

## Nicolai Gedda—the versatile tenor

By Nils-Göran Olve

When Jussi Björling died in September 1960, recording dates for Swedish television a few weeks later were taken over by Nicolai Gedda. It was a sense of succession—Swedes still had a Metropolitan Opera tenor to be proud of, and one who would be a frequent guest at the Stockholm opera as well. For the next 30 years and beyond, I heard him there almost annually, and in concerts longer than that. His final Stockholm concert was well into this century, when he was 76 or 77.

Many recordings show him to have been a very different singer from Jussi: constantly adding new repertoire in a broad range of *Fach*, and in many languages; technically accomplished, but for most of us not a “natural” communicator like Jussi seems to have been. Those who knew Gedda tell us he was funny and generous; but he kept a distance from others, and on stage he could seem aloof and conscientious rather than magnetic. My memories of him in opera are that he skilfully communicated a lot about his roles rather than living them, and with increasing years the mechanics of his singing sometimes affected his movements. It was intriguing and impressive to see how he engaged his whole body, from the waist upwards, to create and project sound, but the impression often was of intellect and skill rather than spontaneity. It is no coincidence that music-interested Swedes still talk about “Jussi” and “Birgit”, but never about “Nico”—that name was used by his personal friends.

Probably that element of intellectual control was the secret of his vocal longevity. His recordings cover more than half a century of singing, and at many stages of his career he undertook parts that stretched his possibilities. This may have something



to do with the verdicts he received in his early twenties: a beautiful voice, but too small for a professional career. This was at an age when not only Jussi but many other future tenor stars would already have taken their first steps on stage. He was earning his bread as a bank clerk and appearing in local events, when he had the good fortune to find a suitable teacher in (Carl-) Martin Öhman. Öhman used his connections to reduce Gedda’s working hours so that he would have time to study. He himself had had a major career particularly in Berlin between the wars (including one season at the Met), and the influence is easy to hear in repertoire they shared. For instance, the aria from *La muette de Portici* which Gedda recorded on his first solo LP is among Öhman’s acoustic recordings from 30 years earlier, and he must have taught it to Gedda—few sang it in the early 1950s.

Several years of study led to Gedda’s debut at the Stockholm Opera at age 26 in *Le postillon de Longjumeau*, April 1952. Within weeks, he was assigned the part of Dmitri in the (first) Boris Christoff EMI recording of *Boris Godunov* the following



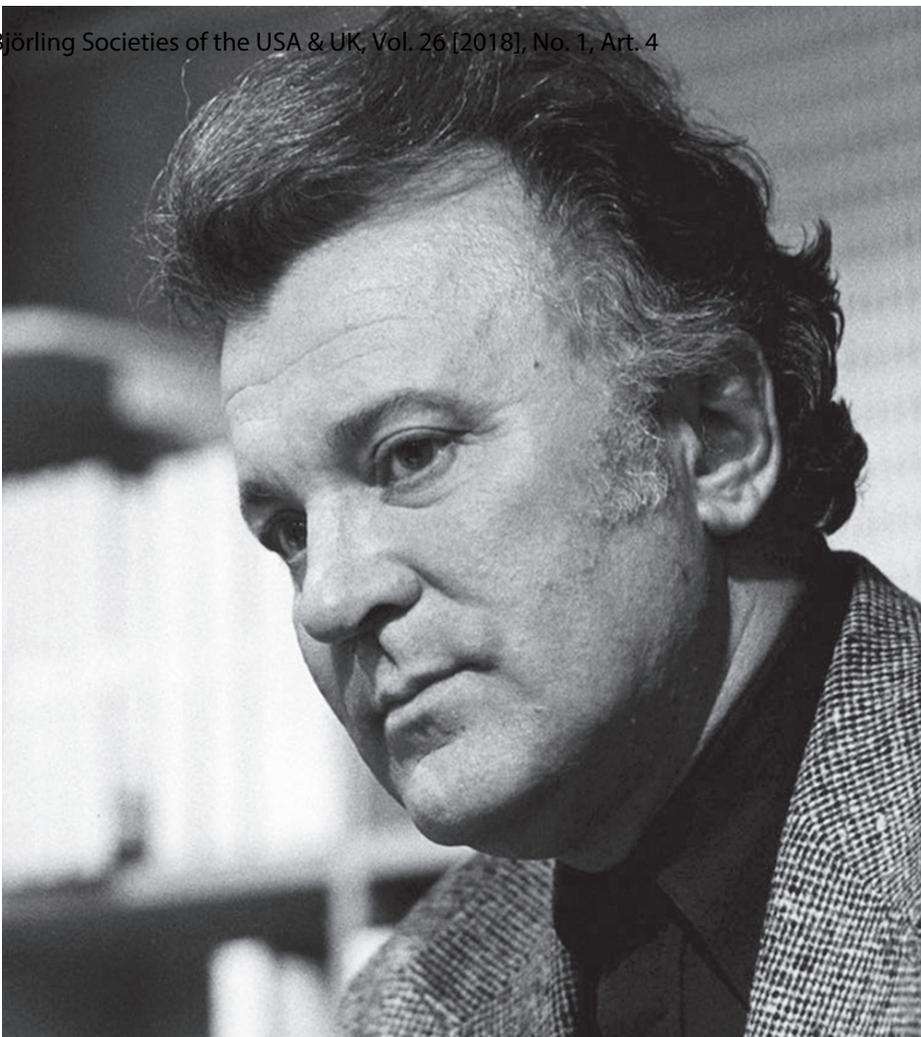
Maija Bodow and Walter Rudolph, enjoying the moment

