingham in Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* in an Opera Orchestra of New York performance that starred Devia. "I finally *really* understood what Maestro Bonyngue was saying in his master class while I was rehearsing with Devia," he says. "It was a lot of singing and I found a way to sing neatly and to really shape the music."

This summer, after the Solti Academy and performances at the Verbier Festival, Onishi goes to the Saito Kinen Festival in Japan to cover the role of Ford in *Falstaff*, conducted by Fabio Luisi. He has been recommended for the 2015 Cardiff Singer of the World competition and has been offered his Carnegie Hall debut next spring. All very heady stuff, and par for the course for Onishi since he arrived in New York in 2010.

After graduating from Musashino Academy of Music in Tokyo he became the winner of the inaugural IFAC-Juilliard Prize Singing Competition in Japan, which provided him with a full scholarship to Juilliard. He has also won the top prizes in the Gerda Lissner International Vocal Competition, the Opera Index, Inc. Vocal Competition, and the Licia Albanese-Puccini International Vocal Competition.

In addition to standard repertoire, Onishi has participated in several world and American premieres. Last spring he created a leading role in the world premiere of Marty Roger's *The Memory Stone* with Houston Grand Opera's East/West program, and at Juilliard he appeared in the America premiere of Peter Maxwell Davies's *Kommilitonen*.

A notable aspect of Onishi's artistry is the honesty and individuality of his performance. When he is portraying a comic role—Malatesta in *Don Pasquale* or Rossini's Figaro, for instance—there is no hint of cutesiness. "I don't think, 'This role is serious and that role is comic,' he says. "I try to reach the inside of the character and not see the outside. If you look at a character who is being silly, they have a reason for that behavior."

Before Onishi decided on a career as a singer, he wanted to be a translator or an interpreter; his innate talent comes through onstage. "One time my teacher said that performers are like interpreters because you have to interpret your music for the audience. I start with the text, working every day on just speaking the text, while also working on the music separately. Always your vocal technique is connected to the language, so as I learn languages more, I can sing more freely.

"In New York you can have anyone in the audience. One time after I sang *Tanzlied* [from *Die Tote Stadt*], a lady came up and said, 'Well, that was very beautiful, but actually I am German...' and I knew she had some criticism. But it was a very good experience for me and after that I worked on language even more."

Onishi loves listening to recordings by great singers of the past. "Ettore Bastianini, Titta Ruffo, Mattia Battistini—I listen to their colors in the voice and I try to remember every detail of their vowels."

For Onishi, it is the details in the music that matter even more. "Even the rests tell you a lot about the character and the drama. They tell you the character is hesitant about something, or he needs to calm himself. There's always a reason the composer put it there."