

An Homage to Enrique Gilardoni (Celebrating his 80th birthday)

By Bertil Bengtsson



Walter B Rudolph, Jussi Björling, Bertil Bengtsson and Enrique Gilardoni
Royal Opera, Stockholm—2011

For many years I've had a firm belief that one sure sign of Jussi Björling's greatness as a performing artist is the ability to join together people from all walks of life, irrespective of ethnicity, political affiliation, religion or country. Over the more than 30 years that I've studied, researched and lectured about Jussi I've had the great pleasure of making friends with fellow "Jussicologists", both in Sweden and abroad. Many of them have become very close friends. One of the most highly treasured friendships is the one I've established with the foremost Jussicologist in South America, Enrique Gilardoni, whom I first met in 1994 at the inauguration of the Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge. Enrique's profound knowledge about Jussi and singers of the past ("altri tempi" as he prefers to call it) is equal to his legendary generosity, kindness and concern for friends and family. This article, which I very gladly accepted to write after being invited to do so by

Walter Rudolph, is an homage to Enrique, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday. There is not space enough to write about all his achievements, but, hopefully, this article will serve as a worthy introduction for those who don't know him, and maybe add some hitherto unknown information for those who do.

A trained engineer, and for many years the Technical Manager of Coca Cola's Andean Division, Enrique has lived with his family in Chile since 1976, although being Argentinian by birth. Enrique Gilardoni Lester (Gilardoni after his father, and Lester after his mother) was born in Buenos Aires on November 24th, 1935. He grew up in Temperley, in the district of Lomas de Zamora, belonging to metropolitan Buenos Aires. Like many Argentinian youngsters during the 1940's he listened to popular music of the time as well as tango, and he especially listened to the King of Argentinian tango, Carlos Gardel (an interest which

continues to this very day. Enrique is a scholar on all matters concerning tango in general and Gardel in particular).

He had his first taste of opera around 1947, when he was 12 years old. One day Enrique's father brought home two HMV 78s with coloratura arias from *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Rigoletto* sung by Lily Pons and Mercedes Capsir respectively. Among the most admired tenors in Argentina during the late 1940's were Beniamino Gigli and Tito Schipa, who both still toured South America quite regularly then, and whose records were easy to obtain. Buenos Aires was (and still is) an opera loving city, and the center of operatic activity is the stunningly beautiful and acoustically perfect Teatro Colón, inaugurated in 1908, which for decades had staged spectacular seasons with the world's greatest singers (although never Jussi, who, it shall be mentioned, did not lack offers to sing there). In Enrique's circle of friends and acquaintances at the local coffee shop in Temperley, "Café Japonés, many were "pro-Gigli", and in order to maintain the status of their vocal hero, they did whatever they could to find faults in other tenors. Few tenors outside the Latin and Italian spheres were known—or accepted. One of the most dedicated Gigli "aficionados" was a man by the name of Pedro Cundins, who was a great opera enthusiast, and an important early influence on Enrique's introduction to opera and belcanto. Cundins had heard Gigli many times; he also knew him as well as one of Gigli's brothers, who lived in Buenos Aires. Later on, during their conversations, Cundins admitted to Enrique that he liked Jussi, but he had always something to remark about his singing, mostly that his voice was "cold". He rarely objected to the voice as such. On the other hand, to Cundins, Gigli was more or less flawless.

Enrique told me that he (probably) first heard Jussi's voice while he was engaged in painting the family house, somewhere around 1956. It was a Sunday, and a local classical radio station was broadcasting a complete *Il trovatore* (it later turned out to be the 1952 studio recording featuring Jussi, Milanov and Warren). Enrique was

immediately taken with the classical refined style and musicality of the tenor singing Manrico, also admiring the beauty of the voice and the elegant phrasing. Instantly he became an admirer of this tenor, who was completely unknown to him, and with a name difficult to pronounce. He wanted to hear more recordings with Jussi, but they were almost impossible to obtain. Eventually, after a long search, Enrique managed to find the studio recording of *Il trovatore*, as well as the 1955 Carnegie Hall recital. Later on, through contacts, he also acquired the *Cavalleria rusticana* and *I pagliacci* studio recordings. One of his cousins travelled a lot and was able to bring home several of the Rococo-label LP-issues to Enrique, who gratefully included them in his slowly growing collection of Jussi recordings. When he learned about the complete *La bohème*, he had it shipped from “Sam Goody’s” in New York, and it took more than a whole month to reach its destination!

