

Jonas and Jussi in French Opera

By Stephen Hastings



Stephen Hastings, a relaxed moment in Rome, 2014

When Jonas Kaufmann took part in the Stockholm concert celebrating the centennial of Björling's birth in 2011, the solo scenes he performed—"L'addio alla madre" from *Cavalleria rusticana*, "In fernem Land" from *Lohengrin* and "Vesti la giubba" from *Pagliacci*—were all associated with Jussi and the German tenor's singing, though very different in timbre and technique from the Swede's, offered a similar combination of emotional truthfulness, superior musicality and ease in modulation. Six years after that event (immortalized in a video recording on YouTube), Kaufmann's elevated status among world tenors has been further consolidated and his latest CD recital, published by Sony and devoted to French opera, offers further opportunities for comparison. Seven of the scenes featured on the album (entitled "L'Opéra") were also performed by Jussi and six of them (the exception being Werther's "Pourquoi me réveiller") were recorded by him either live or in the studio. Not always in the same language, however, for Wilhelm's "Elle ne croyait pas" from *Mignon* was sung in Swedish only and

Vasco de Gama's "O paradis" was performed in the then-prevalent Italian translation by Marco Marcelliano Marcello. Kaufmann shares with Björling a knowledge of performing traditions documented on disc (the booklet interview mentions Enrico Caruso, Georges Thill, Joseph Schmidt, Rudolf Schock, Jan Peerce and Luciano Pavarotti) and at the same time is typical of today's tenors in showing scrupulous respect for the integrity of the original score, opening the cut in the famous *Pêcheurs de perles* duet (with Ludovic Tézier) and including extra stretches of introductory recitative to establish the dramatic context of each set piece: options that weren't of course always compatible with the limited duration of 78 rpm discs. And the three Björling studio recordings chosen here for comparison with Kaufmann—a 1945 "Ah! lève-toi soleil!" from *Roméo et Juliette*, a 1939 "En fermant les yeux" from *Manon* and the 1951 "Au fond du temple saint"—all originally came out on 78s. This reminds us that Jussi was somewhat younger than Jonas, who is now forty-eight, when he recorded this music in the studio, which naturally made it easier for him to bring a radiant freshness of sound to the quintessentially youthful roles of Roméo and Des Grieux.

Jussi's Romeo

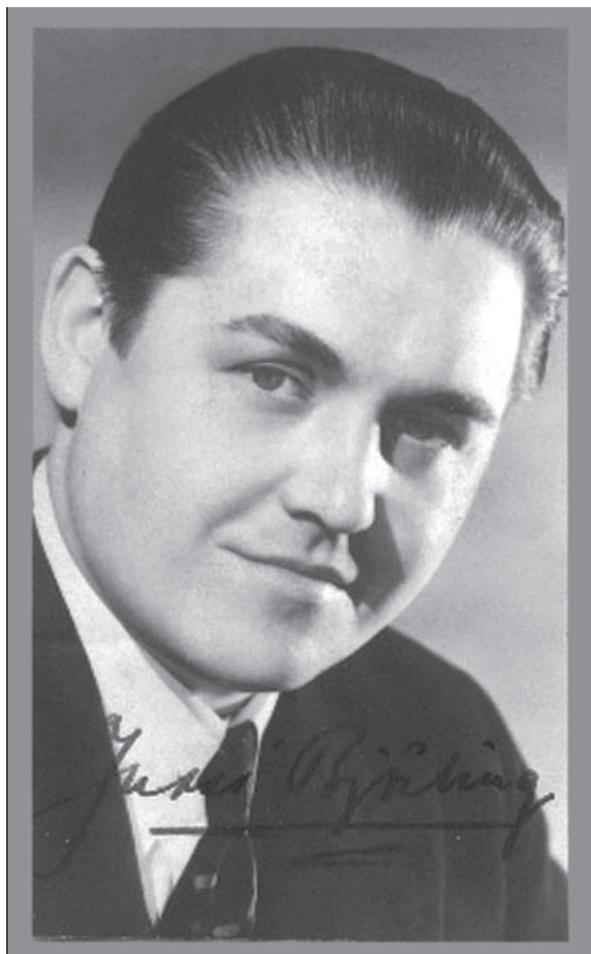
Having said that, neither of the two tenors is arguably at his very best in these studio renditions of the nocturnal Cavatine from Gounod's opera, in which the "sun" evoked repeatedly in the text is of course a metaphor for Juliette herself. Jussi's voice is bright and ardent, with a quick vibrato lending extra vitality to sounds that are bound together by a solid legato and that expand brilliantly above the staff—though the final sustained B flat (sung *forte*) is

