Note on Back Issues

Copies of past issues of this Journal (Nos. 12–27) are offered on an “as available” basis to members at $11 per copy postpaid. For a listing of contents of these issues, or to order copies, write to any of the following:

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Submission of Articles

The editor invites the submission of articles on subjects of interest to the members of the Jussi Björling Societies.

Please be advised that if you submit material to JBS-USA (letters, photographs, articles, etc.), you are granting Jussi Björling Society - USA, Inc. the right to publish, distribute and edit that material in any manner deemed appropriate by the Board of Directors, including permission to share the material with Jussi Björling Society - USA, Inc.’s publishing partners, including other JB Societies. Unless you advise us specifically to the contrary, JBS-USA will assume that you are in agreement with these terms and conditions.

This Journal recommends to authors that they follow the publishing conventions set out by D. Kern Holoman in “Writing About Music” (Univ. of California Press).

ON THE COVER: Jussi Björling as Roméo, 1940

Photos courtesy of the Jussi Björling Museum, Borlänge, Sweden, unless otherwise noted.
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Welcome to the first Journal of the new decade, and Happy New Year to all our members!

In this issue, we explore the outer limits of Jussi’s adult career, from his first years at the Royal Opera in Stockholm under the tutelage of John Forsell, to the final months of 1959, when, although suffering from debilitating health issues, his performances were among his best. Throughout his career, his art never wavered.

"Under Forsell’s direction, ... I also learned my favorite role, Roméo. Perhaps I love it so because John Forsell taught it to me so carefully ... I sing something from Roméo et Juliette every day.” (Jussi Björling 1945 autobiography, Med Bagaget i Strupen, Wahlström & Widstrand. Translation by Marianne Flach-Turnbull, produced by Donald J. Quinn, 1998, page 24.)

We all love Jussi as Roméo and are therefore thrilled to announce Immortal Performances’ new release of Roméo et Juliette, a restoration of the complete 1940 recording with Hjördis Schymberg. The 3-CD set also includes bonus recordings of a complete 1943 Act II of the opera, AND the world premiere commercial release of the complete Act I of La bohème, again with Schymberg. Once again, Richard Caniell brings us Jussi at his best, in two of his favorite roles, and in JP’s miraculously improved sound!

In these pages you will also find news of the activities of JBS-USA. Over the holidays, did you listen to our JB Christmas playlist on the Spotify music service? This month, it will be followed by a playlist of JB love songs, as selected by members of our board, each of us struggling to select only two or three of our favorites!

In addition, we have recently opened an account with Instagram, so you can now find us both there and on Facebook.

On the flip side of the music service trend is the question of the doubtful future of CD and LP collections, a topic we also explore. If you have not yet signed the petition to preserve the Swedish Radio Archive, please do so.

In connection with this same dilemma, on our website we are now offering a new free service to our members: a Member Marketplace where you can list musical items for sale, swap, or donation, — or add to your collections as well!

We hope members enjoyed our recent musical weekend in Washington, as we take a look back at those happy events. We also hope you enjoy these and other articles as you page through this Journal.

Going forward, we are happy to welcome new board members, Karen Messenger and Matthew J. Mancini! We also take this opportunity to salute the tireless work of Sue Plaster, who has resigned from the Regular Board and accepted a place on the Advisory Board. After two decades of service, she continues to be indispensable to the achievements and successes of this organization!

Most of all, we hope you know how much we value the friendship, participation and support of all of you, our members. Without you, there is no Jussi Björling Society - USA. We welcome your comments, questions, and ideas for the future. Please keep in touch with us, and thank you all.

Warmest greetings,
Janel E. Lundgren,
President and Editor

P.S. If you have not already renewed, a membership form is enclosed for your convenience.

Also, you may use the enclosed Order Form to pre-order your copy of the Roméo et Juliette CD at a discounted price! And there is still time to acquire your copy of Harald Henrysson’s fabulous new book, David Björling and His Sons in America: A Musical Family Saga Begins. It is selling quickly, so don’t miss your opportunity to add it to your Björling collection!
Jussi’s Three Debuts at the Stockholm Opera

By Nils-Göran Olve

As readers of this journal may know, Jussi Björling’s first role in opera was the tiny part of the Lamplighter in *Manon Lescaut*, a role which is only 18 bars long – but most of them solo – in that opera’s third act. That was on 21 July 1930, and the venue was of course the Stockholm Opera, or as it says on the poster “Kungl. Teatern” – an abbreviation for “Kungliga Teatern” – The Royal Theatre. If you can master rudimentary Swedish you can find it and much of the data that I will cite in this article on [https://www.operan.se/en/archives/](https://www.operan.se/en/archives/). Jussi’s landlords, Mr. and Mrs. Svedelius, attended the performance, but he missed Jussi’s appearance as it lasted only about one minute.

According to the rules in those days such a small part did not count as a debut. Jussi, like other singers, had to make three debuts as proof of his readiness for employment. The first was Don Ottavio in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* 20 August 1930 — one month after the Lamplighter. In the meantime he had performed the Lamplighter once more plus another minuscule part, so the debut was his fourth performance. But before we go deeper into that we need to understand the kind of employer the Stockholm Opera of those days was, into which successful debuts could provide entry. Then this article will trace the circumstances behind each of the three debuts, in turn.

The system of repertoire theatre, a permanent ensemble – and debuts

There were few opportunities for opera singers in Sweden in 1930. The title was used also by operetta singers, and there were temporary opera groups which sometimes toured the countryside. Otherwise the Stockholm Royal Opera and the Grand Theatre in Gothenburg (actually quite a small theatre seating about 600, and still in existence) were the only possibilities. The latter had put on ambitious opera productions during the twenties with Martin Öhman and a young soprano named Kirsten Flagstad, in addition to operetta and spoken theatre, but some years into the thirties it would focus entirely on operetta.

Opera training existed only in Stockholm as a co-venture of the Royal Conservatory of Music and the Royal Opera. So if you hoped to become an opera singer you would aim for this theatre. It had a permanent ensemble, if without today’s guaranteed employment. There were at least forty soloists who could be required at short notice to take part in those operas that management chose, and if they wanted to accept invitations to perform elsewhere they needed permission. The repertoire was finally decided on a week-by-week basis, so they had to be on hand and receive their schedules at fairly short notice. This ensemble handled all parts, except for rare guest appearances by Swedes who had established themselves abroad and by foreign stars. Those then joined an existing production for a night or two, usually without more than a few hours rehearsal. Operas like *Faust* or *Tannhäuser* were performed in similar ways in most of the world’s opera houses. At least this applied to how the characters were understood and moved on stage – for these two operas musical versions would vary.

Of course premieres or revivals of works that had long been absent required planning and rehearsals, but mostly it was expected that an opera which had been
Jussi as Don Ottavio 20 August 1930

given the previous year should be possible to take up again without much preparation. The previous season, 1929/30, the Royal Opera had performed 50 different operas, in addition to ballets. At this time there were few of the latter, only four that had been given a few times each. The number of performances for each opera varied widely. That season there had been eight that were new, at least to Stockholm, among them the Manon Lescaut into which Jussi Björling now had to fit in as Lamplighter, because it continued to be played from time to time. With Carmen it had been one of the 1929/30 season’s big successes with 14–15 performances each. Many operas were given only once per year, for instance the big Wagner operas that the core audience wanted to see annually.

So becoming employed at the Opera meant to enter a production system where you learnt a number of new roles each year, but also had to be prepared to do at least twenty to thirty roles in the permanent repertoire, big and small, more or less without rehearsals. An established soloist might take part in 100 performances during the season. New productions were obviously rehearsed, but if you just succeeded an older colleague in a role, rehearsing with a pianist in a small studio might be deemed sufficient. Some singers were so established that they “owned” their parts for decades, and those might deign to rehearse only if they had to meet a new singer in a leading part.

In the mid-1930s when he was well established at the Royal Opera but also in demand for appearances elsewhere, Jussi did 18–19 roles per season for a total of almost 80 performances. Singers who mostly did small parts would average more. And they were of course not quite the same operas every year. Singers had to be able to “brush up” things they once had studied, and came back to every few years, remarkably quickly. Given a week’s advance warning, it seems very likely they could have performed any among 30 or so roles — at least after a few years in the company.

A lot comes back when you enter a situation where scenery, colleagues, tempi etc. are familiar. And they were singing in their own language. A very different idea of what constitutes a good opera performance from today, when we are so occupied with new interpretations and concepts. For a singer with his strong roots before the turn of the century the general manager John Forsell was surprisingly modern in encouraging new works and theatrical ideas, not least visual ones. But with a large repertoire, productions are long-term investments and need to be maintained so that they can be “mobilized” without much rehearsal. The orchestra was much smaller than now, so every musician would be used every night (if his instrument was required by the composer) and know every work in the repertoire. As would the chorus.

To be considered for one of the few new openings singers needed to survive the “test of fire” of actually taking part in some real performances. Often this meant to join well-established colleagues in any suitable production which formed part of the repertoire, after just a few rehearsals. The other singers might think of the newcomer as a competitor for the limited number of positions, and the audience members who were frequent visitors would compare him or her with predecessors in the same role. That debuts should be three in number was an old tradition. Already in 18th century France there seems to have been a demand for qualified candidates to make debuts during the first month of the season as a kind of proof of their abilities, after which audience reactions and management determined if this was a singer (or dancer) who should remain. Those who failed would have to try their luck elsewhere.

In Stockholm debutants were singers who had attended the Opera College (at that time closely linked to the Royal Opera) or learnt their craft abroad, and they could rarely count on a good position or a reasonable salary straightaway. A young singer would normally become a “stipendiary” (in Swedish: stipendiat), a stage which most singers at the Stockholm Opera in those days had to pass. During one or two years and for a salary close to starvation they would be coached to enter a range of roles within the current repertoire, and in that way make themselves useful. For the theatre such apprentices were an investment, because they required help from experienced rehearsal pianists and assistant directors – but not always on stage and with orchestra. Only when the singer had become equally valuable as her or his colleagues would normal employment be offered. This was a cheap way for the theatre to exploit young hopeful singers. For instance, one generation later Margareta Hallin was stipendiary for two seasons; when after two years the 25-year-old finally became a “soloist” in 1956 she already had been a guest at the Vienna State Opera as the Queen of the Night!

Successful debuts had a career value also for singers who then went elsewhere. But normally they were the needle’s eye on the path towards an intended life-long employment which would go on until the age of 53 (men) or 50 (women). This was the system of the state-run Royal Opera during most of the 1900s.
(Confusingly, “stipendiat” in Swedish applies to any recipient of a grant, so for instance recipients of the annual Jussi Björling award also may be called so. In recent years that award has been given to very established singers like Nina Stemme — a very different story. The grants given by the Swedish Jussi Björling Society are called “prizes” that often function as scholarships, as they are given to young and promising singers.)

First debut: Don Ottavio
So this was the background when Jussi Björling made his first debut there on 20 August 1930. Everyone studying his career has marvelled at this: he was only 19½ years old. Sure enough he had great experience in public singing, but were his voice and acting ability really ready for a long and demanding part as Don Ottavio in Mozart’s Don Giovanni (or Don Juan as it was then called in Sweden)?

