

"Disturbed me?" she said, "Not at all. I sat for hours by my window and just enjoyed it. It was like being at church."

There have been lots of festivities mentioned here, so that one can understand the farmer who reads the newspapers and asks himself whether folk in the capital do anything but go to parties. But of course they do, and, in particular, Jussi Björling did.

One can say, without exaggeration, that he really did nothing other than work. His whole life revolved around his engagements. One can even go so far as to say that his life, in some ways, appeared to be marked by a certain poverty in that it contained little in the way of intellectual or physical pursuits. We have seen photographs of him pulling in a pike, and certainly he did so on occasion; but to a large extent he just breathed music, existed in tones, explored through phrases, thought in roles. He was a conscientious artist and a perfectionist, our happy singer!

As his lawyer I also got to see Jussi in another role—let us call it the role of a member of society. When contracts were being drawn up he always took careful notice of everything connected to the artistic side of things. When we came to the fee he would merely give a nod of satisfaction and check that it was the highest that was paid. The merit in a contract did not depend on the fee! One time some business friends had advised him to go and live in Switzerland for tax purposes. I commented: "And so become an expatriate Swede." "No," he replied, "expatriate Swede, that's a dreadful idea. I

don't want to be an expatriate Swede. I want to be completely Swedish. I couldn't give a damn about Switzerland!" ■

¹The celebration of St Lucia's day on the 13th December is an important part of midwinter festivities in Sweden. All over the country, local communities select a girl to be Lucia, "The Queen of the Light". In the 1920s a Swedish newspaper introduced an annual competition to choose Stockholm's Lucia.

²A charitable foundation providing accommodation and support for needy stage artists in their retirement.

³A well-known actress of the time.

⁴This is an error on the writer's part. It was Anders Henrikson, an actor at the Royal Dramatic Theatre who partnered Inga Tidblad. Alf Henrikson was a journalist and writer whose work for the stage included the libretto for Hilding Rosenberg's opera *Resa till Amerika* [Journey to America].

⁵Anders de Wahl, Gabriel Alw and Tora Teje—famous actors and actress of the period.

⁶During the period when Sweden had a diet of the four estates (up until 1866) the *lantmarskalk* was the president of the estate of the nobility.

⁷King of Sweden 1950-1973

⁸The Swedish dialect spoken in Dalarna.

⁹The conclusion to this anecdote is rather confusing in the original, since the writer is unclear about precisely what he read in the newspaper regarding Jussi and Anna-Lisa. He had possibly confused his dates and was implying that the announcement of their engagement appeared the day after the soirée at the Drottningholm Court Theatre. This did not actually occur until some months later. Alternatively, a well-informed newspaper columnist may have hinted at their relationship.

¹⁰The year referred to as being "noted for judicial corruption" was probably 1952 or 1953 at which time Herman Zetterberg was Minister of Justice. In his political writings, the famous novelist Vilhelm Moberg (author of a series of four books which is regarded as the greatest fictional portrayal of Swedish immigrants to the USA), participated in debates on various social issues including topical legal cases. Moberg was highly critical of Zetterberg's decisions as Minister of Justice.

The Voice of Velvet

by Sven Salén



Sven Salén

Sven Salén, born in 1890, had a brief commercial education. With an early interest in the sea, he bought his first ship in 1915. The Salén shipping company, which he founded and of which he was CEO 1923-62, was for a period one of the leading lines in the world with a large fleet of reefers, tankers and dry cargo vessels. Salén was interested in sports, especially skiing and sailing, and as a helmsman, he took a bronze medal in the 1936 Berlin Olympics and finished fourth in 1952 in Helsinki. He was also an amateur composer and very active in supporting the Swedish lyric tradition. Sven Salén died in 1969.

Jussi Björling—during the last few decades that name has flown out on wings of song over the whole world; an ambassador of vocal music from the little country far up in the north on the Arctic Circle; a singer who could sing with Italianate passion but also with a northerner's control. This must have been a spoilt individual, a true prima donna. What was he really like?

The scene is Carnegie Hall. Jussi is giving a benefit concert for the Swedish Seamen's Hotel in Brooklyn. There is a full house—full out in the auditorium and full

Website Alert

Raymond Björling, a Swedish opera singer, and grandson of tenor Jussi Björling, spoke at the concluding panel of the Schiller Institute conference in Berlin on February 26, 2012. His topic was "Four Generations in a Family of Musicians." One may watch it or read the text at:

http://www.schillerinstitute.org/conf-iclc/2012/berlin/eiv_v38n17/cmusic_creativity.html#rb

on the enormous stage behind the singer. The greatness of only one other singer has been able to fill those places: his name was Enrico Caruso. The first part of Jussi's programme consists of a selection of songs. He sings them with warmth of timbre and calm control. Right from the beginning the applause is overwhelming. In the second half Jussi sings opera arias, and he allows his high notes to ring out freely. This is what the American public wants above all, and when "La donna è mobile" comes at the end of the programme, there is no limit to the audience's enthusiasm. There are encores and ovations galore.

