

Meeting the right person matters. This is one of the messages we get from this charming interview with Jonas Kaufmann, one of the most important *voices* of our times and, frankly, *a sex symbol at the service of Opera* (as he now admits quite easily). His schedule is booked six or seven years in advance, and he can sing anything from lighter lyric roles to Puccini, Massenet and Wagner. At 46, his career has already reached heights many tenors only dream of. But were it not for the intervention of his teacher, Michael Rhodes, it might never have happened. Twenty years ago, Kaufmann was just another lyric tenor in Saarbrücken, singing the roles he had been told to sing: Mozart's Tamino (*The Magic Flute*) and Don Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*). Kaufmann speaks fondly of a childhood soaked in music and opera... and in Italy! The way he talks about his *Italian holidays* make us proud, for

once, of our country. What does not make us as proud is to read of the importance that the school had in his musical growth. Beware! He is not talking about conservatory, but ordinary school. This is almost impossible in Italy. To say the least music is neglected in our schools, where if you are lucky, you may have classes of *music history*, and only very rarely, and only thanks to the commitment of some special teachers, playing and singing. This is even more outstandingly, since music plays such an important role in our everyday lives, and even a greater one in those of our children. Jonas then touches a soft spot: the importance of talent. Why are some people so incredibly accomplished at what they do, while millions of others in those same fields never rise above mediocrity? Why are some people so extraordinarily creative and innovative? Why

can some continue to perform astoundingly at ages when conventional wisdom says it's impossible? Almost all of us think we have some answers to those questions: the lucky few *superperformers* were born with a special gift, an innate ability to do exactly what they do so extremely well. But Jonas Kauffman, without underestimating the importance of talent, gives us a different perspective: specific natural abilities, on their own, cannot explain great performance. Instead, the key is to build on talent with what researchers call *deliberate practice*. It's a well-defined map of activities that world-class performers pursue diligently. As Jonas tells us.

Mariella Palazzolo  @Telosaes

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KAUFMANN

## JONAS' VARIATIONS. THE STORY OF A VIRTUOSO

“ You can't overrate talent, since this a must if you want to be on stage - but to have success and make a career, this of course needs much more than talent. ”

**Telos:** Opera is a unique art form bringing together words, music, theatre and design. Italy is the birthplace of the art to which you have dedicated your entire life. Italy has also a particular meaning in your family (so, considering all this it is no surprise that you speak a great Italian!). Have you ever felt inspired by our Country and what is the role that the Italian Opera tradition has played in your career?

**Jonas Kaufmann:** Italy has a special place in my and my family's heart, that's true. My parents were convinced that the best way to spend holidays was to combine culture with leisure; they thought - and I think they were right - that the ideal combination was Italy: nice climate, nice landscape and beaches plus great culture. Therefore for many years, we were always going to Italy, at least once a year, sometimes two or three times, each year in another place, combining some relaxing at the beach with sight-seeing of some cultural highlights. And this was something I found very fascinating as a boy. I was very interested in archeology and therefore in history as well. I also learned the Italian language: my sister, who is some years older than me, didn't want to be with me all the time, she had other interests. So I had to find some playmates to spend time at the beach. Therefore I had to learn the language, and my father helped me a lot with that. Looking back, I can only say that this was a great luck, and a great advantage for me to start the language so early. As we all know now, as a grown-up it's so much more difficult if not impossible to learn a language with idiomatic tones. Without doubt, starting very very early speaking Italian, it helps a lot today when singing the Italian repertoire. Coming to the second part of your question: Italy inspired me in so many ways, not only in terms of architecture and music, but also in lifestyle. I'm addicted to Italian food - coffee, sweets, pizza, pasta, all those things you can't resist when you are in Italy. Of course, the Italian Opera tradition has influenced me as well, especially via all those recordings of great Italian singers, from Claudia Muzio to Franco Corelli.

The Opera world recognises your perfect combination of words, theater and music. Clearly, this didn't happen overnight. Please tell us something about your voice development and how you discovered this amazing native talent?

I always loved classical music and I always loved to sing. When I was in primary school, I joined a children's chorus. When I moved on to secondary school, I joined the school chorus, an activity that went right through all my school years, not even pausing when my voice changed. The last two school years were pretty important for me in two ways. First I was talked into doing a major in music, and secondly, I joined the extra chorus at Munich's Gärtnerplatztheater, the second opera house in my hometown. And so, for the first time in my life, there I stood on the operatic stage. With my secondary school diploma in my pocket, I took my parents' advice and registered