John Forsell obviously thought so – the Royal Opera’s plenipotent leader and Jussi’s teacher. He had already given his pupil stage exposure in two small parts during the preceding month: twice as the Lamplighter in Manon Lescaut, and once as a poet named Nightingale in Bellman, a musical play based on melodies by that historic singer-songwriter in 18th century Sweden. Probably it was the major trade fair “the Stockholm Exhibition” that summer 1930 which had caused the opera season to start already 16 July. When Don Juan was performed the next month it had a more specific reason: in the archives it is called “Festive performance on the occasion of the 2nd International Congress of Pediatrics”.

In press collections we discover that the performance was broadcast. Swedish Radio was in its infancy, and to allow room for an entire opera in its (of course one and only) programme may yet have been uncommon. Furthermore this special performance commenced at 20.30, so it must have ended not long before midnight. In the tableau we learn that the weather report would have to be moved to the interval, rather than being broadcast at its customary hour.

The same day as the performance readers of Svenska Dagbladet could learn about a leaked internal memorandum which the head of the Opera John Forsell had sent to his artists. In it he writes about the “unwritten verdict of the public” which will condemn those who do not “take care of their bodies in a healthy manner”. “The heavyweights of the Opera” should reduce their weight, and in Gösta Björling’s

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at the Salzburg Festival, which was covered in the Swedish press. By that time his interpretation was certainly his own, but its roots could be found in his studies in Paris in the 1890s and influences from the Portuguese Francisco d'Andrade, the leading Don Giovanni of that time. Forsell's Mozart style can be studied in a complete Le nozze di Figaro from 1937 which was issued with other Forsell recordings and exhaustive notes by Carl-Gunnar Ahlén in a Caprice album 1998 (4 CDs). It is fascinating and enlightening to consider how Jussi Björling's style of singing was marked by two singers, both of whose ideal was formed in the final year of the 19th century: his father David and John Forsell.

Forsell liked to make guest appearances in his own theatre if some special occasion merited it. By this time his roles were Don Giovanni and the Count in Nozze di Figaro, but not many years earlier he also did the Flying Dutchman and Scarpia in Tosca, roles he now had relinquished. His latest two Don Giovanni performances had been in 1928 for his 60th birthday, and in 1929 when it was court conductor Armas Järnefelt's turn to reach the same age. Since 1910 Järnefelt was the normal conductor of the Stockholm Opera Don Juan. His final Don Juan would be on Mozart’s 175th birthday in January 1931, also a “festival performance” with Forsell, Järnefelt — and Jussi Björling. Forsell limited his performances to such festivities and the Opera's tours to the capitals of Sweden's neighbours and to Gothenburg. They were grand occasions. Some of his admirers had certainly heard him already when he, as a 27-year old lieutenant (on leave) made his own three debuts at the Opera in the spring of 1896 — in the temporary opera building, as the present one was not inaugurated until 1898.

Now that he himself was the head of the Opera and sang rarely, that festive performance 20 August had a special significance, as he took the opportunity to introduce some youngsters into an opera he knew all about. The production was from 1906, and in 1930 the “normal” Don Giovanni was Carl Richter, except when the boss himself wanted to perform. The year before there had been two guest performances by the Vienna State Opera, but in Stockholm Opera scenery, with Franz Schalk conducting and well-known singers among whom Elisabeth Schumann and Richard Mayr are now the best-remembered. Schalk would also conduct Forsell’s one appearance at the Salzburg Festival in August 1930, so to some extent this was an exchange. Before Jussi's debut Don Juan had not been given for a year, so it must have seemed a very good idea to put it on with some new casting and in preparation for Forsell's Salzburg visit.

It was of course given in Swedish, except that Forsell is reported to have repeated Fin ch’han dal vino in Italian, as he was in the habit of doing. In a review we learn that Jussi only sang the first of Ottavio’s two arias, “Dalla sua pace.” In Prague 1787 this was his only aria — aria number two “Il mio tesoro” was written for the opera’s Vienna premiere the next year, as a substitute for the first aria. Mozart obviously thought of them as alternatives, but as they occur at different points in the opera most tenors nowadays take the chance to sing both. To limit oneself to “Dalla sua pace” as Jussi did at his debut can thus be seen as in keeping with Mozart’s original intentions, although it may surprise us because the only part of the opera we can now hear with Jussi Björling is “Il mio tesoro” which he did not sing at his debut, and probably not in his following Stockholm performances of the role. The final sextet may also have been omitted — a Swedish Radio opera guide from 1943 claims that it “usually is not included”. Even so the singer, not yet 20, had been assigned a long and complicated role by his boss, who furthermore was able to observe how well he did at only a few metres distance.

Jussi’s predecessor as Don Ottavio since 1924 had been David Stockman, who would remain at the Opera throughout the 1930s but now left the role as Jussi took it over. Other newcomers were Käthe Bernstein-Sundström and Joel Berglund as Donna Anna and Leporello, respectively. Although it does not say so clearly on the playbill this was her third debut, following Senta the year before and Leonore in Fidelio. Apart from a repeat of Senta, this was her entire performance history at the theatre — three performances! She would remain at the opera until 1934, then sang all the big roles for dramatic soprano in Germany, and 1950 moved back to Stockholm where she became one of Berit Lindholm's teachers.

So the performance boasted three singers who all had sung at the Opera less than 1½ years. Such a rejuvenation must have been preceded by rehearsals, even if the production was old and their colleagues familiar with it. These must have taken place during the few weeks which had passed since the early start of the season. In that time, Joel Berglund had sung eight times and Jussi three. Joel was also a Forsell student, and he must have instructed the newcomers in detail. But had they met the orchestra and the Don Juan old-timers? The reviews don't tell us, and the production was not announced as restudied. Jussi’s voice is described as sonorous, with a full sound and well schooled, although one reviewer thought that it did not sound quite free and therefore postponed his verdict on the debutant. His movements are described as calm and natural, sensible — even though one writer advised him to avoid bow-legs.

The broadcast of course does not survive. It would be a few years until Swedish Radio had any recording equipment, and still longer before they decided to record more than brief fragments of music broadcasts. Their quality was not good enough for rebroadcasts, and when music illustrations were needed in other programmes there were commercial gramophone records. So why waste expensive lacquers and technicians’ work on something not useful?

continued on page 30
Jussi Björling is particularly celebrated for his singing in Roméo et Juliette and La bohème, especially for a mixture of refulgent passion and much refinement in the characterizations sung in tones of such resplendency that we can scarcely believe such sound could be uttered by the human voice. These two roles are memorably represented by performances sung in his youth (in 1940) at the Royal Opera Stockholm.

In March 2020 we are presenting our restoration of the complete 1940 Roméo et Juliette as well as a complete 1943 Act II. In addition the set includes the world premiere commercial release of the complete Act I of La bohème with Schymberg, also sung at the Royal Opera. The three CDs which comprise our offering also include some arias and duets together with articles and photos. This assemblage constitutes another of our tributes to Björling’s unforgettable vocal art.
The CD Includes:

GOUNOD Roméo et Juliette — Nils Grevillius, cond; Hjördis Schymberg (Juliette); Göta Allard (Gertrude); Jussi Björling (Roméo); Sigurd Björling (Mercutio); Leon Björker (Frère Laurent); et al; Royal Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Live: Stockholm March 27, 1940 — IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD 1134-3 (3 CDs 226:32) Complete Opera.

+ Gounod: Roméo et Juliette: Act III, conclusion. Emil Cooper, cond; Jussi Björling (Roméo); et al; Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Live: New York February 1, 1947

+ Gounod: Roméo et Juliette: Act II. Nils Grevillius, cond; Hjördis Schymberg (Juliette); Göta Allard (Gertrude); Jussi Björling (Roméo); et al; Royal Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Live: Stockholm May 13, 1943

+ Puccini: La bohème: Act I. Nils Grevillius, cond; Hjördis Schymberg (Mimi); Jussi Björling (Rodolfo); Sven Herdenberg (Marcello); Carl Richter (Schaunard); Leon Björker (Colline); Folke Cembraeus (Benoit) et al; Royal Opera Orchestra, Live: Stockholm March 21, 1940


CD Review by Ken Meltzer

Fanfare Magazine

Roméo with Juliette, Hjördis Schymberg, 1950

One of the treasures of the Metropolitan Opera’s broadcast legacy is a February 1, 1947 performance of Charles Gounod’s Roméo et Juliette, starring Jussi Björling and Bidu Sayão in the title roles, both in superb form, and clearly relishing the opportunity to sing with each other. Immortal Performances has previously offered a superb restoration of this broadcast (IPCD 1003-2). It’s a recording that should be a part of any opera collection.

Now, as a potential supplement to that recording, IP issues yet another Björling Roméo, this time from the Royal Opera in Stockholm, performed on March 27, 1940. The performance is sung in Swedish, rather than the original French, and does not boast the more well-known and starry cast of the Met 1947 broadcast. And yet, the justifications for this set are many. First and foremost, it affords us the opportunity to hear Björling perform this role at a time when he was still in his 20s, and in his most youthful, fresh, and beautiful vocal estate. This is not to take anything away from his magnificent singing in the 1947 broadcast. But in the 1940 Stockholm performance, Björling’s voice is even sweeter, with an ease in the upper register that is absolutely breathtaking. Although Björling was
hardly an imposing figure on stage, he was, especially in live performance, a resourceful and convincing vocal actor. And that was even more the case when Björling sang in his native Swedish. It’s difficult to imagine a more youthful, amorous, and impetuous Roméo than Björling’s 1940 Stockholm assumption. It is one of his finest complete performances, and is a must for all fans of Björling, and great tenor singing.

Even if the remainder of the cast was only adequate, I would recommend acquisition of this performance for Björling’s contribution alone. But here, Björling is joined by his longtime colleague, Swedish soprano Hjördis Schymberg. Björling, a fine artist, had a long career, and later recordings could sometimes find her in somewhat acidic and tremulous voice. In this 1940 broadcast, Schymberg is in her early 30s, and in wonderful form. She is able to dispatch Juliette’s Waltz Song with aplomb, and the soprano is equally convincing in the succeeding lyrical and dramatic episodes. Björling and Schymberg had their own on-stage chemistry, and the two are marvelous in their series of duets. The remainder of the cast is quite strong, with Sigurd Björling, a singer who would have an important international career, a virile Mercutio, and Leon Björker a rich-voiced and sympathetic Friar Laurence. The smaller roles are well performed, too. Nils Grevillius, a frequent collaborator with Björling and Schymberg, leads a stylish and energetic performance, and one that has an admirable flexibility of phrasing, particularly in the scenes where Roméo and Juliette take center stage.

This performance was previously released by Bluebell, and one has to be grateful the Swedish label made this treasurable document available. The IP restoration, however, offers far better sound, with more dynamic range, definition, and reproduction of the singers’ timbres. One drawback of the 1940 broadcast is that it uses a performing edition that cuts the arioso for Roméo, “Ah! jour de deuil, et d’horreur”; and succeeding grand ensemble leading to his banishment by the Duke of Verona. But as an appendix to the complete 1940 broadcast, IP includes the scene from the 1947 Met broadcast.

