

## Breathtaking Vocalism in Jussi's Finest Wartime Concert, 75 Years Ago

By Stephen Hastings



Jussi and conductor Tor Mann in the Stockholm Konserthuset

A majority of the surviving live recordings from the first half of Jussi Björling's adult career (1929-1945) derive from the Swedish Radio Archive. Taken as a whole these recordings reveal a tenor of captivating musicality, impressive

technical resources and rare tonal purity, whose emotionally spontaneous phrasing is only occasionally marred by verbal slips when he sings in Italian.

The second half of the radio concert recorded at Stockholm's Concert Hall on

November 10, 1944 (the first half, consisting of three Swedish songs, has not survived) demonstrates Björling's increasingly idiomatic command of that language in arias by Donizetti, Mascagni and Puccini and displays the thirty-three-year-old singer at his mid-career best: the voice still enchanting in its youthful overtones, but sufficiently full-bodied to project the music of Calaf and Turiddu (and of course Nemorino) with total authority. Moreover the presence of an enthusiastic audience (the concert was programmed as part of the Stockholm Musicians Festival) and the singularly spacious leadership of the fifty-year-old Tor Mann (then chief conductor of the Swedish Radio Orchestra) inspire him to invest all three solos with an extra degree of long-breathed, legato-bound lyricism that makes these performances entirely special even by his own elevated standards.

The sheer beauty of Björling's voice can be savored particularly in the totally exposed, harp-accompanied melodic line of "Una furtiva lagrima": his first recording of this Romanza from the second act of *Lelisir d'amore*, an opera that he had performed for the last time on stage, in Swedish, in February 1933. The *mezzo piano* attack on the tricky opening F is caressingly managed; every note in the scale is poised, rounded and scratch-free, and vowels are delivered with striking purity, enabling each word to register movingly. Those words speak of Nemorino's awe-struck realization that Adina does love him after all and of his feeling that he would happily die on achieving physical communion with her. This association of death with the fulfilment of desire - Björling's fluent adaptation of the final cadenza enables him to end the aria on the words "morir d'amor"—quali-

fies Nemorino as something of a Romantic hero and justifies the uniquely melancholy coloring of the Swedish tenor's voice in this cantilena. It could be argued however that in the opening lines of the second verse — “Un solo istante i palpiti”—he fails to capture the character's eager expectation of physical closeness. And it is undeniably true that his phrasing favours continuity of line over expressive detail: we hear few of the extra embellishments and drawn out *rallentandi* that feature in recordings made by earlier generations of tenors. If we compare this performance however with the much-admired contemporary recording by Ferruccio Tagliavini (*Cetra*, 1940), we notice that while the Italian tenor makes more of dynamic contrasts, including the traditional echo effect on “lo vedo,” his conception of *legato* is much sketchier than Björling's and his extensive use of a head voice bordering on *falsezza* creates a mood of almost self-indulgent sentimentality that contrasts with the pure-hearted Romanticism of his colleague.

The strength of Björling's *legato*—reinforced by frequent *portamenti*—is equally a feature of Turiddu's searing “Addio alla madre” from *Cavalleria rusticana*, where the continuity of line is felt even during the rests, lending a satisfying musical cohesion to a slowly unfolding performance in which every note and every syllable is allowed its full weight of expression. Björling always performed this music with an emotional honesty that once again eschewed sentimentality, laying bare the vulnerability of the character right from the opening “Mamma!”: a noun that is highly revealing in its psychological implications when uttered by an adult male in distress, but was largely absent from pre-Verismo operas, especially the works of Verdi, whose tenors (with the partial exception of Manrico) are unencumbered by anything remotely resembling an Oedipus complex. The first two parts of this scene — an *Allegro giusto* followed by an *Andante moderato* — has an almost ritualistic quality, with Turiddu first making a confession to his mother (that he's had “too many drinks”: words that in Björling's voice

inevitably acquire a stratified significance) and then asking for her blessing. When uttering these words — “Ma prima voglio che mi benedite” — Björling takes his cue from the *dolcissimo* marking in the accompaniment, maintaining a disarming purity of line when the voice is most exposed on the register break. The words are delivered not only limpidly, but with uncommon emotional urgency. The same is true of the three supplicatory syllables of “sentite” in the phrase that follows, when Turiddu communicates a tragic awareness of the fate that may await him, with “s'io non tornassi” delivered *con dolore* as the score prescribes. Yet the character retains his dignity, making no explicit reference to the imminent duel with Alfio and showing generosity of spirit in the face of death, seeking - in the *Andante con moto* “Voi dovrete fare da madre a Santa” — to save the reputation of the woman he has wronged. Here Björling fully matches the nobility of Enrico Caruso's 1913 Victor recording, and although his voice is undeniably on a smaller scale than that of the Neapolitan tenor, his singing is not: witness the breadth of his phrasing, culminating a prolonged and reinforced top B flat on the final “tornassi.” A vocal effect that electrifies the listeners while seeming entirely dictated by the expressive needs of the character.

Perhaps the most widely celebrated of these concert performances is Calaf's “Nessun dorma” from *Turandot*, sung at a challengingly slow tempo — closer to an *Adagio* than to Puccini's *Andante sostenuto* — that enables listeners to luxuriate in the heady nocturnal atmosphere of this supremely confident love song. Björling's breath span and *legato* are once again remarkable, and here he highlights the dynamic contrasts much more than in Nemorino's aria, sustaining a nuanced, lyrical line that lends an extra aura of mystery to the first half of the aria. A greater degree of thrust and volume emerge only when Calaf becomes impatient to achieve his objective — in “Dilegua, o notte,” marked *con anima* — and progresses rapidly to a long-sustained climactic B natural on the final

“Vincerò.” There has been an increasing awareness in recent years of human beings' almost miraculous capacity to create their own reality; to manifest their desires if they seek them with unwavering conviction, and this may explain why this aria announcing an objective (the definitive conquest of Princess Turandot) that is fully achieved has captured the imagination of many who have little interest in the rest of Puccini's opera. It was Luciano Pavarotti of course who made this aria his signature tune, but the Calaf we hear in this recording carries us with him just as thrillingly at the climax, while shaping the rest of the aria with greater sensitivity. Björling's voice is heard with a more prominent and insistent vibrato than is the case in the Donizetti and Mascagni solos, suggesting perhaps that he was right to exclude *Turandot* from his theatrical repertory, but rarely has the expressive range of a tenor been stretched to such breathtaking effect. ■

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**Stephen Hastings, a relaxed moment in Rome, 2014**