Not all of Enrique’s friends idolized Gigli, though. Another customer at the local coffee shop in Temperley, Alfredo Coombes, had heard about Jussi, whose voice he considered to be the best of them all (Coombes brother, César, also admired Jussi). His opinions were always held in high regard by people around him, and from him Enrique gained more insight to this glorious “new” tenor. Another person who later gave Enrique even more valuable input was Emilio Stevanovich, whose appreciated local radio program “Discografía Comparada”, focused on comparing singers in different arias. When it came to tenors, Stevanovich often favoured Jussi’s recordings to others.

Argentina suffered from political instability during the mid-1950’s which affected all parts of the society. Not unexpectedly Teatro Colón faced severe financial problems as well, and by 1957 the season was cut to a minimum. It was during this season that Enrique experienced his very first complete opera performance, Verdi’s *La traviata*, followed by *Tosca*, *L’elisir d’amore* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The singers consisted primarily of local talent, because there was no money available to bring in the “big guns” from abroad. Enrique told me that he

was convinced that the voices in *La traviata* were somehow amplified using technical equipment, but soon learned that was not the case. The auditorium of the Teatro Colón is justly famous for being acoustically perfect, and the sound has a marvelous carrying quality no matter where you stand on the stage.

The following season, 1958, marked the 50th anniversary of Teatro Colón’s inauguration. As the financial situation had somewhat stabilized, this meant that there was enough money available to invite Sir Thomas Beecham to serve as Principal Conductor for the entire season, as well as several European singers. Beecham conducted 5 operas, including *Aïda* with (Inge Borkh and Flaviano Labó). Enrique who by now was a frequent inhabitant of the standing room section at Teatro Colón saw all the operas performed that season, many of them in the company of his future wife to be, Maria Luisa (who was born in Torino, Italy, but as a child emigrated to Argentina with her family). Enrique also received an autographed photo with Beecham, which was sent to him from England. The conductor had promised to do so as soon as he had returned back home. Ever the English gentleman, Beecham kept his word! Much later on Enrique donated this photo, together with the ones of Marguerite Perras and Robert Merrill, to the museum in Borlänge. The seasons of 1958 through 1960 marked the beginning of what Enrique has described as a “Golden Era” at Teatro Colón, lasting until the mid-1970’s, and were annually visited by many of the greatest singers in the world. I can vouch for Enrique being a living encyclopedia of everything connected with that era. His collection of memorabilia and recordings from those years is vast! It makes one green with envy to listen to the recollections of all the famous singers he heard there during those years: Richard Tucker, Birgit Nilsson, Jon Vickers, Cornell MacNeil, Giuseppe Taddei, Fritz Wunderlich, Leontyne Price and Joan Sutherland to mention just a very few. The list goes on almost endlessly.

With regard to Jussi, during the 1959 season, a rumour began to circulate in Bue-

nos Aires. Enrique knew a famous journalist and critic, active as such since the 1930’s, Riccardo Turró, who in turn knew the manager of Teatro Colón. The rumour said that the famous Swedish tenor Jussi Björling had received an invitation to sing at Teatro Colón for the season of 1960! Enrique could hardly believe his ears! The rumour showed to be true, Jussi had indeed been invited to sing there, but the management was getting a little worried about reports of Jussi’s health problems. Turró confirmed that Jussi was offered to sing the role of Don Alvaro in Verdi’s *La forza del destino* for the princely sum of \$3000 per performance. The opera was not part of Jussi’s repertory, and the whole deal eventually fell through. Instead a not entirely unknown tenor from Brooklyn, Richard Tucker, took his place (Tucker was a great success and returned for many seasons, to great acclaim). With hindsight Enrique believes that Jussi instead should’ve been invited to sing Riccardo in *Un ballo in maschera*, which was also given that season, although it’s anyone’s guess if that would’ve made Jussi change his mind. We know now that his failing health and the exposure to a long voyage were among the factors that prevented the visit.

Even today, Enrique has told me, there are many old opera goers in Buenos Aires who still mourn the fact that two singers never sang at Teatro Colón: Rosa Ponselle and Jussi Björling.

