

Some memories of Jussi Björling: concerts and opera performances

from the notes of Karl Hekler, collected by Sue Flaster



KIRSTEN LEWIN, KARL'S DAUGHTER

Karl's right eye, 2007. Shall we say he was camera shy?

Note: longtime member and opera enthusiast Karl Hekler heard Jussi live 33 times, according to his memories. Karl was in the midst of searching through his collection of opera and concert programs when he passed away. More of Karl's observations are available on the Society web site at jussibjorlingsociety.org.

In thinking about Jussi Björling recitals, I went to four at Hunter College, two at Carnegie Hall, two at the Philadelphia Academy of Music, one at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and one at Manhasset High School. The really tremendous performances where Jussi outdid himself, like the '54 Hunter recital, stand out, but the other three Hunter recitals were merely excellent!

There were additional four Carnegie concerts: two Swedish fundraisers (one

with Grant Johansson and one with Anna Lisa), the Tebaldi/Bernstein concert and the Sibelius Memorial concert. There was one Telephone Hour. That was the broadcast where he sang two *Manon* arias along with "The Girl under the Linden Tree" and "For You Alone" in between. The rest were Met performances.

Met moments

At the Met, in the 40's during the Edward Johnson regime, I saw *Trovatore* and two *Toscas* (with Barbatto and Sved...very exciting). At the start of the Bing regime two things happened that increased my Björling performances: Melchior was gone so I no longer had split loyalties, and I started college and my parents cut me more slack.

I went to the first broadcast *Don Carlo* and then several more. I especially remember some cast changes where Hotter replaced Hines and another where Steber replaced Rigal. There was a fabulous week with a New Years *Faust* (Steber, Warren and Siepi) and two *Manon Lescauts*, one with Kirsten and one with Albanese. I saw four *Manon Lescauts*, including the Albanese broadcast and another one later in the week. One each of *Bohème*, *Ballo* and *Rigoletto*. *Cavallerias* with Barbieri and Simionato and some more *Toscas* with Milanov and Albanese and *Fausts* with Kirsten and de Los Angeles.

This is what I remember off the top of my head without checking programs and the Annals, where I noted performances I attended. When my unpacking continues and if there is any input from others, I'll do some research.

Turiddu at the Met

The first time I heard Jussi sing in *Cavalleria* was on Feb. 3, 1953. It was an interesting night. Jussi hadn't sung Turridu at the Met since 1947, Fedora Barbieri was singing her first (and I believe, only) Santuzza at the Met, and Mario del Monaco was the Canio in the double-billed *Pagliacci*. My friend, Bert Wechsler, who was backstage, told me that del Monaco sat in the wings and watched Jussi's whole performance. Jussi was in fair voice. Barbieri gave Jussi a big kiss in front of the great gold curtain in their curtain calls. I think she appreciated her collaboration with Jussi. The performances of the two tenors demonstrated the difference between a true dramatic tenor and a basically lyric tenor singing a fairly dramatic *spinto* role. Jussi sang beautifully, but compared to del Monaco, he didn't have the sheer visceral vocal power. I don't think del Monaco picked up any pointers watching Jussi regarding style, phrasing, beauty of tone, and probably came away confident that he didn't have much to worry about from Jussi Björling. Volume was the name of del Monaco's game, and he could be very thrilling.

The next time I heard Jussi sing *Cavalleria* was on 11/14/59, the night he returned to the Met after missing three seasons. This was a night we were all waiting for and Jussi didn't disappoint. There was palpable tension in the audience when the harpist began the intro to "O, Lola." It seemed nobody was even breathing. Then Jussi's voice sailed out with the pure silvery sound of old. In fact, he was in much better voice than on his old 10-inch 78rpm studio recording. Here we heard once again the most beautiful tenor sound of the Twentieth Century.

Drama builds

We had to wait a while for Jussi to make his appearance on stage for his confrontation with Santuzza (Giulietta Simionato), and when he did, all hell broke loose. I've never heard anybody get such a tumultu-

