

A Voice Lesson with Jussi

by Arthur H. Patrick Darrow



Jussi at age 19, *Guillaume Tell*, Stockholm Royal Opera

In February, 1950, at the age of 19, I had the experience of my life up to that date. I met Jussi Björling. For the previous ten years I had been an admirer of Jussi, but it never occurred to me that I would ever meet him.

By the time I was twelve years old, I had a lot of songs and arias memorized

from listening to the Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts on radio. I sang along with them, mostly the tenors and baritones, fascinated by the sounds of the voices. I sang along with Jussi. By the age of nineteen, I was fairly well-versed in opera. I'd gone to a concert in Kansas City in 1948 or 1949 and had seen a performance by Jussi.

In 1950 I was standing on the corner of 11th and Walnut in Kansas City, Missouri, waiting for a streetcar and whistling "Questa o quella" from *Rigoletto*. I was approached by a man asking for directions to the Plaza Theatre. He spoke to me in a Swedish accent. Curious, I asked if he were Jussi Björling, the tenor, and he was! I wondered if my whistling was why he asked me for directions, but I didn't ask. I was astonished that he was there in person, so I don't really recall all of the conversational exchanges we made. I do remember telling him the Plaza Theater was way out south, and if he went out there to watch a movie he would be late for his own concert! I told him that I had tickets to attend his concert and didn't want him to miss it, so we agreed to walk around downtown together instead.

From when we first met and while we walked, he kept looking at my high school letter sweater full of medals from shooting. He was curious about those medals. I told him that I had been a champion shooter in high school and traveled all over the country in shooting matches. He asked if I would take him out shooting. I explained that, just like the Plaza Theater, we didn't have time for that—we'd have to go out to the country to shoot, and we'd need guns and ammunition. We didn't have the time to get out and back, but he repeatedly asked me to take him shooting. He said in a bravado way, "I might be able to beat you!" He really wanted to go.

We walked to the Jenkins Music Store, where I introduced him to Polly and the other staff. They were all very surprised that I had walked into their establishment with the famous opera tenor Jussi Björling. Polly and others told him that I came into their store almost every day, sometimes after skipping school, to listen to recordings, particularly HIS recordings. The conversation turned to my being a student singer, and Polly suggested that we go upstairs to the studio and sing. We went to the second floor, and Mr. Björling sat down at the piano. He asked what I wanted to sing. I asked him what he would like me to sing. He said, "Tell me what you know." I

suggested “M'appari” from Flotow’s *Martha*. He played while I sang. He made some comments and remarks about my breathing and where the focus of my voice was. He explained that I was trying to force my voice and put more resonance in my voice than I could at my age and that I needed to relax. He explained, “The resonance and the color in your voice will come with experience as you practice your vocal exercises and your vowels and your breathing.” I went ahead and finished the aria with the top note, and everything was okay. He dumbfounded me by saying, “Your voice is as good as anybody singing today.” I responded by saying, “No, you’re the greatest singer in the world!” He repeated, “Your voice is as good as anybody singing in the world today.” I felt that this was his humble way of paying a nice compliment. I was nineteen years old and didn’t think I could sing nearly that well.

I also sang the aria “Amor ti vieta” by Giordano from the opera *Fedora*. He said that I was trying to force the top notes and reminded me to relax and breathe. Stressing their importance, he gave me tips on breathing, how to relax my voice, and how not to be so nervous. He had me sing the song “Because” by Guy DeHardelot. He had me repeat some parts. We spent quite a bit of time in the music room, and he sang part of “Amor ti vieta” and part of “Because.” He taught me some vocal exercises to practice; he said to be sure to work on the vowels. He told me not to try to hit the high notes so much but to work on the lower and middle part of my voice, and the high notes would come naturally.

We spent a lot of time talking about singers and their techniques and how important it is to do vocal exercises. He stressed how necessary it is to study hard and work very hard. I told him that I didn’t really have the money to be successful, but he stressed the need to study. He mentioned over and over again how much time and hard work it would take to succeed. He demonstrated the technique of approaching upper / high notes by just relaxing and letting the diaphragm slide up into these notes. He pushed on my stomach to demon-

strate breathing techniques. I was in awe of actually being there with this famous singer and the fact that he was spending so much time with me.

We were there a long time, leaving in the late afternoon. We walked around downtown talking about singers and other songs. One thing that stuck in my mind very strongly was when I was talking to him about Caruso’s singing of the aria “The Magic Note” from Goldmark’s opera, *Queen of Sheba*. I told him that my impression was that Caruso hit a *false* *setto*. Almost breaking my eardrum with such a loud voice that I was afraid the Jones Store window would shatter, he shouted, “Caruso never sang *false* *setto*!” I thought that he was mad at me, but he replied no, he was just stressing in his own way that Caruso never sang *false* *setto*. I was stunned by the power and passion in his response.

I learned more about singing in the few hours that I spent with Mr. Björling than from any voice teacher I’ve ever known.

Walking back to the Hotel Muehleback, he made a statement that I never forgot. He said, “You may have success or you may not, but if you never have anything but the pleasure of your own singing, that will be enough.”

We walked into the Hotel Muehleback and shook hands. That was the first time that we’d shaken hands, and I thought that he had a most powerful grip. He had extremely powerful hands like a weightlifter. We parted friends. At the time, this was the most remarkable event of my life.

I talked to him on the telephone several times after that. He had given me a card with two or three names of whom to contact if I ever got to New York City to the opera or to any of his other opera performances. Later, I did get to a few opera performances and used the names on the card. After awhile, they got to know me, and I went to several performances for free. I assume the names on the card were his agents. In 1951 a friend of mine died of polio. I called Jussi’s agent prior to his appearance on the Firestone program or Telephone Hour, and requested my friend’s favorite song “Ideale”

by Paolo Tosti. Jussi did sing it in his performance in memory of my friend.

Many years later, long after Jussi had died, I was collecting his early recordings. One of the records I had was a recording he had made when he was nineteen titled “For You Alone” by Henry Geehl. I thought back to when I was nineteen, when he taught me how to sing. He was an extremely accomplished singer when he was nineteen, and I was humbled beyond description. He had such beautiful technique and style at that young age that I felt my nineteen-year-old attempts were a joke in comparison.

Needless to say, the day that I met Jussi, he wasn’t late to his beautiful concert at Municipal Auditorium. I took a lot of friends with me to hear him sing. Everyone was impressed. We all went backstage afterward and got our programs autographed. He smiled and said that he still wanted to go shooting! ■

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Pat Darrow was a long-time, valued member of JBS-USA, who had a close relationship to Jussi, starting when he was 19. Pat studied at the K.C. Conservatory of Music, was in the 101st Airborne Division during the Korean War, served 27 years in law enforcement and retired from the KC Revenue Division at City Hall. He was a certified NRA rifle and pistol instructor, one of the top Master Class Highpower Rifle shooters in the nation. He was also a professional photographer, had a beautiful tenor singing voice and attended the Lyric Opera since it was founded in 1958. He died in June, 2017.