For 60 years by now Enrique has been an unfailingly dedicated propagator in South America of Jussi Björling’s life and art. It hasn’t always been easy given the, how shall I put it, somewhat chauvinistic preferences for Italian or Latin tenors. Enrique has fought on tirelessly in his “crusade” of spreading the knowledge of Jussi, and it continues with unabated energy to this very day. Countless are the radio programs he’s participated in or produced, not to mention articles written and lectures given in prestigious venues (often strongly supported by the Swedish Embassies in Chile and Argentina). A seasoned globe-trotter, he has visited Sweden on a number of occasions, never neglecting to visit Jussi’s grave in Stora Tuna. I am very happy to

have been able to reciprocate his generosity by having him and Maria Luisa as guests in our home, and in 2010, when Elaine and I got married, the chosen venue for the event was the Gilardoni summer residence, “Shangri-La”, in Viña del Mar in Chile, with a stunning panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean. As always Enrique and Maria Luisa were the perfect hosts. Need I mention that Jussi’s singing was included in the wedding music?

Of his many lectures, I had the honor of attending one in Buenos Aires in April 2000 (to which I was invited by Enrique. I spent a whole month in Chile and Argentina thanks to his incredible generosity). The lecture attracted a large audience of several hundred in a local auditorium, among them was the before mentioned Riccardo Turró, and a relative of Enrico Caruso by the name of Baldini (Caruso’s mothers’ maiden name was Baldini). Enrique is always meticulously prepared for lectures, and this event was no exception. He expertly guided the audience through Jussi’s life and art, and I still remember very vividly the incredible ovation after Jussi’s 1957 live rendition of “Ella mi fu rapita”/“Parmi veder le lagrime” from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*. An elderly, very elegantly dressed lady in the row behind me stood up, with tears rolling down her cheeks, exclaiming several times: “¡Björling, que cantante de Verdi!” (“Björling, what a singer of Verdi!”). An even more impressive expression (if possible) reverberated in the auditorium after the 1944 Tor Mann “Nessun Dorma”! I thought the audience would tear the house down! Never before or since have I witnessed such spontaneous outbursts of genuine appreciation of a singers’ achievements. And all this to the sound of CD-recordings!

Dear Enrique, may health and happiness follow in your footsteps for many years to come! I look forward with anticipation to sharing Jussi with you again, as soon as the moment arises. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, and thereby expressing the profound gratitude from the entire Björling community: “Never was so much owed by so many to you for your unfailing efforts!” ■

Discovery of the Jussi Björling Copenhagen Tape

By John H. Haley
Harmony Restorations, LLC



The Copenhagen Recital CD Cover

As Society members know by now, a new Society-sponsored CD is due out in the coming weeks that presents a recently discovered Jussi Björling live concert in Copenhagen on October 15, 1959, less than a year before Björling passed away from escalating heart trouble. I discovered this tape, which I own, and working together with Society members and expert audio restoration engineer Seth B. Winner, we put this project together, which is being released by JSP Records in London.

The discovery of this magnificent recital was serendipitous in many ways. Whatever health issues were troubling Björling at the time, the tape revealed that he was in exemplary form on this occasion, partnered by a sympathetic and musical accompanist, Bertil Bokstedt, and further, the recital was captured in very fine sound by excellent recording equipment that had recently been installed in the concert hall. This hall was the recently completed Falkoner Centret, built in 1958–1959 (we would call it “Danish Modern” in style today), and as this tape and others from the same source amply demonstrate, this wood-paneled hall had admirable acoustics that seem to have been especially felicitous for the voices of

classical singers.

I later learned a further serendipitous fact from Harald Henrysson, who wrote a splendid in-depth article for the CD booklet about the importance of Björling’s career in Denmark—this tape is in fact the only known surviving recording of Björling’s quite extensive career in that country, in which he sang more often over his lifetime than in any country except Sweden and the US.

The only arguable negative is that the great tenor was apparently pacing himself carefully, though very successfully, with the result that compared to other surviving recitals from prior years, this one is on the shorter side. A written recollection of this recital by Bokstedt (discussed by Harald in his article) advises that Björling was leaving the stage after every number, which was probably for the purpose of pacing himself carefully. In addition, various pieces of music had inadvertently been left at home on the piano in Stockholm, which irritated Björling when he first became aware of this problem during the course of the program. But from our viewpoint as listeners today, we hear only Björling at his finest, as both incomparable singer and masterful musical interpreter, and there can be no doubt that the 1959 Copenhagen audience got a lot more than their money’s worth. Lucky them! And now, fifty-seven years later—Lucky us!

I acquired this tape fairly recently as part of a purchase of several important historical tapes from Copenhagen. I am myself a collector of live recordings and an audio restoration engineer, and I bought the tapes with the idea of restoring them for release myself. However, in this instance I was happy to have Seth Winner restore my tape, which like every old tape had a number of restoration issues to resolve, as I admire his work very much and appreciate the good