The complete 1940 Roméo et Juliette occupies the first two discs of this three-disc set. Disc three brings more treasures. First is a May 13, 1943 charity concert performance of the complete Act II from Gounod’s opera (again in Swedish). It, too, stars Björling and Schymberg, again in wonderful voice. The presence of this duplication of music is justified by several factors. The recorded sound is even more impressive than the 1940 broadcast. In fact, it is quite remarkable for its vintage in terms of the fidelity, dynamic range, and reproduction of the voices. And here, with only one act to sing, Björling and Schymberg throw themselves into the music and drama in a manner that even eclipses the wonderful 1940 broadcast (and for Björling, the same portion of the 1947 Met performance). This is some of the most electrifying singing I’ve heard from Björling, and that is saying quite a bit.

A Swedish-language complete Act I of Puccini’s La bohème from Stockholm (March 21, 1940) follows, and is billed as a “world premiere on disc.” It finds Björling and Schymberg in comparably impressive vocal and dramatic form. Also wonderful is the detailed chamber-opera approach all the singers bring to the conversational nature of the music that leads up to the great finale for Rodolfo and Mimi. Bluebell previously released a portion of this Act, beginning with Mimi’s entrance. But once again IP greatly improves upon Bluebell’s sound. Finally, excerpts from a 1949 Hollywood Bowl concert with Björling and his wife, soprano Anna-Lisa Björling. This, for me, was the least impressive of the selections (admittedly, the previous material set the bar very, very high). Björling is in fine voice, but sings in a more straightforward, generalized manner. The Roméo duets with his Anna-Lisa don’t have the kind of magic found in the same excerpts with Sayão and Schymberg. The recorded sound for these excerpts is fine. The booklet contains a wealth of information and wonderful writing. First are excerpts from Stephen Hasting’s superb book, The Björling Sound, offering an in-depth and fascinating analysis of the performances. Stefan Johansson and Kristian Krogholm provide historical and personal context to the featured music. There is a full plot synopsis for Roméo, as well as Richard Caniell’s Recording Notes, artist bios, some wonderful photos of the star singers, and reproductions of performance billboards. Granted, this release will have more specialty appeal than the IP restoration of the 1947 Met Roméo. But as it documents one of the greatest tenors of the 20th century at the height of his powers, in collaboration with longtime, beloved, and worthy colleagues, it is a specialty well worth the pursuit. And all presented in the best sound to date. For fans of Björling and great singing, highest recommendation.

Rating 5 Stars — Jussi Björling at the height of his powers, in Swedish-language performances of Roméo et Juliette, and La bohème.

Editor’s Note: Members may pre-order their copies at a discounted price using the enclosed Audio and Book Order Form.

More exciting news from Immortal Performances

In the fall of 2020, Immortal Performances plans to issue a 6-CD set of Jussi’s 1959 final Met performances of Cavalleria rusticana, Tosca, and Faust! — once again bringing us Jussi at his most glorious, in the best recorded sound to date. Details are not yet available, but will be announced in our summer Newsletter, at which time you will be able to pre-order your copy!
About November 1959

By Göran Forsling

I have already dealt with the autumn of 1959 in Jussi of the Month November 2018, ( on the Jussi Björling Sällskapet website) but when I now return there it is from a somewhat different perspective, which may perhaps offer a further dimension to the artistry of Jussi. That Jussi’s plans for that autumn were thwarted through illness and limited to a small number of appearances has been mentioned earlier, but it’s interesting to realize that almost all of those appearances were recorded and, at least partially issued on records. On 20 August he gave a concert at Gröna Lund (issued on Bluebell ABCD 114). At the end of September he was in Rome and recorded *Madama Butterfly* with Victoria de los Angeles. In spite of some heart trouble the recording was carried through, but it was not issued until after his death. In 1961 it was awarded a Grammy for best opera recording (Warner Classics 7636342).

The love duet from *Madama Butterfly* with Victoria de los Angeles 1959 may be heard at: http://www.jussibjorlingsallskapet.com/uploads/file/Manadens_Jussi_november_2019_ljud01_Mozart_Die_Zauberflote_Dies_Bildnis_ist_Beaubernd_Schon_Sung_In_Swedish.mp3

On 15 October he sang at the Stockholm Opera opposite among others, Hjördis Schymberg and Hugo Hasslo in *Manon Lescaut*. The performance was broadcast and parts of it were issued on records. This year it was issued complete in refurbished sound (Immortal Performances IPCD1110-2).

Then he went to New York and the Metropolitan Opera, where he was booked for eight performances during November-December, including a couple of performances of *Faust* with Elisabeth Söderström as Marguerite. When he entered the stage on 16 November to sing *Turridu* in *Cavalleria Rusticana* it was his first appearance for more than two years. The return opened however discreetly, since Turridu is first heard in the “Siciliana,” which is squeezed in during the middle of the overture and sung behind the curtain “and so it passed without an audience reaction, but when the agitated introduction to the Santuzza–Turridu duet began — and Jussi appeared onstage — the auditorium exploded in applause that stopped the show”. The words are Anna-Lisa’s in her and Andrew Farkas’ book about Jussi, and she continues: “The performance went gloriously well. The ovation that followed was more than one could ask. Partnered with such an electrifying artist as Giulietta Simionato, Jussi acted up a storm, once again artistically thumbing his nose at critics who condemned his stagecraft. The two of them made the confrontation between Santuzza and Turiddu throb with vibrant passion. This was one of Giulietta’s great roles vocally and histrionically, and she brought the flesh-and-blood verismo character fully to life. When Turiddu made his exit on Santuzza’s curse, conductor Verchi tried to proceed but the audience lost control. Their shouting, howling, clapping and stomping drowned out the music, and the performance stopped in its tracks. Jussi by then totally immersed in the drama, sang a fiery Brindisi and closed
March 1959 performances extended to an unforgettable 'E lucevan le stelle.' When he took the first A-natural and did a diminuendo down to nothing, there wasn't a sound in the house. People were holding their breaths. And when he finished the aria with such bravura, the applause was almost like a standing ovation — so many in the audience rose to their feet. Jussi was in magnificent voice, and it was simply perfect.

Together with the sound clips these eye- and earwitness accounts confirm that Jussi, in spite of faltering health, was still at the top of his trade, vocally as well as dramatically.

*See Immortal Performances' announcement on page 11.*

Göran Forsling is a member of the Board of Directors, Jussi Björling Sällskapet, Sweden. Article reprinted courtesy Jussi Björling Sällskapet.

**Editor’s Note:** The glory of Jussi’s autumn 1959 performances extended to an unforgettable recital in December. Read on!
Revisiting Jussi’s Last New York Recital

By Janel E. Lundgren and Dan Shea

In 1959, I was a young teen whose parents were planning a Christmas holiday trip to New York City from our home in Springfield, Illinois. I was thrilled that coincidentally, Jussi Björling was performing a recital and that we were able to obtain tickets on the main floor, as the event was rapidly selling out.

This opportunity occurred only a few years after I had had my memorable back-stage meeting with Jussi at Lyric Opera, an experience which resonates with me to this day. (See Journal of the Jussi Björling Societies, No. 21, February 2013.) So naturally, I was excited at the prospect of seeing and hearing my musical idol once again.

I was a relatively seasoned concert goer even at this age. My musician parents were members of the Community Concert Association, which brought several major concert artists per year to Springfield. I remember Roberta Peters, Gérard Souzay, Brian Sullivan among many others.

However, arriving at the Hunter College Auditorium, I immediately recognized that this concert was different. As the auditorium filled and the audience gained their seats, there was not the usual buzz of conversation. Instead, there was a breathless hush of anticipation even before the house lights dimmed, an edge-of-the-chair feeling in the audience.

Little did I realize as I looked around at the concert-goers, that some fifty years later I would meet another member of that audience, one of the future founders of JBS-USA, Dan Shea.*

By Dan Shea:

As an undergraduate at home on holiday break in December 1959, I had listened eagerly to Jussi Björling’s matinee (Dec. 19) Met broadcast of Faust. That broadcast had been thrilling, as we all know now from hearing the famous recording that resulted. The next day I noticed from our local newspaper that Jussi Björling would be singing at New York’s Hunter
College on December 27.

Home was in Springfield MA, just a three hour rail trip away, and I had already gone to NY City on Jussi-trips in Freshman year (for his Masked Ball in February ’56 and for a November ’56 Hunter College concert, both marvellous experiences). I decided to go to this new event, and mentioned that to a couple of fraternity brothers, Paul and Norm. They insisted they wanted to go, and that we would drive in Paul’s little Fiat.

We ordered tickets and off we went in threatening weather the following Sunday. Somehow parking was not a problem on E. 68th next to Central Park, and we settled in for a concert at Hunter College’s beautiful hall. Interestingly, that 2000-seat hall was packed and there even were couple hundred people seated on stage! Jussi and his pianist Frederick Schauwecker entered the stage and Jussi announced the opening number, Tamino’s aria from The Magic Flute, and the music began.

At that time Mozart was slightly alien to my ears, and certainly to my pals! But the tune was interesting, and it was clear that this was a warmup piece for our tenor that involved him gradually producing some high notes, and those tones were pealing nicely, of good sheen and volume in that hall. (Yes, it was in Swedish, and this seemed fine to us, he’s in charge here.) There was warm applause, Jussi and Fred made the first of many exits to backstage, and then we got into a group of German Lieder.

There was the gorgeous Brahms “Die Mainacht,” a melody I loved from one of my favorite LPs, RCA’s “BJ in Song.” In fact, the next two songs also were familiar from that LP, Liszt’s “Es muss ein Wunderbares sein,” and Wolf’s “Verborgenheit,” all three were songs of yearning, joy, disappointment and all expressively sung with clear, beautiful, strong tones, some phrases softly hushed while others built to operatic dimensions, clearly a lot was going on with these songs! My pals were impressed too, even though they were less prepared than I was for these riches.

The program listed two more Lieder: R. Strauss’s “Traum durch die Dämmerung” and “Zweiernung.” The first of these I knew from Jussi’s LP from his 1955 Carnegie Hall concert, but the second was more mysterious and not on any LP I knew of at that time. However, I had heard the song in 1956 in this very hall and knew it was a song of celebration titled “Dedication” and that the last words were of “Heilig”(Holy) and “habe Dank!” (have thanks!). I remembered that Jussi had really laid into those words and aimed them at the audience, moving his head from left to right, as if he were verbally blessing everyone.

I had clued in my friends ahead of time, and we were delighted when he performed that trick again, there was a distinct increase in the sound level when he was aiming at us!

After that there was great applause and Jussi obliged with Schubert’s “Die Forelle”, the first encore of the evening. Then we had an intermission, to plan for opera arias coming up.

