Revisiting Jussi’s Last New York Recital

By Janel E. Lundgren and Dan Shea


“Jussi closed the autumn tour with a recital at Hunter College on 27 December 1959. His popularity and drawing power were such that he and Schauwecker had been invited back for this ‘concert extraordinary’ only nine months after their previous appearance. It was a capacity house; many people had to be seated on the stage behind him, but as always, Jussi sang at least one number or a couple of encores facing them. Cornell MacNeil recalls the night, the last time he heard Jussi sing.

‘He sang this glorious concert with encores, all the things that everybody wanted him to sing. Jussi ... gave you the impression as a concert singer that he could do everything that he wanted to do. He varied his approach to fit the piece of music. Jussi was a stylist. He was relaxed, he would talk to the pianist, turn around, smile, announce his encores, and the audience would break into applause. [After the recital] there was this adulation and incredible applause. When I went backstage, I was just in tears. He staggered me with his vocalism; I found it an extremely emotional experience.’

‘John Briggs’ reviews in The New York Times (28 December 1959) made special mention of his diction ... [and said] ‘Certainly nothing that he does seems studied or labored; it appears as effortless as breathing.’ David Björling would’ve relished reading this line about his son; it’s fitting that Jussi’s very last recital in New York received such high praise.”

By Janel Lundgren:

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 backstage 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 marvelous 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.

So 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 of hundred people seated on stage! Jussi and his pianist Frederick Schauwecker entered the stage and Jussi announced the opening number, Taminò'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 "J B 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 “Zueignung.” 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 “M'appari” from Marta, the “Song of India” from Sadko, Vladimir's Cavatina from Prince Igor, and “Come un bel di 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 egoism. 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).

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