prepared in the second take by an audible flip-up (a common tenor trick) from the D below it. The tempo is slightly hurried for an Adagio, depriving the music of some of its emotional expansiveness and limiting the range of dynamic nuance. And although the tenor does bring a degree of tenderness to the central section of the aria, where Roméo contemplates Juliette in his mind's eye, his phrasing proves less imaginative here than in his live recordings of the complete opera.

And then Kaufmann

Kaufmann's Cavatine is preceded not only by the recitative but also by the earlier *Entr'acte*, so we have plenty of time to enter into the mood of the music. All the same, the initial impact of his voice is somewhat disconcerting, for he alternates between a gentle *mezza voce* and a very dark and muscular sound that is not easy to associate with the adolescent Roméo. These contrasts are sustained throughout the aria, which is delivered at a more leisurely pace than by Björling and culminates in a *piano* B flat that would sound better integrated with the rest of the voice if it had been enriched by a crescendo or a *messa di voce*. Kaufmann is unfailingly intelligent in his stylistic choices and renders the text by Carré and Meilhac convincingly if not eloquently (the same could be said of Björling), but his full voice is now too heavy to suggest the keen expectation and surging ecstasy of a young man in love and the slow beat heard on some sustained forte tones suggests that his instrument has paid a toll for the onerous repertoire performed since 2011.

This is less evident in Des Grieux's "En fermant les yeux," sung in a smooth and often beautiful head voice, with very finished phrasing. It comes across however as the



Jussi Björling

tour de force of a spinto tenor rather than as the spontaneous sharing of an experience. The lowered-larynx technique typical of this tenor is cleverly adapted to the intimacy of the music, but leaves the words sounding a bit lifeless compared with Björling's *fior di labbro* emission in the same music, which, combined with the minimal accompaniment, allows the words to speak to us with a melodious sweetness that is as captivating as it is moving. Once again we notice the rapid vibrato typical of a young tenor voice, combined with exquisitely modulated dynamics.

Duet masters

Being very sensitive musicians, both Björling and Kaufmann emerge in “Au fond du temple saint” as masters of duet singing, blending their voices skilfully with the baritones Robert Merrill and Ludovic Tézier. But whereas in the classic 1951 recording



GREGOR HOHENBERG/SONY CLASSICAL

Jonas Kaufmann

the balance is achieved, to incantatory effect, between clearly contrasting timbres—Björling's being at all points more luminous and sharply focused than Merrill's richly diffuse sound—in the 2017 recording both voices sound decidedly baritonal, to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish between the two characters without consulting a score (although if one listens closely one does notice Tézier bringing greater urgency to the words). The inclusion however of the intense dialogues (omitted in 1951) that precede and interrupt the duet does remind us of how precarious the harmony achieved in this episode of nostalgic male bonding actually is. And the accompaniment of the Bayerisches Staatsoper led by Bertrand de Billy is as superbly calibrated in its way as that of the RCA Victor Orchestra under Renato Cellini.

The retrospective quality of much of Kaufmann's recital—an affectionate back-

wards glance at roles that were once better suited to his voice—has no equivalent even in Björling's final live and studio recordings made when he was about the same age as Kaufmann today. For in the Swedish tenor pure lyricism and dramatic urgency coexisted spontaneously throughout his career, stimulated by the requirements of the score, the mood of the moment and the all-encompassing nature of a technique that allowed him, when he was on top form, complete freedom of choice. ■

Born in London and educated in Oxford, Stephen Hastings has been the Milan correspondent of “Opera News” since 1991. He is the author of the 2012 book, *The Björling Sound, A Recorded Legacy*.