

Announcing *Immortal Performances* New Release of *Roméo et Juliette*

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES



Also
HOLLYWOOD BOWL 1949 EXCERPTS

Gounod
**ROMÉO
ET
JULIETTE**
(complete)

BJÖRLING ♦ SCHYMBERG

others
ROYAL OPERA
Nils Grevillius
(1940)

✿
ROMÉO ET JULIETTE
Act II - 1943
BJÖRLING - SCHYMBERG

✿
PUCCINI: LA BOHÈME
Act I complete
Björling - Schymberg
Royal Opera 1940

Notes for *Roméo* release

By Richard Caniell

Founder and Sound Engineer, *Immortal Performances*

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

+ Beethoven: “Adelaide”. Gounod: *Roméo et Juliette*: “Ange adorable. Va! Je t’ai pardonné...Nuit d’hyménée”. Izler Solomon, cond; Anna-Lisa Björling (soprano); Jussi Björling (tenor); Live, Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles August 23, 1949



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 Bidú 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 Hjärdis Schymberg. Schymberg, 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

Caniell: Notes for *Roméo* release

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 Mimì. *Bluebell* previously released a portion of this Act, beginning with Mimì'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!