

## New Björling CD Available Soon!

This spring, *Immortal Performances* will be issuing an exciting new 2-CD set “**Jussi Björling: A Treasury of Little Known Broadcasts**”. This beautifully re-mastered offering will feature the complete November 1959 Stockholm performance of *Manon Lescaut*, excerpts from concerts at the Hollywood Bowl and London Palladium, among others, and a Stockholm December benefit concert, (including “O Helga Natt” and a Christmas greeting to the audience from Jussi.) This highly anticipated CD is already receiving rave reviews, such as the following:

### A Review by Henry Fogel

for upcoming issue of *Fanfare Magazine*

PUCCHINI *Manon Lescaut* Nils Grevillius, cond; Hjärdis Schymberg (*Manon*); Jussi Björling (*Des Grieux*); Hugo Hasslo (*Lescaut*); Royal Op Ch & O, Stockholm; Live: Royal Opera House, Stockholm, 11/1/1959

PUCCHINI *Tosca: E lucevan le stelle. Turandot: Nessun dorma.* MASCAGNI *Cavalleria rusticana: Addio alla madre.* HANDEL *Serse: Ombra mai fu.* WAGNER *Lohengrin: In fernem Land.* PETERSON-BERGER *När jag för mig själv.* NORDQVIST *Till havs.* ADAM *Cantique de Noël.* SIBELIUS *Var det en dröm.* TCHAIKOVSKY *Evgenyi Onegin: Kuda, kuda* IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1110-2, mono (2 CDs: 155:40)

I have previously only heard excerpts from this 1959 *Manon Lescaut* as issued on the *Caprice* label, and the sound quality here is a very significant upgrade. Without hearing it, one might question the wisdom of issuing it at all. Two famous Met broadcasts have circulated with the great Swedish tenor Jussi Björling as Des Grieux (one from 1949

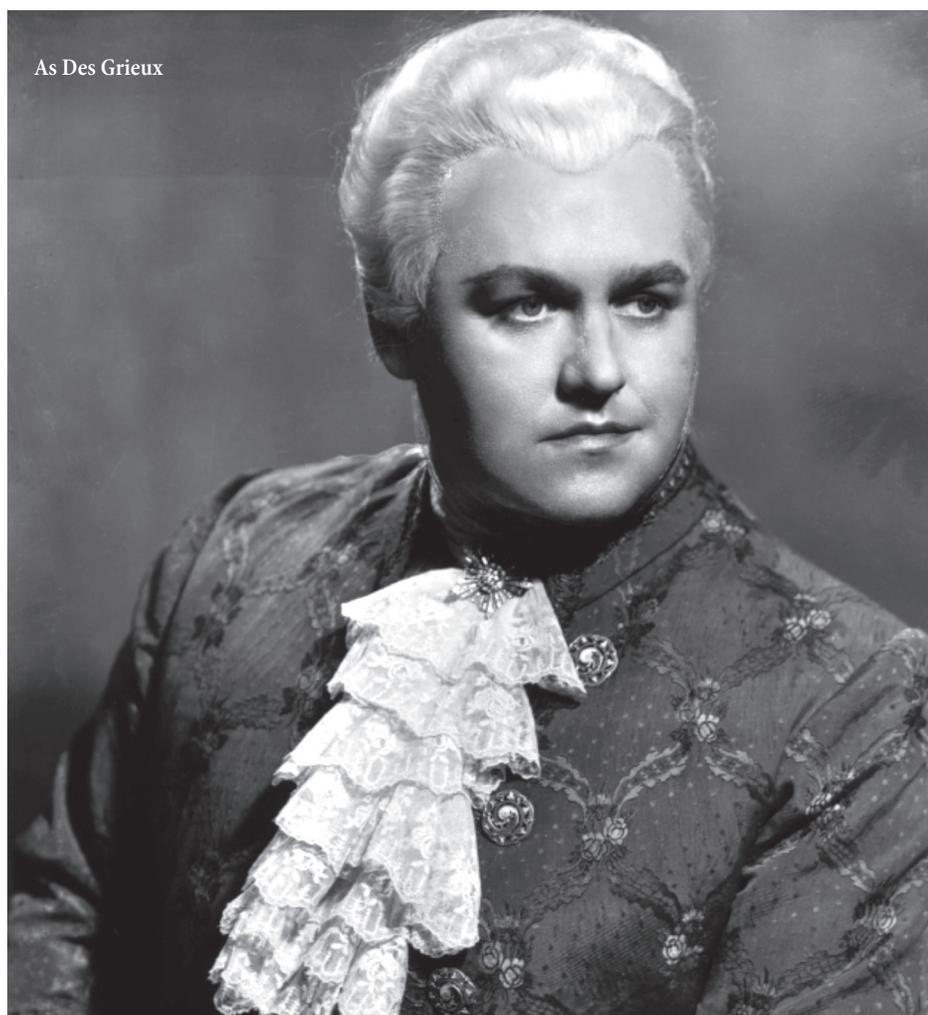
with Dorothy Kirsten, the other from 1956 with Licia Albanese), along with a fine studio recording for RCA from 1954, also with Albanese. Here we have a bilingual performance (Björling in Italian, everyone else in Swedish) with a lesser known soprano in the title role.

