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GOING BIG TIME: Lime Rock Baptist Church choir soloist Greg Bonin rehearses at the church last week after learning that he has won the annual Talent America contest. Bonin, 31, who works for CVS, is now looking for an agent to help him get auditions for New York musicals.

Lincoln choir soloist wins national competition

Now, Greg Bonin, of Woonsocket, has his sights set on Broadway.

BY ELIZABETH GUDRAIS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

LINCOLN — Greg Bonin "sounds just like Jean Valjean," Jane Eastwood gushes.

Eastwood has directed Talent America's nationwide talent contest for 28 years, and her winner this year is Greg Bonin, a Woonsocket resident and regular soloist in the choir at Lime Rock Baptist Church.

"He has a strong voice, he's got magnificent shoulders, he has presence," says Eastwood, president of the Lincoln-based corporation that sponsors the contest, in which 5,000 people nationwide compete annually.

With his calming, mellow baritone, Bonin beat out hundreds of competitors to win the contest's adult division in New York City last month.

The contest's winners have a strong history of scoring contracts with agents, managers, and casting people; one past champion is actor Patrick

Dempsey, Eastwood said.

Next month, Bonin will travel to Allentown, Pa., for an interview with an agent.

Bonin grew up in a home filled with music: His parents, Burrillville residents, used to sing country duets in local bars and clubs, and would practice "all the time" at home, says Bonin, 31.

"I've sung as long as I can remember," he says.

At his parents' urging, Bonin pursued a solid, sensible career as a financial analyst for CVS.

But now, he's ready to drop it all for a chance at life in the spotlight.

He has taken voice lessons for eight years, and has shown off his repertoire of classical, standards, Broadway, and jazz numbers singing at funerals, weddings, and in churches, but as for trying to make the big time, he says, "I always kept putting it off.

"Finally," he says, "I just said, 'You know what? If I don't do it now, I'm never going to do it.'"

So last September, Bonin put together an action plan, creating a portfolio and business cards and

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recording a six-track demo CD showcasing the fulfilling, inspirational songs he favors, at a Providence studio.

And he entered Talent America.

In February, he won the local contest at the Providence Biltmore, performing "The Prayer," a song made famous by Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli.

And last month, competing in front of 48 judges, against adults in four categories — dance, vocal, acting, and modeling — he won again at the contest's finals in New York City.

He also won best legitimate male vocal in the contest, a category that includes songs in a more classical style, rather than that of popular music.

When he found out the contest results, Bonin says, he was in "shock. I was stunned. It took me at least three days for it to really sink in."

Now, Bonin says he is seeking a spot in a New York musical or a touring musical theater company.

Specifically, he said, the agent he will meet with next month has indicated that he'll be considered for *Beauty and the Beast*, *Mamma Mia*, and *Rent*.

Those are just starting points; Bonin's dream roles, he says, include the phantom in *Phantom of the Opera* and the Russian in *Chess*, a musical written by two of the singers from the Swedish singing group Abba.

Of course, in show business, there are no guarantees, Eastwood is quick to remind.

"He'll need the courage to follow through," she says. "New York is frightening."

But, she says, "he's got great potential. The agents are arguing over him."

It might not be so easy to wrench Bonin away from the locals.

"His voice has so enhanced our choir," says Lime Rock Baptist Church choir director Susan McClain, who is also a School Committee member. "I don't want him to leave."

Bonin is here for the time

being: He has committed to perform in a production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* with Theatre Works in Woonsocket next month and plans to record a second CD and market it to record labels.

But, when asked whether he'd like to move to New York or travel with a show, the answer is clear:

"Oh, yeah," Bonin says, nodding and widening his eyes.

The details still need a bit of ironing out. He and his partner own a house together in Woonsocket, and, Bonin says, they haven't decided yet whether his partner would accompany him on any travels.

"That's still open for discussion," Bonin says with a smile.

Bonin began singing at Lime Rock Baptist Church two years ago, after McClain worked with him in a community theater production and invited him to sing at the church.

The first time he sang, McClain remembers, Bonin came across as "underconfident," but the congregation was "overwhelmed."

He's come a long way since then: At a rehearsal last week, Bonin, accompanied by McClain on the organ, practiced "To Where You Are," a song performed by the young classical crossover vocalist Josh Groban, for the coming Sunday's church service.

Without any warmup or warning, Bonin opened his music and began to sing in a confident, booming baritone, shaking his head, brows furrowed with emotion.

"Fly me up to where you are, beyond a distant star," his voice soared, and continued to ring for a moment even after his mouth closed.

The grand voice seemed appropriate in a worship space, but, McClain said, it turned some heads when the two rehearsed at McClain's home.

"Imagine this in my living room," she said, tilting her head in the general direction of Bonin's resonant voice. "People walking their dogs just stop."

Those interested in buying a copy of Greg Bonin's CD may contact Bonin at 439-5802.