ous reception. I think it even eclipsed the ovation that Flagstad got when the curtain went up in her return to the Met as Isolde (I was there). I guess we were worried that we would never see Jussi again at the Met, and the entire audience seemed to be sending Jussi (and Bing) a message. The one thing that Flagstad got that Jussi didn't, was just as the applause was dying down, someone yelled out, "Welcome back!" and the applause started all over again, but this time didn't last as long as the first time. The *Cavalleria* excerpts of this performance that were included as a bonus to the *Manon Lescaut* with Kirsten (Myto 931.73) have the whole length of the ovation, whereas, without having timed them, I think the Omega Opera Archives issue of this (complete) performance cuts it shorter, diminishing the explosive excitement of Jussi's reception. After Simionato saw Jussi's exciting reception just for showing up, she knew that she had to toe in and give her all that night, and so did Jussi. Jussi was transformed into a blazing, ringing, *verismo* dramatic tenor, but with far more beauty of tone and style than any dramatic tenor that I've ever heard. He had become the absolute complete package. The stage action was something special too, I seem to recall that in the tumultuous duet, Simionato, after being thrown to the ground by Jussi, grabbed him by the ankle and Jussi dragged her along the stage as they kept singing. It was quite a night.

Other sopranos

A week or so later, Jussi sang another Turridu, this time with Milanov. The performance was A-OK, but didn't (couldn't) live up to the previous one with Simionato. For one thing, Jussi had already returned and conquered. For another, Zinka didn't hit the floor, and didn't grab Jussi's ankle, and Jussi didn't drag her across the stage. The Canio that night was Bergonzi, who was also A-OK, but did not have the visceral impact of del Monaco. I was at the last *Cav* with Curtis-Verna, which turned out to be Jussi's

last Met performance. I don't remember much about it.

I seem to recall that the two interim *Toscas* with Milanov and Albanese were both better than the last *Cav*. Maybe it's because I like *Tosca* better. Of those two *Toscas*, the Albanese performance was better. Jussi was in top form, and Licia sang better than I had heard her sing in quite a while. Her top especially was absolutely thrilling, and the two old pros turned back the years and sang up a storm. Leonard Warren's *Scarpia* wasn't chopped liver, either.

The best *Toscas* I saw Jussi do were two performances with Elisabetta Barabato and Alexander Sved in 1949. Not only were Barabato and Sved fabulous, but Jussi's voice still had the pure late 1930s sound that I still consider to be his absolute best vocal vintage years. But I'd give anything to hear Jussi sing in his 1959 voice. In fact, he was in better voice for his live '59 *Cavs* and *Toscas* than he was for his earlier studio recordings of these operas. It made his death a little more than 8 months later totally unbearable.

In the '53 *Brindisi*, Jussi sang it very respectably—it was very good. But in the 11/14/59 version, Jussi seemed to be vocally bursting at the seams. It sounded as though Jussi felt that Mascagni had under-written the aria. I had a 10-in. 78 of a German *Brindisi*, Joseph Schmidt I believe, where he interpolated a high note at the beginning of the second stanza, and slid down to the first written note. I loved it. The aria really needed it, and I hoped that Jussi would do it, and he sounded as though he just might do something like that. When he didn't, I then hoped he'd sing along with the chorus when they took up the melody, and completely dominate them, which he could have that night. But he stuck to the score, which didn't do him justice. He was certainly refulgent and heroic, as you say.

Tosca

Jussi's "Vittorias" were each time by far the best I have ever heard from any other tenor.

Most Cavaradossis can get out a decent *B-flat*, but the gap between Jussi's top and other tenors' really widened conspicuously on the *B-natural* in the first act in the scene with Angelotti. I would add that at the Met, Jussi came down to the prompter's box, stamped his foot, propelling the *A-sharp* (*B-flat*) like a rifle shot, and then fanned the house with it. A knockout.

Another spot I watched for was the way Jussi handled the first act line, "Angelotti! Il Console della spenta republica Romana." He would excitedly toss it off like nobody else. Add his lyricism in the arias and duets, and you had the consummate Cavaradossi. Another telling point was in the third act when *Tosca* and Cavaradossi sing in unison. The sharp focus of Jussi's voice and the quick response of his tone on the breath always showed up the soprano, regardless of how big her voice was.

What was miraculous was that although every muscle in his body was taut, the voice sounded absolutely free, unstressed, and effortless. Regardless of how high the note was, I always felt he could sing several notes higher if he wanted to. The others sounded like they had reached the upper limit of their range. As Toby once said, he always sounded like he's approaching a high note from above, rather than reaching up for it, as others do.

Editor's note: Many of us recall Toby and Karl Hekler from the D.C., NY and first St. Peter JBS conferences, as well as their contributions to JBS publications and the on-line discussion group. Both Karl and Toby were deeply committed to the legacy of JB, as well as other singers of note, especially Lauritz Melchior! Their energy and enthusiasm, and the generosity with which they shared their experiences enriched us all.