

# Jussi Björling—Recitalist: Out Front Alone

By Duff Murphy



The RCA LP Jacket for the 1955 Carnegie Hall Recital

Sound provokes emotion. We are alarmed at a car's screeching brakes; calmed by a cat's rhythmic purr. It's difficult to determine whether these are intuitive or learned responses; yet to many the voice of an opera singer evokes alarm. Yet the amber tones of Jussi Björling's warm embrace only alarms with its natural beauty.

In early 1960 after nearly two and a half decades of appearing in North America, Björling gave his final US solo recitals in California—Pasadena and Santa Monica—a few miles from where I lived at the age of six. As he left the Los Angeles basin returning to Sweden for the last time, plans were made by my family to move to Stockholm where after a summer of eating lingonberry jam and blood pudding I was about to enter 1st grade in the neighborhood school—no Swedish skills, no friends and no familiar faces.

Shortly after my first class and early one September evening, a black and white television news flash—in Swedish—interrupted the program with a still-picture of a man wearing what appeared to be a band uniform with a rather tall pom-pom on his head. The report concerned something

about a tenor having unexpectedly passed away and there was no successor in sight. As the story ended so too the recorded sound of this alleged fabled singer. Or so I thought.

Of course, the news reported the untimely death of Jussi Björling but it wasn't until two decades later shortly after I started producing a weekly opera program on the local Pasadena public radio station that my memory filled in the blanks of this event. Wedged between German Heimat Musik and the Highland Pipes Hour, a two hour Saturday afternoon slot gave me the opportunity to explore the recorded sound of opera singers of past generations preserved on an unending catalogue of LP's. Each week alone in a darkened studio opera singers revealed their distinct voices in opera's favorite theatrical moments. Pavarotti, Sills, Horne, Merrill, Tucker.

One Saturday a solo album curiously caught my attention: a Carnegie Hall recital released on RCA with its ample dose of art songs and arias and the bemused picture of the friendly singer on the cover. No sooner did the needle hit the track than the sound emitted by that exceptional voice recalled the faded television memory of 1960. It was Jussi Björling—New York 1955. Along with the intimacy of that hall and its exquisite resonance was the charming accented English of the tenor who introduced from the stage each encore. "I will sing for you 'Amor ti vieta'" as the audience erupted in excited anticipation. A musical epiphany.

This recording captured the glowing musical pictures that to this day continue to reflect what has been described as "the beautifully sustained tone and the utmost poetic perception" of his art. Jussi Björling was a mastersinger like no other.

Although Björling gave US recitals from El Paso to Kalamazoo, it was his recurrent

appearances in New York and Los Angeles that to this day hold my interest. The former due to RCA's intimate LP releases and the latter because Björling's ringing tenor voice still resonates in my KUSC radio studio.

Björling's US recital career started early as a young lad, together with his father and brothers, crisscrossed the US in the 1910's finding Scandinavian communities near and far to sing colorful folk songs. Later, when his operatic career was secure at the Royal Swedish Opera, he began a nearly three decade course of recitals that today would be entirely inconceivable. From his earliest efforts at Copenhagen's Tivoli Garden, a critic aptly judged the magnitude of his voice: "Nature has given him everything." Thus from the start his recitals revealed what would become an unending continuum of musical lyricism.

It was also Nature that deprived the young Björling and his brothers of their mother and not so long thereafter their father. A strong, nuclear family would have had difficulty muting such an indelible mark on any sensitive youngster; without one it is hard to know the emotional impact on the emerging singer. His struggles are well documented, yet there is little argument that Björling was at his finest, most artistic, most secure in his solo recitals. Whatever vacuum was created by early losses was filled time and again by the resolute need to be out front alone. The recital stage and its solitary space were apparently perceived as safe and nurturing.

Late December 1937 New York marked the locale of his "return" to the US as a mature tenor where the demand for his presence was rising as fast as his growing international fame. There were 25 selections on that vocal marathon with the Musical Courier reporting "wild furor of bravos greeted every song" with the "Grieg and Sibelius songs deserv[ing] the highest encomiums."