In fact the program was billed as a “Concert Extraordinary,” and promised the classic tenor arias “Mappari” from Marta, the “Song of India” from Sadko, Vladimir’s Cavatina from Prince Igor, and “Come un bel di maggio” from Andrea Chénier. I didn’t understand the “Extraordinary” claim until years later, when the Henrysson JB Phonography made clear that Jussi had sung the first three of these operas in his youth (during 1933-1937), but never since except for these particular arias, as concert items. (Of the fourth opera here, Chénier, he sang only this one aria.)

Actually listening to those arias was a great pleasure. The Marta aria, often taken for granted, was notable for its precision of rhythm and tuning. The “Song of India” was a special pleasure since it was so familiar to everyone there. I actually own a copy of the Swedish HMV 78 (X4723) that Jussi recorded in 1933, played it a lot, and considered the 1959 performance we heard at Hunter College to be better: definitely more stylish, with the voice sounding just as fresh as it did at age 22.

The same is true for the Prince Igor Cavatina “Daylight is fading,” I’ve known that recording (also from 1933) as well as a 1960 version from Gröna Lund. The voice is as fresh and beautiful in the 1960 recording, and in our 1959 performance, as it was in 1933, but the delivery in ’59 definitely was sung with an elegance missing in the ’33 version. That aria is supposed to end with a tricky high pianissimo, and that effect definitely was better, completely secure, at our Hunter College concert and the 1960 recording.

With one more programmed aria, from Andrea Chénier, with its line of climactic high notes, Jussi ended this Concert Extraordinary with a predictable flourish! When the applause finally stopped, and most of the audience was leaving, the two artists returned to the stage and spoke with well-wishers from the crowd, even my pals spoke with Freddy S. (I decided I didn’t know enough to take up their time, I should have planned that part better!)

By Janel Lundgren:

As I listened to this beautiful cascade of songs, I was struck by the utter beauty of each offering, and by the simple, refined manner of the singer. Jussi’s onstage persona was gracious and courtly. There was no grandstanding, no dramatic display of gearing up for a high note, no egotism. Here was an elegant artist in utter command of his art and his audience, who also seemed completely at ease, smiling at his listeners as old friends. The tremendous effort that goes into such a perfect performance was totally invisible (as was any sign of illness or weariness). This was the ultimate vocal artist at his very best, one we all thought we would be able to hear for years to come.

He sang three encores at the end of the program: Brahms’ “Serenade,” Beethoven’s “Adelaide,” and last, Sjöberg’s “Tonerna,”—with multiple standing ovations calling him back for another song, another bow. Then there was a long pause of several minutes. The audience continued to stand and applaud, with people streaming down the aisles and standing six deep in front of the stage. Finally he returned one last time, and criss-crossed the stage, spreading his arms wide as if embracing his audience, bowing...
This little song — among his first solos as a child which he kept with him throughout his career — is a song which speaks for all of us who love music. And it must be that it spoke for Jussi too. I am glad that, from all his repertoire, “Tonerna” turned out to be the last music I would ever hear him sing.

*Editor’s Note: Also in the audience that night was Ed Walter, who already has written his reminiscences of Jussi in concert at Hunter College (see J.JBS #25, 2017), and Karl Hekler (see J.JBS #21, 2013).

Translation by Harald Henrysson

I don’t want to be another Caruso; I just want to be Gigli,” said the tenor who inherited many of Caruso’s lyric roles after his sudden death in 1921. Over the years, other tenors have expressed similar reservations, sincere or otherwise, about the “second Caruso” label which Beniamino Gigli addressed in his memoirs. Yet there actually was a “second Caruso”: the legendary tenor’s son and namesake, Enrico Caruso, Jr., whom I was privileged to meet at a social event in Tampa, Florida.

The state of Florida has seen opera companies come and go since its “Gilded Age” when railroad magnates Henry Flagler and Henry B. Plant built their lavish resorts in St. Augustine and Tampa, respectively. Some of these opera companies were founded by wealthy patrons who had winter homes along the state’s Atlantic and Gulf coasts. In some instances they were aided by legendary singers who, like Emma Thursby, spent the winter months in Florida’s favorable climate.

In Tampa, the port city on the Gulf coast, several opera companies had flourished briefly but had failed because of the city’s transient population. During the 1960s, a young psychiatrist, Walter E. Afield, M.D., was determined to revive opera in Tampa. A year earlier, as a Harvard Medical School graduate and a resident at Johns Hopkins, Afield had become acquainted with the legendary soprano Rosa Ponselle when she was being treated for depression. The time Afield spent with Ponselle at Villa Pace, her estate in Baltimore’s Greenspring Valley, had deepened the young physician’s appreciation for great singing—and now in the early-1980s, he was funding yet another small opera company from his own pocket and from funds he raised by holding musical soirées at his home overlooking Tampa Bay.

Having become a friend of Walter Afield when I relocated to Tampa as a Dean at a local university, I was pleased when he called to invite me to his home for an event honoring Enrico Caruso, Jr. I had known about him from Nina Morgana (later Nina Morgana Zirato), whom the senior Caruso had discovered in 1908 when he was concertizing in Buffalo, New York, where Morgana lived with her immigrant Sicilian parents. She would go on to become a coloratura soprano at the Metropolitan Opera from 1920-1935—but of far more importance to her was that Caruso had chosen her as an assisting artist in his American concerts in 1917-1918.

As the youngest of seven children, Nina Morgana began her career as a toddler billed as “The Child Patti” and “Baby Patti” at the Pan-American Exposition held in Buffalo in 1901. By 1908, when she auditioned for Caruso at the city’s Iroquois Hotel, her voice had matured into a potent soprano. Caruso listened to the petite young woman sing “Caro nome” for him, after which he wrote a note and handed it to her. The note said that he would personally arrange for her to study in Italy with Teresa Arkel, under whose tutelage, Caruso wrote in his note, Morgana would become “una
that Caruso, Jr., would have very little
first-hand details about his father's life and
career because, as she explained, Enrico,
Jr., had been "shipped away" (her phrase)
to the Culver Military Academy during his
teenage years. His only recollections, Mor-
gana believed, would be of his visits as a boy
to one of the Caruso estates in Tuscany—
but even those recollections, she felt, would
be insignificant for a potential biography of
the great tenor.

Morgana then recounted the last time
she had seen Enrico, Jr., an incident which
she described to me vividly. During the
late-1950s, her son, Bruno Zirato, Jr., had
become a middle-management executive
with the CBS network. Later, he would join
the Goodson-Todman Company and would
produce "To Tell the Truth" and other
American daytime television shows. When
Enrico Caruso, Jr. phoned the senior Zirato
nearly seven years when her son, television
executive Bruno Zirato, Jr., had placed her
in a specialized assisted-living facility in
Ithaca, New York in 1973. At the time, I
was a professor and administrator at Ithaca
College, which had been responsible for the
construction of Ithacare, Inc., the facility to
which Morgana was relocated from mid-
town Manhattan after the senior Zirato had
died.

When I called to tell her that I had
been invited to an event at which Enrico
Caruso, Jr., was a guest of honor, I took the
opportunity to ask her whether I should
broach with him the subject of a biography
of his father, which perhaps I could write
with him as co-author. During that time, I
was in the midst of a similar project with
Rosa Ponselle, resulting in the publication
of Ponselle: A Singer's Life by Doubleday &
Company.

Morgana replied that she was certain
that Caruso, Jr., would have very little
first-hand details about his father's life and
career because, as she explained, Enrico,
Jr., had been "shipped away" (her phrase)
to the Culver Military Academy during his
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American daytime television shows. When
Enrico Caruso, Jr. phoned the senior Zirato
and asked to visit him and his wife, Zirato
had invited him to the apartment that he and his wife maintained at the Carnegie House in midtown Manhattan.

As Morgana recalled, she had arranged a light lunch for Enrico, Jr. “He had grown into a very handsome man,” she said, “and we were especially pleased by his courtly manners and his mastery not only of formal Italian but also Napoletan, the dialect spoken in Naples.” After they had finished lunch, Enrico, Jr., who had arrived carrying a small leather-bound case, asked if he could use their hi-fi system to play a recording he had made of “Questa o quella” from Rigoletto.

Morgana, who had debuted at the Metropolitan Opera as Gilda in 1920, remembered being surprised by the ease with which Caruso, Jr. sang the high B-flat at the close of the aria on the recording. The young Caruso then played his recording of “Che gelida manina,” and again impressed both Ziratos with the prolonged high-C at the apex of the aria.

Afterward, Morgana said, Enrico, Jr., explained that he had come to ask a favor: would the senior Zirato tell his son to arrange for a television appearance for (as Morgana remembered his words) “the son of the world’s greatest tenor, who is also a tenor.” The atmosphere in the room changed suddenly as Zirato, who was then General Manager of the New York Philharmonic, firmly told Enrico Caruso, Jr., that this “favor” was out of the question.

According to Morgana, Enrico, Jr. replied angrily to Zirato, “My father made your career possible — and now you refuse to ask your son to help me, the son of the man who gave you your career!” Zirato, a tall, formidable man who was accustomed to giving orders to subordinates, stood and launched into a blistering attack, in Italian, upon the young Caruso. “In his booming voice my husband told him that he was impertinent, an ingrate, a spoiled brat in the body of an adult,” Morgana said, “and then he ordered him to leave our apartment immediately. That was the last time I ever saw Mimmi.”

My telephone conversation with Nina Morgana took place two days before I was to meet Enrico Caruso, Jr. When I did, I was taken by his appearance: he was trim and agile, and though his white hair was now sparse, his peach-toned skin and unlined face made him remarkably young-looking for a man in his mid-seventies. After asking him several questions about his father, I took the liberty of mentioning Bruno Zirato, his father’s one-time secretary. “I knew him, of course, but I can’t say that I liked him,” he replied. “But I adored his wife, Nina Morgana, very, very much, but I’m sure she is gone now.”

As Manrico (Il trovatore) in the film “El Cantante de Napoles” (The Singer of Naples)
her if he had sung the words correctly. She was so taken by hearing his singing and speaking voice again that she exclaimed, “You have transported your Nina to another time, when I was young and you were even younger, when both of us were in the presence of Maestro”—the title by which those closest to the great tenor had always addressed him.

Wanting to give them privacy, I left the room so that they could continue talking. Some twenty minutes later, Enrico Caruso, Jr., rejoined us. It was obvious to me that he had been crying. Hoping to avoid having others notice this change in his demeanor, I complimented him for his singing of the Pergolesi art song. He thanked me but added that his voice was only a fraction of what it had been when he made recordings and was singing in films that he had made for Warner Brothers First National Studio, for their Spanish department. “I would rather you remember my voice as it was then,” he added as he retrieved the small carrying case he had brought with him.

Inside the case were two recordings of “Questa aquila”: his father’s Victor Red Seal disc from March 1908, and his own recording of the aria from March 1938. As soon as Dr. Afield saw the discs, he offered to play them on his sound system, which contained an adjustable-speed turntable for 78 r.p.m. recordings. The first disc that Enrico, Jr. asked to play was the senior Caruso’s 1908 Red Seal, which filled the large room and excited the guests when the legendary tenor sang a clarion B-flat near the end of the aria.

