

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 dismiss 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



WALTER B. RUDOLPH

Walter B. Rudolph and Douglas Robinson — Provo, Utah 1978

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 ¾ 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 of 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 / are 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