

Chasing the Voice

Sheila Sharpe

"Please, please let us in," I pleaded. "We've come all the way from California." Over the past three years I've crossed one ocean and two continents in hapless pursuit of Jonas Kaufmann, the world's greatest and most elusive tenor. The trail led here, to Munich's National Theater, where he was due to sing in a few minutes.

My husband Michael and I slipped through the opening doors and squeezed by the other members of our group seated in row four of the orchestra section. There were fifteen people on this high-end tour to the Munich Opera Festival, and we'd paid the big bucks on the gamble of catching Kaufmann in his hometown.

"Has he bailed yet?" I asked Michele, the most fervent Jonas fan.

"No cancellation on his website, but..." She shrugged. We knew Kaufmann could pull out right before the performance if he detected the slightest vocal problem.

Sitting down between Michael and my friend Mary, I felt close to passing out in the stifling theater. My clothes were all wrong for August in Munich, and without air-conditioning, I was sweltering in my exotic Serbian sweater, feeling the colors bleed.

"Isn't this exciting?" Mary said. "Do you believe we actually got here and Jonas is going to sing to us right there?" She pointed to the stage a few yards away.

I grunted, checking the time. Four minutes past the seven o'clock curtain. This did not bode well. Germans were punctual. Was Jonas melting down backstage? Was he even there?

"We're in Bavaria," Mary reminded me. "It's much less anal than the rest of Germany. Besides Jonas would not dare fail us a third time."

"Right. Hell hath no fury like women thrice scorned." I said, only half in jest.

The women in our group—a Voltaire scholar, a German teacher, a Viennese jewelry designer, a music professor, a lawyer (Mary), and me, a psychologist—were all accomplished grown-ups old enough to be wise. Yet, here we were panting after this singer like a gaggle of groupies. We even called him Jonas, as if he were an intimate. At least this madness was not just a female condition. There were an equal number of male fans in our group, including my math-genius husband.

I eyed the closed red and gold curtains, squirmed in the uncomfortable seat, and sweated. Blotting my damp face with a handkerchief, I conjured up the cool, air-conditioned movie theater where I first heard Kaufmann sing in a filmed Met production of *Faust*.

Jonas appeared onscreen as the old decrepit scientist, so there was no falling in love at first sight. Rather, it was love at first sound when I heard his voice soar up to full volume, cursing God and crying out, "Come to me, Satan!" My heart was thumping, and I tingled all over, his voice flowing into my body like the Devil's elixir of youth.

How could a singer have such power? Researchers call these tingling reactions "frisson" or "aesthetic chills" or a "skin orgasm." According to recent research, music activates the pleasure center of the brain, releasing dopamine, as does good sex, food, and drugs like



Jonas Kaufmann

"Nessun Dorma"

*Nessun Dorma –
The Puccini Album*

2015

Sony

cocaine. Of course not all music excites everyone. Important memories influence what turns you on. My love of opera came from my father, who played the Met Opera broadcasts on the radio when I was growing up. I hated that god-awful music back then and didn't find my potential love for it until friends dragged me to an opera as an adult.

Now I wondered why Kaufmann's voice moved me more than any other tenor's. His voice was darker, heavier, and more masculine than the voices of other greats like Pavarotti and Domingo. Kaufmann also had an exceptional range from ringing high notes full of color to an unusually rich, velvety lower register that extended down to reverberating bass notes. This remarkable range allowed him to sing almost any role from Mozart to Wagner. These unique abilities plus his precision and passionate delivery must hit more pleasure points in my brain than other beautiful voices did. His voice was also addictive.

The sound of Michael blowing his nose brought me back to the sweatbox theater and the view of closed curtains. No Jonas Kaufmann. It was 7:12. I glanced at Mary who sat ramrod straight, hands folded, her British stiff upper lip in place. We'd been through this routine before, and the angst of the first time came roaring back.

In 2015, one of the coldest winters in New York's history, Mary and I flew from balmy San Diego to see Jonas in *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera. Michael stayed home. He hated the cold more than he loved Kaufmann. I'd rented a light-filled apartment overlooking the Hudson River and close to Lincoln Center. Two days later, Kaufmann cancelled his first of only two performances because of the flu. He planned to make it for the Saturday matinee, for which we had lousy overpriced tickets from an online broker.

Saturday morning, a ferocious storm struck New York. The snow was so thick I saw only swirling white outside the windows. We could get no news about Kaufmann. It was 14 degrees outside when we left for the matinee wrapped in layers of clothes. A few steps down the street, a fierce gust off the Hudson threw us against the wall, knocking me breathless. The gale kept our bodies plastered there and we could only inch sideways, palms against the wall. Around the corner, the wind lashing our backs, we staggered down 66th Street. Three interminable blocks later, we pushed through the glass doors of the Met and straight into another storm.