summer. Later the same year, he appeared in concert with Karajan at La Scala. In the years 1952-56 he takes part in 16 opera recordings, while singing (often in other operas from those he recorded) in Paris, Aix-en-Provence, Milan, Rome, London and Stockholm. In addition to learning all those parts, travelling and performing, he found time to marry, had a daughter and moved into a villa in Paris. One wonders how a timid recent opera graduate managed it all. From late 1957, and with his marriage dissolving, his base would be the Metropolitan where he appeared in 28 roles over 24 seasons, until 1983 when he bid farewell in *La traviata* at age 58.

Of course Jussi Björling did develop his voice over his long career, but beyond age 30 he assumed few new parts, and certainly did not test his limits as I believe Gedda did. He essayed Don José in concert with Karajan already in his second professional year—in the latter acts a more dramatic role than one would have thought advisable, and recorded it a few years later. Around the age of 40 he alternated high-lying parts such as Arturo in *I puritani* with *Werther*, Mozart and Verdi, but also performed *Lohengrin* in Stockholm—a part he relinquished after three performances and in spite of a Bayreuth contract for it, as he felt that it was too heavy. From 1969, aged 44, he added a few grand operas (*Les troyens*, *Le prophète*, *Les Huguenots*, *Guillaume Tell*)—never resting on his laurels, when he could have instead capitalized on his status as a leading *Faust*, *Roméo* and *Hoffmann*. At age 66, he still added a large new role to his list: Christian in Naumann's *Gustaf Wasa* when it was revived at the Stockholm Opera.

Yet in all this there were similarities between Björling and Gedda in how they both remained true to a vocal technique that they acquired very early. Jussi's training by his father David and his one thousand concerts as a boy soprano are well known. Nicolai's early days have been less talked about, although he tells about them in his two autobiographies.

Nicolai Gedda was a product of the close cultural ties between Sweden and Czarist Russia that existed before its 1917



revolution. He grew up as the child of an *émigré* Russian, Michail Ustinov, and his wife Olga whose mother was Russian. From her father she had the maiden name of Gädda, spelled with an ä like the Swedish word for pike. That was the spelling used for his opera debut, and school catalogues listed him as Ustinov. (In the 1952 *Boris* where Gedda sings Dmitri in his first complete opera recording, the minuscule part of the Court Boyar is taken by Gustav Ustinov. Another of Nicolai's Christian names was Gustav—and it does sound like him!)

As a teenager he discovered that his parents were instead his "mother's" brother and a Swedish girl, who had abandoned him when only a couple of days old. He continued to consider Michail and Olga his true parents. Olga and her brother, and of course Michail, had all lived in pre-revolution Russia. When Nicolai was born 8 years after the revolution they were immigrants in a poor neighbourhood, without much of a footing in Sweden in spite of their partial Swedish background. At home Nicolai spoke Russian



and Swedish, and his father taught him Russian as well as music at an early age.

His position as an outsider became even more apparent when the family moved on to Leipzig and lived there 1929-1933, that is, when Nicolai was between four and eight. The reason was a job opportunity for Michail who led a Greek Orthodox choir. Nicolai of course went to a German school, and their move back to Sweden was caused



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by the Nazi takeover. During the Leipzig years Nicolai took part in his father's music-making, and his memoirs give the impression that this was where he found security and stability throughout his youth. His father's teaching meant that he could read music and take part in choir performances from age five.

