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DEPARTMENT

Sound Bites: Joseph Kaiser

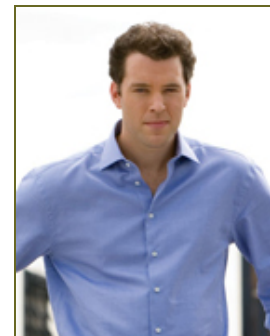
by JANET A. CHOI



Photographed in New York by Dario Acosta
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Joseph Kaiser's career path has taken a few fairy-tale twists that have turned him into a prince. The twenty-nine-year-old Canadian tenor is Tamino in Kenneth Branagh's English-language *Magic Flute* film, which had its premiere in September at the Toronto and Venice Film Festivals. "I didn't even mean to audition for it!" he exclaims. The Lyric Opera Center young artist actually caught Branagh's attention in his few minutes onstage as the First Prisoner, when the director dropped by Chicago's dress rehearsal of *Fidelio* in 2005 to hear René Pape for the film's Sarastro. A chance audition with James Conlon, the film's conductor, led to screen tests, and seven weeks later, an opera film star was born.

Just a few years ago, Kaiser was known in the vocal realm as a baritone. Despite garnering praise for his committed acting abilities and warm sound, he was procuring little work. The frustrated singer received some authoritative nudges from the judges at Canada's Jeunesses Musicales vocal competition in 2002 to switch voice parts. As that illustrious list included the likes of Berganza, Vickers, Horne and Bumbry, Kaiser wisely listened.



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"It was really a matter of adding two or three notes, not much," he explains. "It was about being ready for that tessitura and understanding what it takes to maintain it." After working on the transition with his teacher, Arthur Levy, and at the Merola program in 2003, Kaiser has been blazing ever since.

From the world premiere of John Musto's *Volpone* at Wolf Trap in spring 2004, to an alluring recital of Spanish song with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson at Caramoor that summer, the new tenor displayed a voice of molten sunset colors and welcome ring. In 2005, Kaiser sang the role of Mark in *The Midsummer Marriage* at Lyric Opera to critical acclaim and picked up second prize at Operalia; this past summer, he took on Froh in Aix's *Das Rheingold*. The rapid bloom of his career as a tenor hasn't dazzled Kaiser, whose friendly attitude remains rooted in an earnest, thoughtful demeanor that is reflected in his approach to his varied repertoire. "I feel like so many of us as listeners are so easy on our ears," he observes. "Our eyes are far more advanced than our ears when it comes to things that we'll accept in art. I just always like to push that."

An avid sports fan who compares changing voice parts to switching football positions, Kaiser readily offers the high points of his career thus far: "In three very different ways, the movie, singing the national anthem at a Montreal Canadiens game, and singing at my synagogue for the high holidays. All those things were the greatest experiences." For this young tenor, the list is bound to grow. □

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