Clusters of people were milling around, ranting in loud voices. Others looked stunned or devastated. A pale young woman was sobbing.

"Isn't Kaufmann singing?" I asked the distraught lady next to me.

She snorted. "No, and we drove six hours in the storm to get here."

"I flew in from Virginia," a dapper gent chimed in.

"I came from California and paid two hundred dollars for a nosebleed seat right under the ceiling," chirped a pint-sized lady, taking the prize.

"Who's replacing Jonas?" Mary asked.

"A young Korean tenor," said the Virginian.

A novice, I feared, the dismal reality sinking in, as we watched all the angry, disappointed people leaving or trying to unload their tickets.

I lost track of Mary in the bathroom, then found our seats did not exist. The online brokers had screwed us. Across the theater, I saw Mary waving at me with two tickets in her hand. After discovering the scam, she'd hustled to buy two of the turned-in tickets. Now we had ringside seats to see a bloodthirsty audience slaughter Kaufmann's baby-faced replacement. Somehow, the young tenor rose to the challenge. In the last act, he unleashed a powerful voice and murdered Carmen in a spine-tingling explosion of jealousy and rage. The crowd cheered.

People exited the theater in high spirits. Mary and I, now forever bonded by our trials, had a fine time at good restaurants, plays, and museums for the rest of the week.

Screw you, Jonas.

In March 2016, Kaufmann was scheduled to sing in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. Surely, he would not stand up the Met, or us, a second time. Confirmed groupies, we committed to the trip.

The blow came about two weeks before *Manon* was to open. Jonas cancelled all nine performances for mysterious reasons. Much gnashing of teeth followed as Mary and I pushed around the salad on our plates at Il Fornaio in Del Mar.

"How could he fail us again?" I said. "Now we'll be stuck with a tenor who won't quite hit the high notes. Mr. Perfection never misses a note."

"True." Mary sipped her Pellegrino. "Jonas just misses his performances."

I laughed. "Right, he's an unreliable, ego-centric, entitled cad, totally undeserving of our devotion."

"A typical arrogant male," Mary said. "Perhaps that's his draw."

I thought of the book *Smart Women, Foolish Choices*, a helpful read for my clients addicted to asshole men. "I'd like to think the hook is the uplifting power of his once-in-a-lifetime voice."

"That too, but I don't believe women throw their lingerie all over him and weep when he comes onstage just because of his terrific voice. With those Byronic curls and smoldering dark eyes, he inspires fantasies." Mary looked dreamy-eyed.

"Go on, say more."

She speared a cherry tomato. "After you."

"Coward," I said. "Okay, my favorite Jonas fantasy is the one of him chained to the end of my bed, lusting to sing to me every night."

"Ah, bondage and domination. Brilliant." She grinned. "Is he singing anything special in this fantasy?"

Nessun Dorma (*Nobody Sleeps*). I can't get enough of hearing that Puccini aria. The song is so beautiful and wrenching, and Kaufmann sings of his love for the ice princess with such passion. Even though Pavarotti made *Nessun Dorma* world famous and Arethra Franklin made it her signature song, too, Kaufmann's rendition moves me the most. It's heart-stopping at the end, when he sings, "Vincerò, Vincerò," ("I will win, I will win"), then shoots

up the scale and roars out that magnificent high B. Gives me tingles, chills, tears, a delicious skin orgasm.

"Come now, a chaste skin orgasm is the only sex?" Mary looked incredulous.

"Sorry to disappoint, but I think this fantasy probably comes from memories of my mother singing me to sleep. Those were the best times I had with her."

"So Jonas is your mother in disguise," she said.

"Jesus, what a frightful thought. Suddenly I have no interest in seeing him live."

"Well, that seems to be our destiny," Mary said. "Perhaps Jonas is not that important. Maybe he's just an excuse to go on a grand adventure with a good friend."

"Bingo."

The Munich theater lights dimmed, and the orchestra started to play the stirring overture to Verdi's *La Forza Del Destino*. I gripped the arms of my seat as the parting curtains revealed two women and a man seated at a long table in a dining room. The striking soprano in black was waiting for her secret lover to come and spirit her away. A dark figure burst through the filmy white curtains draped across the back windows. He had long black hair and wore a leather jacket and jeans. I could hardly believe my eyes, but I did not doubt my ears. The thrilling blast that lifted me up and soared to the back of the house could be none other than the voice I'd been pursuing for years. To hear this glorious sound now seemed worth every minute of the long, arduous journey.

Tingles of frisson ran up my back and neck. I no longer felt the stifling heat or any aches and pains from the body-breaking chair. I was soaring with Kaufmann's voice—blooming in full color at the highs, vibrating with the rich burnished lows, caressed by the silken pianissimos. Vitality and youth were flowing into my bloodstream and old age no longer loomed on the horizon. I was euphoric, out of my body, young forever.