“It was 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
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 Caránt, 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!
Lundgren: A Musical Weekend in Washington

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 playbook 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 playbook 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...
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 Alfvén 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 is it right to react against a change you do not understand and find unfair? When I encounter Saul I always think of business managers whose intentions have been quashed. And I think about the entrepreneurship 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-Ca- vallius 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. Conduc- tor 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.

Nils-Göran Olve

books on management control, most in Swedish but some available also in English, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese and Russian, and regularly contributes articles on historic singers to the UK magazine The Record Collector.

Lundgren; A Musical Weekend in Washington

Nils-Göran Olve is a former chairman of the Friends of the Royal Opera in Stockholm, and contributes regularly in the Swedish Jussi Björling Society as interviewer, lecturer, and writer in the Jussi of the month series on its website (http://www.jussibjorlingsallskapet.se/index_en.html?). He received his doctorate from the Stockholm School of Economics in 1977 and worked in management education, as a consultant and researcher. He has written more than twenty