When he was eight they returned to a (then) poor part of Stockholm. He managed school acceptably, taking most interest in sports and languages, but was probably an outsider. But it is interesting to note how, like Jussi, the direction of his life was laid early – both in terms of reading music, vocal technique, and an attitude to singing. When we hear him in Russian songs at age 70 and beyond, these are songs he would have sung for more than 60 years!

Gedda's far-reaching repertoire was partly a consequence of his musicality and ease in learning music, and his proficiency in many languages. But I believe it might not have happened to the same extent earlier or later. He achieved prominence in the 1950s when opera houses started to explore neglected operas, and some of his early successes in Paris were *Les Indes galantes* and *Oberon*, both of them approached a bit as if they were by Mozart. Later he was among the first high-profile tenors of modern time to sing Bellini, Auber and Meyerbeer, and he premiered contemporary works by Liebermann and Menotti. Today when baroque, *bel canto* and grand opéra works have become rather more common they provide a niche market for more specialized singers. But Gedda did all styles. In fact,

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some of his most indispensable recordings are “unofficial” issues of live performances of for instance *La dame blanche*, *Les Huguenots* and *Le prophète*, works that the record industry then did not dare to put on record, at least with the all-star casts needed.

Less well-known outside Sweden is Gedda's advocacy of songs. In the 1980s he recorded eleven LPs of Swedish songs, many of them rarely heard, and most still not on CD. He also continued to add to his concert repertoire, and there must be broadcasts that still need to be rediscovered.

Jussi Björling and Nicolai Gedda shared the grounding in an early training by their fathers. In most other respects they were opposites, and products of very different market conditions in the international music world. As Gedda had the good luck to live much longer, and started out at an age when Jussi already was making his international debuts, we tend to think of him as a more modern singer. But today things have moved on again, and his broad repertoire and rise to fame through the gramophone will not happen again. In that regard, Gedda and Plácido Domingo are likely to remain unique among operatic tenors.

### Post-script and playlist

During the recent conference the following items were used as illustrations. With so much to choose from, the focus was on rarely-heard items—some never issued—but even some of the less common can be found on Youtube or various streaming services, or on CDs:

1. “Ave Maria” (Bach-Gounod) Maria Magdalena church, Stockholm. Private recording 2001
2. “Poème” (Fibich) gramophone recording, August 1953
3. *Faust* (Gounod): from act 3. Radio concert with Söderholm, Meyer, Näslund; Swedish radio, December 1952
4. *L'amant jaloux* (Grétry): aria. Broadcast, Stockholm, August 1964
5. *Lohengrin* (Wagner): “Atmest”... Stockholm Opera, January 1966

6. *La dame blanche*: “Ah quel plaisir.” Concert, Holland 1964
7. *I puritani* (Bellini): “Vieni!” With Sutherland, Philadelphia, April 1963
8. “Wanderers Nachtlied” (Schubert) With Moberger, pf. Studio recording, 1964?
9. *Les Huguenots* (Meyerbeer): “Tu l'as dit.” With Tarrès, Concert, Vienna, February 1971
10. Liszt: “Psalm No. 13.” Swedish Radio Concert, Stockholm 1987
11. “Monotonously calls the little hand-bell” (Russian folksong). Concert, Karlstad, August 1994

The selection was intended to show Gedda's long career-span, the variety of different styles and languages, and particularly the range of very different parts during his prime in the decade 1963-1973. Sadly, Wunderlich—five years younger than Gedda—did not live long enough to emerge as an international singer. And so Gedda came to claim numerous parts in German recordings which might otherwise have gone to Wunderlich. So in the 1960s with Björling dead and Di Stefano and Del Monaco declining, and before Domingo and Pavarotti had established themselves, his only big-name international competitors were Bergonzi and Corelli, and maybe Kraus—all very different and focusing on more narrow repertoires. ■

*Nils-Göran Olve received his doctorate from the Stockholm School of Economics. A frequent contributor to music journals and conferences, he was President of the Swedish “Friends of the Royal Opera” for 25 years. This article represents the talk Nils-Göran gave at the JBS-USA conference in Washington, D.C. on November 18, 2017 at the House of Sweden.*

#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

This presentation may be heard on the Conference audio recording, available through [www.jussibjorlingsociety.org](http://www.jussibjorlingsociety.org).