

(3). Jussi in the News, at Chicago's Lyric Opera in Autumn 2006.

Jussi Björling was a mainstay for the new Lyric Opera company as it willed itself into being, first in the spring of 1954 with a brilliantly-cast Don Giovanni (Steber, Simoneau), and then consolidating its formula of attracting the greatest singers with promises of interesting repertoire (+ good salaries, if not lavish new productions). Thus Maria Callas famously opened the fall season in Norma (with Simionato), Traviata (with Simoneau and Gobbi), Lucia (with di Stefano); check the database at lyricopera.org!

The next season brought Callas back as well as Tebaldi, with Jussi in Trovatore with Callas, Rigoletto (with Stitche-Randall, Gobbi), Faust (Carteri, Rossi-Lemeni), and Ballo in maschera (Cerquetti, Gobbi). The 1956 season lacked Callas but was still a marvel as the database will show (Walküre with Nilsson! etc.), and Jussi returned in Trovatore, Tosca (Tebaldi, Gobbi), Bohème (Tebaldi, Bastianini). He continued as a mainstay of the 1957 and 1958 seasons as well.

The fact that Bruno Bartoletti began his long tenure at Lyric in the 1956 Trovatore with Jussi was celebrated at Lyric in October 2006, as Bartoletti conducted a new production of Trovatore that opened 50 years after that memorable first one, almost to the day. An interesting interview of Bartoletti by Roger Pines is included elsewhere in this Newsletter, you'll enjoy his assessment of Jussi's singing.

The young Lyric Opera depended very much on the ideas of Danny Newman, who was press agent, marketer, advisor to Lyric Opera from its first days. Now Newman has a new book, "Tales of a theatrical guru," and it's full of stories from his colorful life with chapters on Callas and Tebaldi as well as Tucker, di Stefano, Gobbi, Jussi B., Domingo, Pavarotti – he was especially fascinated by tenors! Here's the title of Ch. 28: **"The Great Jussi Björling of the Seamless Voice (and a bone-crushing armwrestler as well)."**

Here's Newman's evaluation: "Jussi's glorious, silver-trumpet sound was totally unique in its perfection from the bottom to the top of his range. He never had to shift 'vocal gears' as other, even very great tenors did. His voice had the same incredible consistency throughout. A true aficionado can immediately identify his surging, clarion sound... Writing about Jussi Björling is more than a thrill. I have been enthralled by tenors since my childhood. Throughout the late 1920s and into the 1930s and 1940s I had heard the impassioned artistry and vocal magnificence of such masterful cantors as Gershon Sirota, Mordecai Hershman, Josef Rosenblatt... Moshe Kusevitzky, who was the world cantorate's Jussi Björling. It was thus preordained that I would become involved with virtually all major opera and recital tenors in my time ... including Bergonzi, Corelli, del Monaco, Domingo, Kraus, Melchior, Pavarotti, Peerce, Simoneau, Tagliavini, Tucker, Vickers, and Vinay -- and, via the old 78-[rpm] recordings, Caruso, Tamagno, Gigli, and Joseph Schmidt... **All the tenors I have mentioned were superb.... each offered something special...But if you had to vote on which offered the most qualities you admire in a singer, you'd have to give the prize to Jussi, especially in the lyric tenor category. Jussi personified perfection.** There are endless reams of review superlatives written about his greatness by the most perceptive music critics of his generation. Yet I doubt that any could – or did - succeed in describing in words the effect that Jussi's performances had on the public Those who had the privilege of experiencing the miracle of the essential Jussi over and over again know what we felt; and what we remember is beyond articulation no matter how gifted the writer."

Well. So this opera-loving press agent/impressario, now 87 years old and friend and admirer of the greatest tenors of the post-Gigli decades of the twentieth century, is telling us loud and clear who his personal favorite tenor was. All thanks to Danny Newman for being so clear and eloquent about his choice, which few of us would contradict!

One further note about this season's Lyric Opera News magazine: The recommendations there for this season's Turandot, Trovatore, and Roméo et Juliette all endorse Björling recordings, which continue to maintain their interest even in these days of tremendous sound engineering, uncut performances, DVD productions, whatever.