Next came the 1938 recording by the tenor’s namesake. As I listened to the opening measures, which were played by a piano accompanist, the sound of the piano seemed so distant that I thought I was hearing the studio piano in one of the senior Caruso’s early recordings of “Questa o quella”—until I heard the voice of Enrico Caruso, Jr. I remember having to adjust my ears to the timbre of his tones, which lacked the baritone tint of his father’s voice. But in the second verse, when the son sang the climactic B-flat effortlessly, I remember exclaiming, “Your B-flat is every bit as good as your father’s!”

After a prolonged ovation, Walter Afield mentioned to Enrico, Jr., that I was writing the authorized biography of Rosa Ponselle and that perhaps he and I should talk about collaborating on a biography of the two Enrico Carusos. The reaction of Enrico, Jr., was a brief smile that I interpreted as the nonverbal equivalent of, “Maybe, maybe not.” Remembering Nina Morgana’s comment that the son’s two teenage years in America (1919-21) were at the Culver Military Academy, I asked a series of questions to help me determine how much information the son had about his father. His replies led me to conclude that he had very little.

Before he left the party, I asked him for his postal address and in return I jotted down Nina Morgana’s mailing address for him. I noticed that he was living in Jacksonville, Florida, which struck me as ironic because I had heard that Caruso’s only daughter, Gloria Caruso Murray, was also living in Jacksonville. Not knowing what relationship, if any, the two of them had, I decided not to mention her name. The next morning I called Nina Morgana, who told me how elated she was about their telephone “reunion” and also said that she had begun writing a letter to Enrico, Jr.

After the evening at the Afield home, in which the best of everything was served for the guests, I gave little thought to pursuing any sort of project with Enrico Caruso, Jr. While I could not envision working with him, I was pleased that he and Nina Morgana were now corresponding. Although intensely curious about what they may be discussing, I never brought myself to ask Nina Morgana to share with me what she had written.

Meantime, Lydia M. Acosta, head librarian at the University of Tampa and the founding director of its Merli Kcel Library, accepted a donation from me of approximately 200 Victor Red Seal recordings from 1904 through 1920. The majority were Caruso recordings. As we were inventorying these historic recordings, she retrieved a book from the shelves: Opera and Concert Singers: An International Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets, which had just been published by Garland Press. The book was, and still is, a masterpiece of research, and more importantly, it made me aware of its author, Andrew Farkas.

Many years later, when we met and became friends, Andrew shared me with the letter Morgana had written to Enrico Caruso, Jr. after their telephone reunion. It was among his possessions when he passed away. Dated 25 June 1982, the handwritten letter began with a tribute to his singing, and it included photographs he had sent with his letter. One paragraph in Morgana’s reply is especially touching because at the time she was dependent upon the care of others:

“Sitting down, I feel quite well—but standing and walking are very bad! I “stump” along and it is discouraging. Your letter made me feel young again. Life was a song in 1921 and we loved your Father’s penthouse in the Vandebilt Hotel. It was so generous of him to give us a “honeymoon” apartment for six months! I shall always be grateful for that wonderful telephone call. It was a joy to talk to you after all those years of silence!”

For my part, I had gone on to write a biography of the American tenor Richard Tucker, and was also doing my “day job” as a higher-education administrator. As an avid reader of The New York Times, I was leafing through the pages of the 12 July 1986 edition when I saw an obituary with the heading, “Nina Morgana, 94, Soprano Who Sang with Caruso.” I had spoken with her two weeks earlier, and at the close of our conversation she had told me that she sensed her end was near.

A year later, in the 11 April 1987 issue of the Times, I saw another obituary: “Enrico Caruso, Jr., 82; Actor and Son of Tenor.” As I read it, I learned more about the films he had made for Warner Brothers, which
had also been distributed in the capitals of Central and South America. I had not known any of those details when I had met and talked with him. But that was merely a prelude to what came next: in 1990, I began hearing about a book which knowledgeable friends were describing as “the last word” on Caruso, a biography titled Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family, co-authored by Enrico Caruso, Jr., and Andrew Farkas.

Through Amadeus Press, its publisher, I received a complimentary copy and wrote a detailed review of it in The Opera Quarterly, then published by the Duke University Press. By the time I had read the first 100 pages, I realized how coy Enrico, Jr., had been—and how mistaken I had been—about how much new information he was able to have Andrew Farkas locate and thoroughly document. At 724 pages and replete with numerous monochrome and color plates, this biography, I concluded, was indeed the final word not only on the life and career of the greatest Italian tenor of the twentieth century, but also his entire family, including the two illegitimate sons to whom he had given his surname.

If, as Nina Morgana had suggested, Enrico, Jr., had relatively few vivid memories of his father and any extended times they spent together, he and his brother Rodolfo (Fofò) and their uncle, Giovanni Giuseppe Caruso, the tenor’s brother, had first-hand knowledge and documentation of the relationships between the senior Caruso and Ada and Rina Giachetti, the sisters who, at different times, were the love interests of the senior Caruso and also figured prominently in the life of Enrico, Jr.

As I was writing my review, I began hearing from a few colleagues who were disappointed that the book’s chapters dealt more with Enrico Caruso, Jr., than his legendary father. I took the opposite position in my review: I concluded that the final third of the Caruso-Farkas book, just as the title indicated, addressed and answered a number of lingering questions about key persons inside and outside the Caruso family, about the assets, value, and fate of Caruso’s estate, about his two sons’ inheritance, and about Dorothy Park Benjamin, the young American woman whom Caruso had married and with whom he had a daughter.

I also concluded that Andrew Farkas, with the full support of Caruso, Jr., had utilized his life story as a backdrop, a canvas on which to depict the events that occurred after the great tenor’s passing. His son’s presence necessarily pervaded the book because he was directly involved in the actions and activities of his heirs. Six years after the book was released, an abridged edition omitting the chapters after Caruso’s death was published in paperback—a disappointment, in my opinion, because those who purchased it were deprived of the full story of the Carusos.

Thirty years have passed since the publication of Enrico Caruso: My Father and My Family, and it remains the proverbial last word on the life, career, and family of the most renowned tenor of the twentieth century. “One hundred years from now,” Luciano Pavarotti told me in a 1973 interview, “Caruso will still sound like a ‘modern’ tenor because he was the first modern tenor.” So too, I believe, the collaboration between his son and namesake and author Andrew Farkas—as with that of Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas for Jussi, the biography of the “Swedish Caruso”—will remain the standard by which future operatic biographies will be measured.

James A. Drake, Ph.D., is a retired college president in the Florida higher-education system. He is the author of seven books, four of which are biographies of legendary twentieth-century singers: Rosa Ponselle (Doubleday, 1982, and Amadeus Press, 1997), Richard Tucker (E. P. Dutton, 1984), and Lily Pons (Amadeus Press, 2001), with forewords by Luciano Pavarotti (for Ponselle: A Singer’s Life and Richard Tucker: A Biography) and Beverly Sills (for Lily Pons: A Centennial Portrait).
Save the Swedish Record Archive!

“I am forwarding and strongly recommending an appeal against the actual destruction of the Swedish Radio Record Library, where I once worked. The collections there were of great importance for my work on the Jussi Björling Phonography. The text is also in English, and I hope that international support for the action against the wasting of a Swedish cultural treasure might be of some importance.”

—Harald Henrysson Sign the petition at http://www.musikskatt.se/

Swedish Radio’s Grammofonarkivet (“the Record Library”) in Stockholm has one of the largest and finest collections of music in the world and is Sweden’s largest music treasure. This library is financed by the Swedish people via a television license fee. The archive has suffered cuts since 2007 but now the Swedish public service companies — Swedish Radio, Swedish Television and Educational Broadcasting — have made even more drastic cuts to free up money for other activities. This has led to major service reductions for the archive. The cuts are so drastic that you can say that the Record Library in its current form has been effectively closed down.

The Record Library is no longer maintained as an archive with a long term perspective. Now the Swedish public service companies only focus on the archive as a production unit, which they see as an advantage in their competition with other media companies. As the Swedish public service companies own the Record Library, they can do as they please with it. Unfortunately this also means they have the ability to withhold access to a cultural treasure of national (and international) interest. None of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation’s websites display any public information on the Record Library. What modern archive today lacks a website?

In 1928 the first person was hired to take care of the records that were piling up at Swedish Radio. Sweden’s Record Library has since been managed as a national archive for the past 85 years.

The Record Library’s collection has both Swedish and international content and many unique recordings. Many popular network services such as Spotify and iTunes do not include large parts of Sweden’s Record Library collections, even some of the digital material! The collection’s sound quality is outstanding, as each record is archived separately and only handled by a few employees. In an international perspective, it is unique.

The cuts are now being implemented at a rapid pace.

Decisions have partly been decided to:
• Restrict the archival of new music to only music that has been ordered. In the past the Record Library staff has been able to ensure that relevant or important recordings were included as well. This means the collection’s width will be considerably narrower. Additionally much of this music will be purchased as individual audio files, without metadata or the sound quality of original CDs that is minimum for archive standard today.
• The cataloging system will become the simplest possible, which is devastating to an archive. Future generations will not have access to a broad and open search capability. Yet there is no equivalent on the Internet music services.
• The Audio Technology section of the Record Library has been closed. Office staff will continue to manage the playback of analog phonograms, 78s and vinyl. Recordings will not be professionally made and saved for the future in digital layers. Transfer of analog sound recordings is a specialist skill in audio technology. Programme production by the Record Library studio has closed down. This means it will no longer be possible to record music programmes from the archive. Closing this section also means that popular live pipe applications will not have access to shellac and vinyl records.

The issues involved with maintaining physical collections are increasingly occurring not only in major institutions, but also at a personal level. See the following article about the conundrum from one of our board members!

Archives health has low priority and will not be achieved by a workforce reduced by half.

Our politicians should earmark funds for the Record Library in the new Public Service Agreement which will take effect from 2014. However, the public service proposal from June 2013 shows that politicians do not want to interfere with what the public service companies are doing and they are blindly trusting that the Public Service Group will openly and properly take care of the archives.

This petition aims to draw attention to the Record Library’s status as a national cultural treasure and that it must be maintained as one. Accessibility should be extended as far as copyright law allows. After all, Sweden is the country that exports the most music in the world after the U.S. and Britain. For the good of our current and future generations, this unique national music collection must be financed and developed instead of being degraded and reduced.

This petition will periodically be sent to the board of directors of the Swedish broadcasting corporation, to politicians and to the Swedish media in order to raise awareness of the value of this precious archive and to show the value of treating it as such.

The petition and supporting initiatives will continue until the proper maintenance of the archive is secured. It’s important that we are as many as possible! Help therefore to spread the petition to all of your music lovers contacts via email and on Facebook.

You may sign up on the Swedish Website at http://www.musikskatt.se/

Editor’s Note: We sent out this petition to our email list a few months ago. The situation in Stockholm is unchanged. However, as more signatures come in, the petition will be resubmitted. If you have not signed as yet, we hope you will do so soon!

The issues involved with maintaining physical collections are increasingly occurring not only in major institutions, but also at a personal level. See the following article about the conundrum from one of our board members!
What Becomes of my Jussi Stuff?