Surprisingly, Björling's lifetime complete operatic roles were limited to those he recognized sat comfortably in the wheelhouse of his voice: Rodolpho, Cavaradossi, Manrico, Duke of Mantua, Romeo, Faust. So too his song repertoire, surprisingly few in

light of the many years he travelled with the same music. No matter.

In his solo recitals Björling gave as much as he received. Each year from late December to early Spring, he sang Sibelius, Grieg, Strauss, Schubert, Handel, Rachmaninoff, Mozart, Gounod and a dusting of Italian, German and Russian opera arias topped off with Stephen Foster's "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair." In each recital one suspects, as Albert Goldberg of the LA Times observed in 1956, "Mr. Björling [could] make the rafters ring but he is far too much of an artist to do so when the occasion does not call for it."

The use of words to describe sound hardly finds the nuance and dimension of a live performance and more so now that historic recordings are an instant Web click away. In a fraction of a second—with full, surround-sound—one can find just about any Björling experience recorded. But it is the spontaneous utterances of critics, fellow artists and fans that fully capture the exuberance and excitement of the event and act to record that moment in history. Andrew Porter, English critic, likened Björling's voice to "an inter-streaking silver and gold, tinted by emerald and ruby" with "that power to sadden or thrill." John Steane, another estimable critic, focused on Björling's "purity of line and the beauty of unforced tone."

The reflections of Porter and Steane are particularly sensitive and accurate when sampling the tenor's New York recital recordings of Sibelius' "Svarta rosor." Björling's voice achingly transmits the melancholy text seamlessly overlaying a resonant, calm reflection.

From Pasadena in 1956, local critic Albert Goldberg wrote of the "heart-warming performances of Rachmaninoff songs sung in English so impeccable as to make most American singers blush for shame" along with two Sibelius pieces that "had a somber magnificence of tone that so freely and gloriously did they dispense the Björling voice." In Schubert's "Serenade" Björling intoned "virility with reserve and poetic feeling."

Björling surely understood the music business of recitals but never compromised



Duff Murphy in Salt Lake City – June 12th, 2015

his total commitment to the music and his voice. Francis Robinson, an assistant MET manager observed how "Björling could be difficult as only the extremely gifted can be" but graciously conceded "his methods invariably were scrupulously legitimate." And John Steane once again recalled "the exceptional splendor of the voice" in observing that the tenor above all treated it "as a musical instrument."

As Björling made what would become his final recital sojourn, several pictures focus on the personal yet universal artist that was Jussi Björling. Cardiac problems became more acute, although the voice never truly wavered and the audiences responded as though it would last forever. Prophetically, Lohengrin's Farewell became a more frequent recital piece. We now recognize that Björling was indeed ending a well-worn recital path with one of Wagner's most soulful moments. Critic Irving Kolodin once called him a "junior" Melchior but nevertheless recalled that the sound was "a shade less brilliant perhaps than in its youthful prime, but with a sheen and suavity all its own."

On April 7, 1960 as an SAS prop stood ready at LAX five miles away – and two miles from my childhood home - Björling gave what was to be his final US recital.

After the first song of the second set, the tenor required an extended break due to his cardiac illness. His accompanist, Frederick Schauwecker improvised until the tenor returned without evidence of physical distress. As if a glimmering reflection not only of that evening but his entire artistic life, Albert Goldberg reported that "the voice sounded uncommonly fresh and pure" and the Swedish tenor's "artistry was as distinguished as ever."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This was the basis of the Keynote Address for the JBS-USA SLC Conference in June 2015. While Duff Murphy is an eminent domain trial lawyer in Los Angeles, he is also the producer and host of a weekly opera radio program in Los Angeles for over 35 years (at KUSC since 1994). He is also an executive producer of "LA Opera on Air", the nationally syndicated broadcast series of the Los Angeles Opera distributed by WFMT Chicago. Mr. Murphy is a frequent guest speaker on opera with the Los Angeles Opera, the Getty Museum, The Pasadena Conservatory of Music and the Music Academy of the West. He attended 1st and 3rd grades in Stockholm, Sweden without ever mastering the language.*