

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.

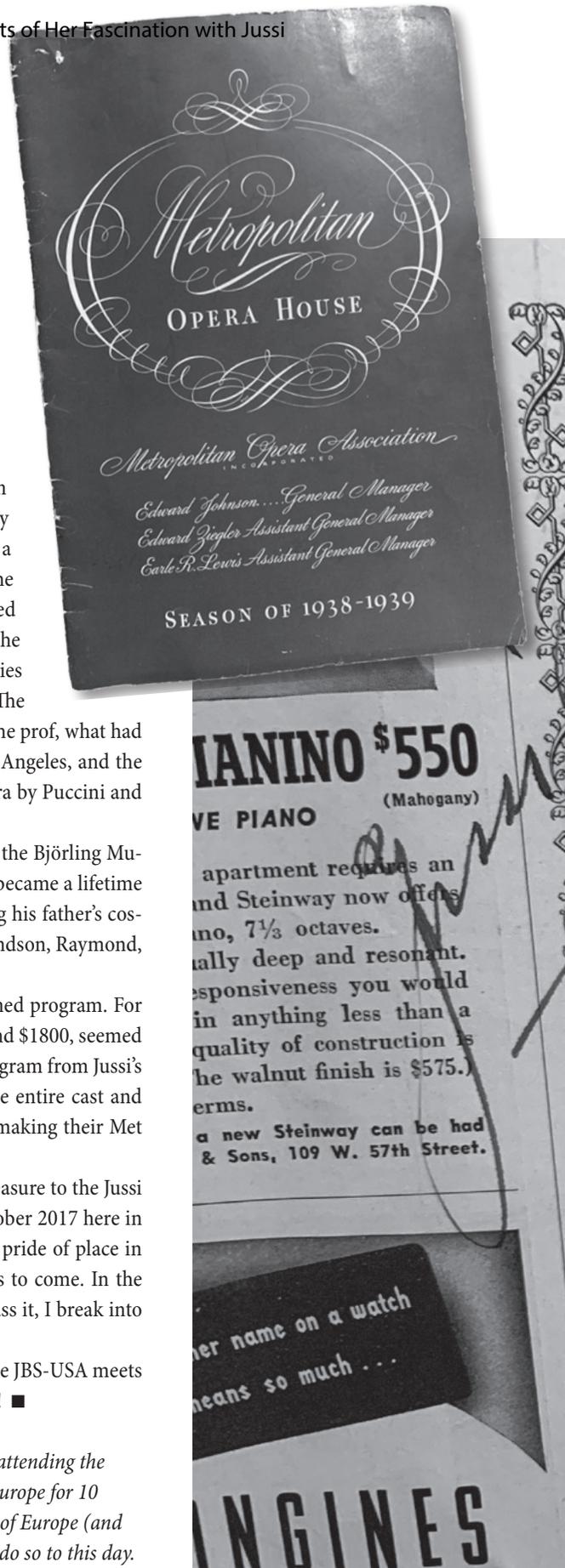
"A few years later, in the early 1980's, my Jussi-obsession accelerated, and I visited the Björling Museum and his grave, met and began my friendship with Harald Henrysson in Borlänge, became a lifetime member of the JB Society-USA. And, I saw Rolf Björling in *Tosca* in Stockholm wearing his father's 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 Björling 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 Mimì 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.



Metropolitan

OPERA HOUSE

GRAND OPERA SEASON 1938-1939

EDWARD JOHNSON General Manager

EDWARD ZIEGLER Assistant General Manager

EARLE R. LEWIS Assistant General Manager

THURSDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 24, 1938, AT 8.30 O'CLOCK

LA BOHEME

Opera in Four Acts

(In Italian)

Book Founded on "La Vie de Boheme" by Henry Murger

By Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

MUSIC by GIACOMO PUCCINI

Rodolfo
Schaunard
Benoit
Mimi
Parpignol
Marcello
Colline
Alcindoro
Musetta
A Sergeant

Jussi Björling (debut)
George Cehanovsky
Louis D'Angelo
Mafalda Favero (debut)
Max Altglass
John Brownlee
Norman Cordon
Louis D'Angelo
Marisa Morel (debut)
Carlo Coscia

Conductor
Chorus Master
Stage Director

Gennaro Papi
Fausto Cleva
Desire Defrere

POSITIVELY NO ENCORES ALLOWED

The Management requests the audience to abstain from applause at the end of acts so long as the music continues.

Correct Librettos for Sale in the Lobby

KNABE PIANOS USED EXCLUSIVELY

Program Continued on Next Page

THE NEW

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