The value of this release becomes clear fairly quickly, however. The illustrious tenor, heard here less than a year before his death at the age of 49, sings with an abandon and incisiveness that exceeds those earlier efforts. Also, while Hjärdis Schymberg did not have the major career of Albanese or even Kirsten, she is an impassioned Manon with an evenly produced and bright lyric soprano voice that is used with intelligence. This recording may not displace the other versions, but it is an important complement to them. Nils Grevillius's sympathetic and idiomatic conducting is another plus. His beautiful shaping of the Intermezzo (which he places between the third and fourth acts, a theatrically sound decision) is very special.

The role of Des Grieux fits Björling perfectly. It benefits from the golden glow of his timbre, his innate feel for phrase-shaping, and his flair for dramatic vocal acting (as opposed to his physical acting, which could be stiff). It is also possible that he felt singularly comfortable in his “home” opera house. He made his debut with the Stockholm company in 1930, singing the tiny role of the Lamplighter in this same opera. Whatever the reason, this performance has about it a freedom and intensity that goes beyond his other recorded performances, while retaining all of their vocal beauty. The passion is palpable in “No! No! pazzo son! Guardate, pazzo son!”, and he also conveys the agony of the final act.

Schymberg and Björling had a very strong artistic partnership. They sang together in over 100 performances in Sweden, starting in 1934 in *La bohème*. In addition to *Manon*, she was his preferred Gilda, Juliette, and Marguerite in Stockholm. While the listener must adjust to hearing the





As Des Grieux

performance in two languages, it is worth the effort in part because of Schymberg's impassioned singing. At times she reminds me of Albanese, fragile and intense at the same time. She can apply pressure to the voice without losing its basically attractive sound. The chemistry between the two singers, after a quarter-century of singing over 100 performances together, is evident throughout, and it makes this account very special.

Hugo Hasslo is very strong as Lescaut, a better singer than one often gets in that ungrateful role. The overall recorded sound is, as noted above, far better than the prior incarnation with which I am familiar, and in fact is reasonable monaural broadcast quality from the 1950s. The unmistakable timbre of Björling is apparent from the first note he sings.

Richard Caniell, *Immortal Performances*'s proprietor, has also chosen the bonus

material wisely. There are arias and songs from recitals Björling gave at the London Palladium in January, 1959; the Hollywood Bowl in August, 1949; in Stockholm at a benefit for the Southern Hospital in 1949; in Stockholm again in 1952; and his final broadcast concert, from Göteborg in August, 1960, about a month before he died. All are thoroughly identified in the booklet.

Much of this bonus material has been issued before, but where I have been able to make comparisons, the sound here has more presence and a more natural aura than on the previous releases. Anything Björling sang is worth listening to, but there are some especially beautiful and impressive excerpts here. The *Tosca* aria from the London Palladium recital is magnificently sung, despite some ham-handed piano playing by Ivor Newton, featuring a lovely *decrecendo* on "discioglìa dai veli."

"Nessun dorma" from the Hollywood Bowl concert demonstrates that Björling had plenty of power and thrust when he chose to unleash it. The Scandinavian songs are lovely, several of them longtime favorites of the tenor, and after hearing him sing "Var det en dröm," one is not surprised that Sibelius inscribed a photo "To the genius, the great singer, Jussi Björling."

The final selection on the disc, Lensky's sorrowful aria from *Eugene Onegin*, which comes just before the duel that will kill him, is taken from that last Göteborg concert. The tenor had been experiencing symptoms of the heart problems that would turn fatal a month later. Whether or not he had any premonition of his impending end, one cannot avoid being struck by the sharp poignancy of his performance and the impending reality. Caniell, in his eloquent appreciation of the singer, notes the opening words of the aria: "Where have you gone, O golden days of my spring? What does the day coming have in store for me? Shall I fall to the deadly arrow, or will it pass by?" Whatever the actual state of Björling's mind, his singing is devastatingly beautiful and expressive. As listeners we are affected by what we cannot un-know about his immediate future.

As usual, *Immortal Performances*'s booklet is an important addition to the discs. Its 24 pages contain two knowledgeable essays about Björling and the performance by Stefan Johansson and Kristian Krogholm, along with notes about the recording, Caniell's appreciation, complete documentation of each track, and wonderful photos. Even if you own other Björling *Manon Lescaut*, I can recommend this one as an important complement to those. There is no denying the electricity generated by a supreme artist when singing with his home company. ■

**Editor's Note:** Copies of this CD set will be available through JBS-USA. You may pre-order your copy through our website or by using the enclosed Audio and Book Order Form.