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**Jonas Kaufmann**, extraordinary German tenor, naturalised Swiss, doesn't get upset anymore when he is defined the hunk of Opera. Today, at just over 46, Kaufmann is living one of the most intense moments of his splendid career, brilliantly prepared and managed. His father, God knows why, advised him to study math. However, he completed, *cum laude*, his music training in Munchen, his home town, at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater, becoming an opera and concert singer. As all German tenors do, he has in his repertoire the great cycles of Schubert and Schumann, together with Richard Strauss' Lieder. He started his career at the Staatstheater of Saarbrücken in 1994 and soon invited to perform in important such leading German theatres, among which the Stuttgart State Opera, and the Hamburg's one; in 1997-98 he is at the Piccolo Teatro di Milano in Giorgio Strehler's last remarkable staging of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Many other important theatres invite him, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Opéra National de Paris, and eventually he is back in Milan, but this time it is La Scala! Metropolitan, Chicago, Paris, Zurich, Covent Garden, Scala, Fenice, the German theatres and the Salzburg and Edinburgh Festivals, are some of the stages that see him as main character. The Perfect Wagnerite, but also as perfect for Puccini or Verdi, fully booked until 2021 (yes, 2021!), Kaufmann is fluent in Italian, thanks to many Italian holidays with his family. He is also proud of his Latin look. He is so fond of the Italian culture to have picked Italian names for his three children - Carlotta, Fabio and Matteo. Today Kaufmann, married and recently divorced from the mezzosoprano Margarete Joswig, lives in Zurich. Please watch this video [Scala, five encore and 40 minutes of applause for the tenor Jonas Kaufmann](#) Not to be missed!

at the university in Munich to study mathematics. They wanted me to learn something *sensible, substantial*, something that I could later use to get a job like my father, who earned a decent income in an insurance company and was thus able to provide for his family. I wanted a family, too, and it was just as clear to me, that professional singing was a pretty chancy business, especially because a singer is dependent on his health. So, I held out as a math student for a couple of semesters, but the certainty that I wasn't born to be a desk jockey, weighed heavier and heavier. I tried auditioning for a slot as a vocal student, and I was accepted on the spot. It took a huge amount of courage to make the fateful decision and say good-bye to the security of life as a mathematician. And so, in the summer of 1989, I began training to become an opera and concert singer at the Academy of Music and Theatre in Munich. I got in touch with many teachers not only in the Hochschule, but also outside, such as Josef Metternich, James King and Hans Hotter. But despite the fact that I learned a lot from them, I was not really prepared for the daily life of an opera singer. When I started as a professional singer, 1994 in Saarbrücken, I still believed in what I had been taught as a student: to be the typical *lyrical German tenor* with Tamino and Don Ottavio being the centre of my repertoire. But soon I realised that this wasn't right for me. That was during my first season in Saarbrücken. I got ill very quickly, and I was unable to cope with all those things I had to sing. In the darkest moment of those years, I got hoarse during a *Parsifal* performance singing the small part of the fourth squire! Thank God I met Michael Rhodes shortly after, and he taught me to sing with my own voice instead trying to sound like a *lyrical German tenor*. Fortunately, I managed to overcome that crisis rather quickly. But when Rhodes told me, that I'd sing *Lohengrin* some day and that I'd even sing at the Met, I shook my head in disbelief. But he was right, and I can't express how grateful I am having met this wonderful teacher at the right time.

**Is talent overrated? Is there anything else that separates world-class performers from everybody else?**

You can't overrate talent, since this a must if you want to be on stage - but to have success and make a career, this of course needs much more than talent. There are several important criteria. First, I'd say, you should have a beautiful and reliable instrument, that allows you to concentrate on interpretation and acting. Also essential is a continuous study and development of your voice and technique. As the body and the mind change, you must be aware of the developments and work with your voice. Then you should have two or three people, on whose ears you can be sure to rely and that you remain open to criticism. Maintaining your health is essential for a successful career, and this demands a lot of self-discipline in the daily private life.

Coming back to the second part of your question: to become a *world-class performer* you need to reach the point where you are the master of your instrument and its possibilities. It is impossible to be confident without this. Technique is what frees the singer to fully express himself as an artist. But aside from that issue, the best way to keep a positive attitude is to remain focused, not on *competition* but on your own path, your own voice, and by that I mean not just your singing voice but your inner voice as well. And I would say to every young artist. Always hold on tightly to the reasons which made you become a singer in the first place: your love of the art, your love of music, your desire to contribute to it through your own expression. Keep that as your anchor.

**Let's be honest: you are one of the greatest tenors of all time. Your vocal range is extremely wide and you gave evidence to be a very eclectic actor. Furthermore, you've played in the most prestigious Opera houses. A while ago, you declared that one of the greatest steps of your professional life came in February of 2006 with your début as Alfredo in La *Traviata* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. What are your aspirations now?**

Generally: to stay healthy and to have more time for my family and myself. But I guess you meant artistic things. Well, I hope that I will continue in developing vocally and artistically. And after I did that small part next to John Malkovich in the film *Casanova variations* I'd like to do more movies - not necessarily as a singer, but as an actor. In fact, I'd prefer a non-singing part, it should be pure acting.