By Walter B. Rudolph, Contributing Editor

Regrettably, there is no Jussicology or scholarship in what I’m offering. But it is timely. We, as the Jussi Björling Society-USA, are occasionally approached by people with Björling recordings, seeking an afterlife, or an off-load, of their collections. Major repositories are systematically turning away such collections. And now, on a larger scale, we have joined the struggle to preserve the invaluable resource of the Swedish Record Archive.

My introduction to today’s catastrophic dismissal of tangible collections was a 1000 unit antique radio collection. Initially built, piece by piece by a single individual, the collection was purchased by a corporation. Corporate headquarters displayed a few favorite pieces while the remainder sat in storage. Eventually the collection was offered to a university, on condition of storage, maintenance and display, with the stipulation that the donating corporation be given first right of refusal, if the university were to dissemble the collection. No money was given with the collection to assist with its care. The dismissal was inevitable – imagine the cost just to provide shelving and storage with no budget!

We’re not dealing with anything of that enormity. I cite this situation only to demonstrate that our world is now plagued with personal collections without a future. If you are like me, you haven’t gathered your Björling recordings and memorabilia because you expected it to accumulate value toward your retirement needs or future sale. Nevertheless you hold it with great care and meaning, knowing how it has enhanced and even defined your heart and your life.

In the late 1960’s, as an indigent student, I was slowly building my Jussi recording collection. I was completely new to the idea of pirate recordings, and many of Jussi’s recordings were already out-of-print. Manon Lescaut was one of my first acquisitions, purchased used, via mail order, at a price of $20.00. The same recording can be found on CD today for as little as $4.00. You all have a feeling for the purchasing power of a dollar in the late 1960’s compared to today. No wonder my collection grew so slowly! I traded my Reiner/Rise Stevens Carmen to my grade school music teacher for her Björling/Milanov Aida in a day when I couldn’t even find a used copy to buy. And yes, I have missed that Carmen, originally intended for Jussi as Don José.

For the same amount as the Manon Lescaut, a gentle, giving man in California (name forgotten) made me a 7” reel-to-reel tape with the Met Romeo, Beethoven Missa Solemnis, and several scores of individual songs — all carefully identified. Recorded at 3 ⅞ ips in 4 track monaural sound, this was, to me, a prize of colossal quantity! My other three must-have albums were Canadian compilations on the Rococo label. These were acquired when a beneficent neighbor told me he would fly me to New York City via Toronto, if I could find my own way home. I had about 5 hours in Toronto, on foot, and managed to locate two admirable LP shops. When the customs official boarded that Cessna jet that evening I learned I had spent more than allowed for the few hours I had been in Canada. Looking at him, dumbfounded, he realized it was pointless to pursue such trivial amounts with his witless culprit, and simply advised me ‘for the future.’

I always tell more than you want to know. This detail is simply to indicate the singular intent and effort that goes into gathering. Here’s some more. Not a day of my life goes by without remembering Douglas Robinson. Robbie was the chorus master at Covent Garden from about the...
time of my birth until just before the death of Benjamin Britten. He trained that chorus for the premieres of Britten, and we all have an idea of the legacy that house in the post WW2 era. Robby was chorus master at Lyric Opera of Chicago in my short time there, before beginning my career in classical music radio. He and I became close, and he visited us in Utah before returning to England where he died only a few years later. He’s a defining part of my musical pedigree, and I remember him most for four words he used when stressing rhythmic accuracy. But they are four words I had known my entire life — now used with new emphasis: *do it on purpose!* They’ve become a credo for me, easily applied in everything I do, if I’m willing to implement.

From those four words I tempered myself when remastered recordings became available. For me, it was not necessary to have every reincarnation issued. Each purchase was a decision, determined by reviews, musical preferences and… .space. (I must later return to my ‘stuff’ about Robbie.)

Storage space, in the digital era, is probably the leading nemesis to physical collections. I’m aware of another university instance where an authorized employee accepted a sound recording collection (primarily CD/DVD) large enough to fill a 15 x 15 foot room. Between the time the collection was accepted by the employee and delivered, the university declined. Said employee has emptied a room in his home to store the collection while trying to locate another recipient. No strings attached, other than to accept ownership. No takers.

In my younger years I could never imagine having to die, leaving behind not only family and loved ones, but loved stuff — specifically my recordings. They were a substantial part of my life. Today I realize that the digital era has now solved that problem, while destroying physical collections in the same breath. It is called the cloud. Many have a mindset that a life—here—after is spent sitting, harp— in—hand, on the cloud. Since all sound is now digitized to the cloud, surely we’ll have access to it hereafter as well! Okay, that isn’t helpful. But perhaps it expands our view of the magnitude of the problem.

By the early 1990s the radio station for which I had responsibility was rarely playing any of the 17,000 LPs in the library. The university library accepted them as a donation — radio already had full access to the university library. We had just transferred convenience of access and gained some considerable space, which in turn was lost to the library. For a time there were used duplicate record sales, where thrifty—minded students and public could acquire ‘my hard—earned *Manon Lescaut*’ for $2—3.

Those same early years had a few Jussi Björling articles one could locate and eventually photocopy. There were just a couple books, and if acquired, required knowledge of Swedish to read. That was of no matter to me. If it said Jussi Björling on or within, I needed it on my shelf. Thus my wants went to a waiting list in some unknown antiquarian bookshop in far—off Stockholm. Imagine my surprise when they eventually became available. Newspaper clippings had been inserted in these volumes, also in Swedish. These I mailed to the Museum in Borlänge. I’ve learned to donate without strings attached. The new owner must not be impeded when making future decisions.

English translations have been made of Jussi’s books. Additional translations may yet be made. I have no idea how many of you may own copies of these Swedish language books. But if you know not Swedish, and an English translation exists, do you wish to keep your original? Broadened another direction, how many of you have family pictures — slides, prints or negatives? I have digitized literally thousands of prints. Additionally I’ve spent another $1000 to have pictures digitized. We know LPs are making a strong comeback. But professional photographers have never dismissed film. And there are instances where photo processing can make copies of originals that digital cannot match. So another question becomes, what becomes of the original once digitization has occurred?

Libraries have largely answered that question — toss it out. This leads in quick succession to our overloaded landfills and today’s disposable attitudes. You’ve no doubt had as much experience as I have with refrigerators, CD players and appliances of every order that seems to have inserted chips limiting life to a miserably short duration. Just this week I purchased CO2 monitors — each programmed to last 10 years. Then replacement is required. No batteries to change; just replace. One hundred years ago, the idea of junking old cars hardly existed. In our years of excess, we’ve gathered rather indiscriminately, without consideration of ‘what’s to become of everything I’m acquiring?’

Those in later years are planning wills, only to learn ‘their kids don’t want their stuff.' Attitudes have changed. Everything was of value to those who lived through WW1, the Great Depression, or WW2. Few are left to even describe what it was like to have their needs. Thus today’s disposable society.

This is written top—of—mind. I’m no scholar on the subject. But I know of what I’ve described. So what is to be done with our Jussi CDs and LPs?

I believe we are individually responsible to share what we have learned, know and cherish with those around us. Let us seek opportunities to learn of young people with an interest in the vocal art — opera and recital/concert singing with classical training and literature. Contact local voice teachers. Offer listening gatherings to introduce and/or share favorite recordings. What better opportunity to introduce and share Jussi Björling? This will lead us to people of various ages with similar interests. Form groups based on those attending local symphony, opera and recital series. “Do it on purpose,” and be determined to help create a strong future for the music and artistry we have relied on to provide beauty and stability to our lives.

Some public libraries may accept some of your materials. But be prepared to see them in the ‘sale’ shelves in the near future. Some libraries may save 2-3 copies of each disc. But once given, it is no longer yours.

Should you wish to leave your recordings in your will, just be sure you know...
where they are going. Please don’t assign your family to donate them to a worthy cause, because for all intents and purposes, there isn’t one.

I’ve been a bit blunt, but only because we truly must individually find recipient(s) for these items. Some think there is money to be gained by sales. Not likely. It is difficult to even qualify for a tax deduction in most cases under current tax laws. But a voice teacher/studio or faculty member may be thrilled to become the repository for what you have so carefully curated. This is our responsibility. We must save our stuff by finding individuals (and rarely institutions) who may bolster our beliefs and extend our energies beyond our time.

And what about my interviews with Douglas Robinson? Who knows his musical pedigree? Who knows what he learned as he trained the Covent Garden Chorus for world premiere operas that still hold the stage today? These are questions that most often do not end well.....

Editor’s Note: In response to this wonderfully written lament, JBS-USA is initiating a new service for its members, called “Member Marketplace.” It will not solve everything, but perhaps it may help. See the following article!

JBS-USA is happy to offer a new, free service to our members. On our website, we now have a new page called Member Marketplace, a place for our members to offer up for sale, swap, or donation, any music-related items or collections they might have which they now want to “offload”. Only members of the Society may post items. Buyers, however, may be anyone from the general public who visits our website.

We will be acting as the facilitator for these sales, swaps, and donations, but not as the financial platform — no purchases will be through JBS-USA. The seller will need to agree on the easiest way for purchase directly with the buyer. Members will need to send JBS-USA an image of the item(s), how much they are selling their item(s) for, and their contact information: more specifically the best email to reach them on. Items will be posted as they are received. (Buyer and seller may want to set up a PayPal account so that financial information is kept private, and so that purchases may be made with a credit card. All a buyer will need in order to make a payment is the seller’s name, email, or mobile number.)

We hope this service will be of use to you all, whether you are looking to down-size or add to your collections! Visit the Marketplace on our website, www.jussibjorlingsociety.org

Disclaimer
“Jussi Björling Society - USA (JBS-USA) provides the Members Marketplace as a service through JBS-USA for JBS-USA Members. JBS-USA reserves the right to decline to post any item(s) at its own discretion. JBS-USA is not responsible for, and expressly disclaims all liability for, damages of any kind arising out of use, reference to, or reliance on any information or product contained within the website, electronic communication or other documentation. All financial transactions made on the Members Marketplace page are handled directly between the seller and the buyer, and will not go through JBS-USA. Do not share bank account information, credit card information, or financial information of any kind with anyone that you do not know. If you choose to share this information, you do so at your own risk. Sellers will be responsible for setting up the appropriate payment methods and discussing the payment method with the buyer. While the products on this page and within this website will be periodically updated, no guarantee is given by JBS-USA that the information provided on this website is correct, complete, and up-to-date.”
A Longtime Member Recalls the Roots of Her Fascination with Jussi

By Vicki Wallshein with Dan Shea

The Directors of our Jussi Björling Society-USA had their annual meeting in Washington DC last November, and the delightful Vicki Wallshein attended several sessions with her mother, Dixie. One of the main social events was Sunday brunch at the DC Army and Navy Club, hosted by Carol Pozefsky, where we had good opportunities to swap notes with others about how Jussi Björling had entered our lives! Vicki had this especially charming story:

“I was starting my sophomore year at the University of Virginia, taking a major in biology and minor in music. I had signed on for a class called Opera 101. On the first day of the semester, the professor, without any commentary or explanation, gave each of us a libretto to follow and proceeded to put an LP on the record player. I was content to read the dialogue of the four young Bohemians in their attic quarters, but became more interested when a soprano entered and engaged with the tenor: both voices were so beautiful! By the end of the first act and its duet, I had become totally swept up in the world of those melodies as sung by those voices which left me a blithering mass of tears collapsed on my desk. The other students filed out while I attempted to pull myself together and could finally ask the prof, what had we been listening to? It was the RCA recording of La bohème with Björling and de los Angeles, and the opera was by Puccini. Now my life was changed forever and I started buying every opera by Puccini and every recording of Jussi Björling that I could find.

