

## Bass Mark Elyn Remembers Jussi

by Dan Shea



Mark Elyn as Phillip II, Verdi, *Don Carlo*

One of our long-time JBS members is Mark Elyn, who in his mid-twenties as a bass at the start of his career sang with Jussi in a 1956 Detroit *Rigoletto*, and then during 1958 in performances of *Trovatore*, *Don Carlo*, and *Rigoletto* in San Francisco, Sacramento and Los Angeles. He observed Jussi closely in rehearsals and

performances, and has much to tell about those experiences. Jussi noticed him too, and during the *Don Carlo* rehearsals in San Francisco he mentioned to Mark that "I told my wife that I'd heard you [as the Friar in *Don Carlo's* opening scene] and you have a very beautiful voice—but don't try to sing too loud." When Mark responded that "I'm afraid that the audience won't be able to hear me," Jussi told him that if the voice is beautiful, the listener will lean forward and pay closer attention in an effort to hear the singer. Then he said, "It is better that they go like this (cupping his hands behind his ears) than like this (placing his hands over his ears) so as not to hear the sound!"

That San Francisco season was remarkable in many ways: Leontyne Price was slated to make her debut as Leonora with Jussi on September 26, but in early September Jussi had a serious heart episode and his physician required him to have hospital

care in Sweden until September 12 [see pp. 306-309 in *Jussi*]. Thus Jussi arrived late for the rehearsals and some reports [e.g. Arthur Bloomfield's chronology] have him sounding "tired" during his first performance on September 26. Nevertheless a few days later he was "in much better shape." For Leontyne, those *Trovatores* marked a major

step in her climb to superstardom as a Verdi soprano. The production toured to Sacramento and then to LA, where Mark also sang the *Don Carlo* Friar and *Rigoletto* Monterone in wonderfully-cast performances.

Mark also appeared in 1958 with the NBC Opera in a televised *Rigoletto* with Igor Gorin, and returned to San Francisco the following season. Then like many others he went to Europe for more experience in leading roles with the Cologne Opera, Hamburg, Munich, Vienna, Paris, Rome, Basel, and Naples. There's a fine recording of a 1964 Cologne *Don Carlo* with Mark as King Philip, István Kertész conducting.

In 1969 Mark joined the faculty of the University of Illinois as Professor of Voice, becoming Chairman in 1990. He also served as advisor to the Bel Canto Institute in Florence. One of his best known students is bass Eric Halfvarson, who credits Mark with helping him find his voice. Mark retired in 1998 and now lives in Seattle with his wife Jackie. He speaks fondly of their times together in Cologne, especially of his friendship with George London who starred in the superb 1963 *Ring* production there. A description of those days is given in London's biography "Of Gods and Demons."

Recalling his earlier days in 1956-8 when he was able to watch Jussi rehearse, Mark is especially enthusiastic about Jussi's soft singing, his marking voice used at *mezza voce* level so as to minimize stress on the voice. He recalls that sound as particularly gorgeous and wishes there were recordings of those rehearsals, "you could sell his marking voice." And he recalls another part of those 1958 *Trovatore* rehearsals as confirming Jussi's earlier words of advice to

him: "The entire cast including Miss Price were visibly overwhelmed at JB's singing 'Ah si, ben mio' in a *mezza voce*, marking voice." Mark added that "the voice's ring was astounding, it was the clearest voice I'd ever heard, so it carried well. It didn't come across as an unusually big sound, but its clarity gave it an eerie shimmer, almost a freakish acoustical quality that carried well."

I remember when I first heard the the term related to stereo known as "surround sound", JB's singing immediately came to mind. From the wings on stage his voice seemed to be coming from all over, left, right, up.... truly surround sound.

"Beauty" is famously difficult to describe adequately, but this professional singer knows well what he heard at the start of his career, and has not lost his enthusiasm for describing those enviable experiences! ■

## Website Alert

A few months before his passing in 2011, Giorgio Tozzi asked Walter Rudolph to edit a few memories. Only two were sent to Walter. The longer is a fascinating tale of how he declined the request of both Rudolf Bing and Samuel Barber to participate in the opening of the new Met and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Consequently he feared for his future with the Met because of Bing's strong reaction to this refusal. The aftermath makes this an unusually wonderful tale. And while it does not deal specifically with Jussi Björling, we recommend it, and have posted it exclusively on our website at: <http://jussibjorlingsociety.org/blog/139/backache-barber-and-bing>.

### **Il Trovatore by Giuseppe Verdi**

*San Francisco 1958 Opera Assn.*

*War Memorial Opera House/\* Shrine Auditorium/Los Angeles*

*September 26; October 11, 1958, at 8:30 PM*

*\*Sunday, November 2 1958, at 3:00 PM*

#### CAST

Conductor	Georges Sebastian
Leonora, a noble lady of Aragon	Leontyne Price (debut)
Manrico, a young chieftain	Jussi Bjoerling
Azucena, a wandering Gypsy	Claramae Turner/Irene Dalis* (10/11)
Count di Luna, an Aragon noble	Louis Quilico
Ferrando, di Luna's guard captain	Mark Elyn

### **Don Carlo by Giuseppe Verdi**

*San Francisco 1958 Opera Assn. - Shrine Auditorium/Los Angeles*

*Tuesday, November 4 1958, at 8:00 PM*

#### CAST

Conductor	Georges Sebastian
Philip II, King of Spain	Giorgio Tozzi
Don Carlo, Crown Prince	Jussi Bjoerling
Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa	Frank Guarrera
Elisabeth of Valois, wife of Philip II	Leyla Gencer
Princess Eboli	Irene Dalis
The Grand Inquisitor	Giuseppe Modesti
A friar (Charles V)	Mark Elyn
A celestial voice	Ruth Daniel

### **Rigoletto**

*San Francisco 1958 Opera Assn. - Shrine Auditorium/Los Angeles*

*Saturday, November 8 1958, at 8:00 PM*

#### CAST

Conductor	Jean Fournet
Rigoletto, jester to the Duke	Robert Weede
Gilda, his daughter	Leyla Gencer
Duke of Mantua	Jussi Bjoerling
Sparafucile	Lorenzo Alvary
Maddalena, his sister	Cecilia Ward
Count Monterone	Mark Elyn