“A few years later, in the early 1980’s, my Jussi-obsession accelerated, and I visited the Björling Museum and his grave, met and began my friendship with Harald Henrysson in Borlänge, became a lifetime member of the JB Society-USA. And, I saw Rolf Björling in Tosca in Stockholm wearing his father’s costume, on Jussi’s 74th birthday. I saw Ann-Charlotte in the Sound of Music and Jussi’s grandson, Raymond, in recital. And I started getting catalogs from Bill Safka Autographs of Forest Hills, NY.

“In one catalogue, I saw a listing for Jussi Bjorling in La bohème at the Met, a signed program. For someone newly out of college, the price, which I recall was somewhere between $1200 and $1800, seemed extreme but I bought it. Little did I know that this would turn out to be the complete program from Jussi’s debut performance at The Met on November 24th, 1938, and that it was signed by the entire cast and the conductor. In addition to Jussi, the sopranos singing Mimi and Musetta were also making their Met debuts.

“Fast forward many more decades and I had decided that I would bequeath this treasure to the Jussi Björling Museum. But, after showing this program to Harald and Stefan Olmårs in October 2017 here in DC, they both suggested I come to Sweden and donate it in person where it will have pride of place in the museum’s permanent collection and can be enjoyed by Jussi lovers for generations to come. In the meantime, I have the program in a special display case in my home and every time I pass it, I break into a huge smile!”

Indeed, you will too, when you see the accompanying photos. And maybe, next time JBS-USA meets in Washington, we can prevail on Vicki to invite all of us to her home to see it in person!

Vicki Wallshein is a native Washingtonian who discovered opera and Jussi Björling while attending the University of Virginia. She is a retired biomedical professional, who lived and worked in Europe for 10 years, including 18 months in Sweden. Frequent visits to many of the Great Opera Houses of Europe (and some outstanding small ones), only fueled her ongoing passion for opera and continues to do so to this day. She is a Life Member of JBS-USA.
PHOTOS COURTESY VICKI WALLSHEIN

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Fausto Cleva

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Program Continued on Next Page

www.jussibjorlingsociety.org

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A Musical Weekend in Washington

By Janel E. Lundgren, Editor

“...a wonderful idea to bring JB Society members together for an outstanding performance with the National Symphony Orchestra with such great singers. The dinner at the Kennedy Center was quite enjoyable, met some interesting people and had a good time.

“The Jussi Björling Society USA is quite a wonder. Its activities and discoveries and publications preserve our cherished memories of the great Jussi, and I hope it will continue to thrive.”

— JBS Member Robert Schreiber  November, 2019

Members and friends at one of the JBS tables in the Roof Terrace Restaurant, Kennedy Center

Members of the Board of JBS-USA enjoyed another weekend in Washington D.C., November 15 to 17, 2019, devoted to an annual board meeting, musical events, and friendship. An open invitation was extended to JBS members and friends, board members of Vocal Arts DC, and representatives of the Swedish Embassy to join us for a Friday evening event, and in the end, we arranged for a block of 25 seats for the Friday, November 15th concert performance of Act II, Tristan und Isolde, by the National Symphony Orchestra.

The evening started with dinner reservations for all in the Roof Terrace Restaurant of the Kennedy Center. At dinner, it was an extra treat to have the opportunity...
lights dimmed! And of course the concert was phenomenal. The music of Tristan with the orchestra seated onstage rather than in an orchestra pit was glorious and almost overwhelming. Fortunately, the fine cast of singers was equally stunning, and all were rewarded with a lengthy and boisterous standing ovation at the evening’s end.

The next morning, the Board met for a four-hour in-depth session, working on current and future policies, projects, and events, including plans for increased use of social media, and for a 2021 conference.

Saturday evening was free, but three musical events attracted most of us. Some returned to the Kennedy Center for the Washington National Opera’s production of Otello. Others chose instead to attend Il Postino, a 2010 opera by Daniel Cartán, presented by Virginia Opera at George Mason University’s concert hall. And a third group attended a celebratory organ concert at St. Matthews Cathedral, on the occasion of the completion of their massive Lively-Fulcher Organ, and featuring the Catholic University Symphony Orchestra and Harp Ensemble. Truly an embarrassment of musical riches!

Sunday morning, the riches turned scrumptious. Life Member Carol Pozefsky invited us all to the renowned Sunday morning Champagne Brunch at the Army and Navy Club on Farragut Square. Carol was indeed a wonderful hostess, the buffet was lavish, and again we lingered long in happy conversation. We are grateful to Carol for giving us such a perfect way to end another JBS weekend!
After these five Don Ottavios during his first operatic season 1930/31 Jussi only ever sang the role five more times: when Forsell was 65 in 1933; on tours to Copenhagen, Oslo, and Riga; and a final time in 1937 when Ezio Pinza made a guest appearance as Don Giovanni. Did Jussi get a chance to talk to the distinguished guest, who was the Metropolitan Opera’s admired Don Giovanni — also outside the stage, it was rumoured — and from 1934 also the Salzburg Festivals? Two months later Jussi would himself travel to the US for the first time since he was a child, so he could benefit from some advice. Don Juan was otherwise not performed in those years, and when there finally was a new production in 1941 Jussi was an international singer who performed more grateful roles when he returned to the Stockholm Opera.

When Jussi a quarter-century after his debut sang the aria at his famous Carnegie Hall concert 24 September 1955, issued on LP not much later, he did so in Italian. He may have studied at least parts of the opera again in its original language in preparation for a Don Giovanni production in Los Angeles 1948 which was announced but never happened. If it had, we would have been able to hear more of Jussi in this part than just “Il mio tesoro.”

But now I am getting ahead of events. After his first debut Jussi had to go through two more debuts.

Second debut: Arnold
Following the debut in August 1930 Jussi could concentrate on his studies. One more Don Ottavio followed on 25 September, but otherwise his only role that autumn was the small part of the “chansonnier” in Gustave Charpentier’s Louise. This was a fairly successful novelty (although it had been played regularly in Paris since 1900), which was given seven times during the 1930/31 season. The playbill can be seen on the Internet and lists 36 singers — a major part of the ensemble — so even the student and opera stipendiary Mr Björling was needed.

During this period Jussi prepared for his second debut: something quite different and even more challenging. Don Ottavio may be a long role, but most of it is safely in the middle register. Even though Mozart’s music requires much from musicians, most singers find it friendly for the voice. Now it was time for Rossini’s Guillaume Tell (played in Swedish as Wilhelm Tell) which received its “Repris-Premiär” 27 December 1930 and then was played eight times until spring – a success for those days. Then there were two follow-up performances during the season 1931/32. Jussi sang the tenor hero Arnold in all of them. After that, Guillaume Tell only returned to the Stockholm Opera for the season 1967/68.

The latest performances of Wilhelm Tell had been in 1919. Since the work had first been given by the Opera in 1856 it had never been away for more than three seasons, so it was an old repertory piece they now tried to give new life through a newly studied production where scenery and costumes had been renewed “almost completely,” according to one press review. In 1919 nothing on the playbill tells us about director or designer; now in 1930 we are told that “decorations” were new (by the signature Jon-And), while the costumes “from the theatre’s ateliers” may not all have been newly made. Now a director is mentioned: Gunnar Klintberg (1870–1936) who for some years did several productions at the Opera and had the title of “förste regissör.” We can guess that it was a totally traditional production. Klintberg had attended the school of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in the 1890s, and after finishing his own career as an actor he was now functioning as a director.

We will come back to how much renewal there may have been on the musical side. But all leading parts were newly cast and considerably rejuvenated. The conductor was also new: 28-year-old Herbert Sandberg who with one small interruption would remain with the Stockholm Opera until his death in 1966, from 1946 as Court Conductor. He had come to the Opera from Berlin where he had been an assistant conductor, in particular to Leo Blech. Blech was the chief conductor at several among Berlin’s opera houses, most enduringly at

Jussi as Arnold 27 December 1930
the Court and later State Opera, and from 1925 he was a frequent guest conductor in Stockholm. Intrigues in Berlin, probably anti-Semitic, gave him ample time for the Stockholm Royal Opera, and John Forsell who knew him well grasped the opportunity. Blech made a big impression from the very beginning, and Sandberg came here on his recommendation, later married Blech’s daughter, and had a lasting importance on the Stockholm Opera’s development.

By the time for the Wilhelm Tell premiere Sandberg had been there for two years but already conducted about 25 works during almost 200 performances. We may guess that he was ambitious when he had now been assigned a newly studied production that was even labelled a premiere, but also that his experience from how Tell was done in Germany would influence him — there it was still a repertory work.

Moses Pergament, composer and reviewer for Svenska Dagbladet, had special praise for Joel Berglund, then a 26-year-old newcomer, and for the conductor and orchestra. The chorus he calls “as acting material almost hopeless” but it sounded well. “Jussi Björling, although he is said to have been indisposed, still had sufficient radiance and warmth in his singing to reinforce the view that he is a coming ‘star tenor’ at the Opera.” Curt Berg in Dagens Nyheter wrote that “the voice was fairly beautiful, but the scenic action should have been made less old-fashioned. To be fair, one has to say that he had frightful things to interpret. The aria ‘Oh Mathilde!’ in the first act, to take one example, nowadays is not so emotionally engaging as it originally was intended; this fact becomes particularly striking when the diction is so good as that which Mr Björling offers.” This quote gives one example of how many viewed Wilhelm Tell as an outdated opera: Berg wrote about “longueurs” and passages in three-quarter time which nobody could take seriously as drama.

Arnold is a part known for its many high notes, and they were at the time a weak point for Jussi whose voice was not yet fully developed — he still had more than a month until his 20th birthday. In my “Jussi of the month” for July 1934 I described how he conquered them that summer. So it may seem foolhardy or miraculous that he sang this long and arduous role already in December 1930. There is of course no audible evidence. But we can be sure that in those days it was acceptable practice to substitute some high notes with lower alternatives, or just delete passages. Few listeners were so acquainted with the opera that they would notice the difference, except for memories of how local singers had handled the part more than a decade earlier. Only the most important arias were available on records, to which few people had access. Those who had happened to see Tell outside Sweden on their travels would hardly remember details, and if they did it was certainly regarded as normal that Stockholm would not always measure up to international standards. And cuts and simplifications existed also in Berlin and Paris. Those who could read the music themselves would find that French grand opéra was especially maltreated in repertoire performances, as their length and high demands had led to simplifications almost since they were new. Wilhelm Tell like Meyerbeer’s operas were seen as old-fashioned and modernizations as welcome. Dagens Nyheter’s reviewer claims that its conspiracy scene “could have benefited from shortening.”

Actually we know that Wilhelm Tell was considerably cut. Some day a researcher may investigate this in the Royal Opera’s archives, where performance materials and production notes should exist. While waiting for that we can study the playbill for Guillaume Tell the 27 December 1930 on the Internet. We find that the performance was expected to last 3 hours and 15 minutes. When we come to the next performance the timing is five minutes less, and by the third performance only three hours. This included intervals. A complete performance without intermissions lasts about four hours!

When Guillaume Tell returned in 1967 I was a young enthusiast who saw it twice and recorded the radio broadcast. That production is described in the archive as lasting three hours “with two longer and one shorter interval”. The music time of the broadcast is roughly 2 hours and 15 minutes. I spoke to Kåge Strömback, at the time well-known winner in Kvitt eller dubbelt, one of Swedish Television’s first successes that followed a US model (The $64,000 Question — the money was much less in Sweden). His topic was Verdi, but he was knowledgeable about earlier Italian opera and I said how happy I was to have seen Guillaume Tell. “Well, at least 48% of it!” he said — he had counted bars when following the broadcast with the piano score. I happened to look down into the orchestra
and was awarded its jeton or medal, and that he at this time was coming into demand as a concert artist. From January 1931 his duties as a Royal Opera stipendiary were becoming more demanding, and he is gradually entering the repertoire and taking part in several operas at the same time as this employment includes studying more parts which were new for him. In February he is 20 and already busy. Forsell liked to talk of his employees using the French term sujets — subjects. Jussi will spend a total of nine years among those: 1930/31 as a stipendiary and from summer 1931 until summer 1939 on a regular contract. In total he did fifty roles, big and small, before relinquishing his fixed employment. Of course he continued as a guest artist until his death 1960, but during this long time he added only two new roles (plus one more on records).

Incidentally, John Forsell's period as general manager ended in 1939 — at the same time as Jussi went freelance. But in early 1931 Jussi was barely 20 and it was time for his third debut.

Third debut: Jonathan

The idea of a young singer's one or two years as a stipendiary was to develop a repertoire that could motivate regular employment. In Jussi's case this was a fast process: already in May 1931 he would receive a more permanent contract, valid from 1 July. By that time he had also passed his third debut. This was as Jonathan in Carl Nielsen's opera Saul og David and happened already on 13 January, little more than two months after debut number two. ("Og" is Danish for "and" — in Swedish it is written "och"). During those weeks he had sung his second debut part Arnold one more time, and one evening he did a small part in Louise — one of all those minor roles which members of the theatre's ensemble did routinely.

Forsell had differentiated Jussi's three debuts in a clever way. First the formal and classical Mozart opera. At least those words describe how it was performed in those days. It also was a work where Forsell in person could monitor his young colleague's moves on stage while he himself sang Don Giovanni a few metres away. As there were a few more beginners in that opera there was a reason to invest some rehearsal time, which was not always the case: other debutants might have to do with little more than an instruction session.

As debut number two a French-Italian opera, but not one of the most commonly performed. As Guillaume Tell was a new staging of an opera last seen eleven years earlier it could be relatively well rehearsed, and it attracted more attention from audience and media than if it had been a constantly performed opera like La bohème. A more common work had also given rise to immediate comparisons with other tenors of the Royal Opera; now it must have seemed natural and interesting to have a new name when an old opera like Guillaume Tell returned. The renaissance for the bel canto repertoire was far in the future, and many thought of the work as old-fashioned.

And now as the third debut an opera by a contemporary Scandinavian — a third style of opera for the debutant. No-one could know that Carl Nielsen (1865–1931) would die in October. During the 1920s his music had had a breakthrough, not least in Sweden. The premiere of Saul og David had been already 1902 in Copenhagen, but after he had visited Gothenburg's Concert Hall, its Grand Theatre took it up in 1928, and now it was Stockholm's turn. Nielsen had guest conducted also in Stockholm's new Concert Hall in 1928, and with Sibelius he was regarded as the greatest living Nordic composer. Hugo Alfven had not written any opera, and Stenhammar had died in 1927. Peterson-Berger and Natanael Berg were the only active Swedish composers to have had works performed by the Royal Opera; Hilding Rosenberg would be added to that short list a few years later. But Saul og David must have been perceived as an important and at the same time "safe" novelty. That its composer himself travelled to Stockholm for the occasion added extra glamour.

Some may expect Saul og David to be an edifying Old-Testament sermon with devotional choruses about the Lord's chosen people. But Nielsen had no interest in such
things, he was an extrovert country boy from Funen who at the time of writing — the turn of the century — just had had his first major successes. As in Verdi’s Otello the audience with no prior warning or overture is thrown into a situation where the next few minutes will determine the entire course of the drama. Israel’s king Saul wants to send his army against the approaching enemy, but the prophet Samuel has said that the will of the Lord is that Saul should await Samuel’s return. Saul dares to trust his own judgment in a way that we in the audience probably find rather reasonable: that the situation is acute and does not allow any delay. He starts the sacrifice which must precede the army’s departure, without attending the return and permission of the prophet. The ceremony has hardly begun before Samuel does return and proclaims that the Lord takes his hand away from Saul because of his disobedience, and that consequently a new king is needed.

When David then appears he is at the same time a challenge and a solution for Saul’s dilemma. Here is a youth who wants to face the enemy without weapons, one that his daughter wants to marry, and whose music can calm Saul’s sick soul — but will Saul really give up his powers and be punished when his actions were driven by his concern for his people? When I encounter Saul I always think of business managers whose intentions have been quashed. And I think about the entrepreneurial that characterized many in Copenhagen’s upper classes around the year 1900. Among the elegantly dressed audience for the first night of Stockholm’s Saul og David that January 1931 there must have been some who had been affected by the stock exchange crash in New York autumn 1929, little more than a year before. Now less than one and a half year later the European economy was hesitating after “the roaring twenties,” and one year later Sweden would experience the Kreuger crash.

Maybe the director Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius did not think too much about this. He was a multitalent in film and theatre, who after an aborted career as a lawyer now at 45 years of age had a permanent position with the Stockholm Opera that would last 1928–45 and put its seal on a big part of its repertoire. On black-and-white images the scenographer Jon-And’s designs seem colouristic and dramatically effective, which are words used about him in Wikipedia. He too had come to the Opera some years earlier and would remain there until his death in 1941. He also had done the visual renewal of Guillaume Tell the previous month. So Saul og David was a production of its time, with the leading living Nordic opera composer coming to watch his opera, and well-established but still fresh talents forming the team to produce it. Conductor Armas Järnefelt had been at the Royal Opera for a quarter-century and when we nowadays can hear his collected recordings on a CD-box from the Finnish label Fuga we hear an important musician.

Jonathan, Jussi Björling’s role, was not mentioned in my words about the plot above. He is the son of Saul who at a young age has assumed the task of arbitrator between his father’s wild temper and the internal and external forces affecting Saul’s kingdom. Jonathan immediately becomes a close friend of David, so close that modern productions sometimes find a homoerotic side to their relation. David is the larger tenor part and for the first three performances it was taken by a Norwegian, Conrad Arnesen, who had performed it when the opera was given in Gothenburg. He was recruited because David Stockman was ill. But Stockman sang the remaining performances when the opera proved successful: it was given eight times until the early spring, and six more when it was taken up again next season. In those days planning was not far ahead, as all singers belonged to the ensemble and could be ordered to do what management decided. So these fourteen performances prove there was a demand for Saul og David. Jussi sang at all performances. Later the work has not been given in Stockholm, nor as far as I know anywhere else except of course in Copenhagen, where there have been several productions at the Danish Royal Theatre.

Audiences came not only for the work but to experience some other favourites. Brita Hertzberg in the important soprano role of Mikal was young, 29 years, and fresh, a warm and lovable voice and person. Einar Larson, more baritone than bass in Saul’s part, was praised for an “excellent study” of the conflicted ruler. He too belonged among the many young singers
whose careers Forsell had launched at the Opera, but in his case his less than five years there had already proved too much load for his lyric voice. After a few highly successful years management and he himself made several failed attempts to have it regain the freedom and ring which had come easy for him when he was 30. But he stayed with the Opera for twenty more years, and until he was approaching 80 he remained a spokesperson for the opera soloists, for instance when they performed at the Stockholm amusement park Gröna Lund. At the premiere he was 33, a strangely young age for the old ruler. Maybe it was lucky that his son Jonathan was played by a really young singer: Jussi Björling, still a few weeks from his 20th birthday.

All of this indicates a highly deliberate effort from Forsell to offer Stockholm audiences an attractive novelty. Hertzberg, Larson and Björling were all among his favourites, which some critical voices in the press felt he drove too harshly and expected soon to be worn out. Maybe even that attracted attention. *Saul og David* was a success: *Svenska Dagbladet* (Moses Pergament) called the first night "a tempestuous triumph". He wrote that "For Einar Larson the role of Saul is a little too low, and maybe psychologically a line too high" but that he seemed to have benefited from a study of Chaliapin’s conception of Boris Godunov. Jussi Björling is only mentioned in passing, but another reviewer commented on his velvet-soft and beautiful voice. Even his acting was said to have improved, and writers speculated that the nervous stress was becoming less as he was gaining experience. Curt Berg in *Dagens Nyheter* was more reserved: "The latter now had another debut role, whose execution was laudable, but did not add something to what he had proved earlier." 

Carl Nielsen was called up on stage, received laurels from the manager and a *touche* [fanfare] from the orchestra. The audience seemed singularly satisfied and their applause called back the soloists repeatedly" (Moses Pergament in *Svenska Dagbladet*).

Even though Jonathan is the second tenor part and lacks any real “numbers” of its own, it is important and he takes part in all four acts. Maybe this also reflects Forsell’s coaching of his apprentice. Obviously it was good to give the role of Jonathan to a singer who neither the audience nor he himself would think should have had David’s larger part instead. David is more important and puts greater demands on action and singing, but both are of a similar age and Jonathan too requires a good lyric, youthful singer. Jussi may have been an excellent Jonathan, and at the same time he will have learnt from it how to interact with brief lines with many on stage, and to react silently to the conflicts among the main characters Saul, David and Mikal.

With the three debuts under his belt Jussi could proceed and gradually be rewarded with more roles. During spring 1931 he alternates his three debut parts, at the end of March adding two small roles in Natanel Berg’s *Engelbrekt* and in April one of the “cavalieri” in Zandonai’s *I cavalieri di Ekebù*. He sings a total of 25 performances with the Opera that half-year, also appearing outside the opera at a few concerts and private functions. It seems likely that most of his time was spent preparing for his future as one of the theatre’s tenors on regular contract. From August 1931 there follows at a rapid pace more roles: during that autumn only, in addition to several smaller parts he adds the strangely contrasted bouquet of Erik in *The Flying Dutchman*, Count Almaviva in *Barber of Seville* and Narraboth in *Salome*!

But that’s another story.

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