When we meet afterwards for supper, Jussi just says: "That didn't go too badly."

I had the good fortune of being Jussi's friend for many years. He was a good man, salt of the earth, his friends' most loyal friend, no matter what cards life had dealt them. I also found in him a world-famous tenor without any prima donna-like tendencies—a rare phenomenon. He was aware of his greatness as a singer. He was proud of his abilities, which he often said had not merely come of their own accord, but he was never in the least haughty or conceited. He remained, his whole life long, a kind and extremely gifted prodigy of song.

It is perhaps true that his way of life was very much circumscribed by his career. Apart from his singing and his music, he did not have any special hobbies. Consequently, life could at times become wearisome and monotonous. But an international tenor in Jussi's class must devote his free-time to preparation before every new performance. His renown made its demands on him.

As a result, his stage-fright also increased as the years passed, which is often the case with stage artists. A week before his death, Jussi dined at my home and he sang a number of pieces in a more wonderful way than I had possibly ever before heard from him. When I complimented him he said: "Yes, I certainly still have a voice there, but do you know what?—ever since that mishap

with Tosca at the Royal Opera when my vocal chords suddenly seized up completely and Einar Andersson had to sing the following acts, since then I've been so afraid that I'll let my public down. It's a nervousness that comes from a weakened physique."

It is no doubt true that an opera singer must have an incredibly strong constitution. His performance, if it is to be of the highest standard, demands tremendous physical strength. Jussi certainly felt that after all those years of hard work he was beginning to tire.

I have heard Jussi perform in Sweden and in America. At our opera house he of course had his loyal and enthusiastic public. But he was probably even more popular in the U.S.A. At the Metropolitan Opera it was a great occasion when Jussi's name appeared on the programme. The Met's former general manager, Edward Johnson, was a warm and admiring friend to Jussi. During his time, there were no rifts. But Johnson's successor, Rudolf Bing, had a different attitude, and there sometimes arose small differences of opinion. For example, one time Bing organised a dress rehearsal and sold out the auditorium for the basically praiseworthy purpose of improving the Met's precarious finances. Jussi thought that in these circumstances the performers ought to be paid. It was a *dalmas's*¹ sense of fair dealing coming to the fore. The matter was resolved eventually, but the relationship between the two of them was never totally comfortable.

I was once invited to Bing's box. Jussi had not performed at the Met for some time. The opera was *La Bohème*, the house was sold out and the atmosphere was enthusiastic. Bing also had some representatives from the Vienna State Opera in his box. Their enthusiasm was tremendous—"Ach, der Björling ist ja fabelhaft!"² Bing brushed aside their enthusiasm, saying that Jussi was "a good tenor".

But the audience! Bing had decreed that there should be no more than three curtain-calls. I don't know how many there were—

perhaps thirty or so, and a large part of the audience was standing, stamping, shouting and applauding.

Jussi was a member of *Stadsbudskåren*³ for a number of years. It is a tradition that the year's Lucia attends *Stadsbudskåren's* annual meeting which is held just before Christmas and includes a traditional herring breakfast. The organisation then presents to Lucia its contribution to her fund-raising efforts. It was a very grand moment when Jussi sang "Santa Lucia". However, during recent years Jussi had been away on tour when the annual meeting took place, and he therefore made his place available to someone else.

"But," he said to me, "I think we will do something for *Stadsbudskåren*. You've composed a number of songs. Couldn't we pick out a couple of them? I'll record them and *Stadsbudskåren* will receive an income for the future as my records will be valuable."

The result was two gramophone discs. The first has "Till Havs" ["Toward the Sea" by Nordqvist] on one side and "Sången till havet" ["Song to the Sea" by Salén]; the second disc comprises "Jungfrun under lind" ["The Maiden under the Linden Tree" by Peterson-Berger] and "Visa kring slånblom och mänskära" ["Song of the Blackthorn and the Crescent Moon" by Salén].

They have provided a good income for *Stadsbudskåren* every year, and for this we remember with gratitude Jussi's brief guest appearance with the organisation. I can perhaps add that even my simple melodies sounded quite acceptable when spruced up by Jussi's extraordinary artistry.

What was it that made Jussi so loved by the Swedish people? It was probably that he was Swedish to his very fingertips, that he returned here after every tour abroad and that he was the same simple and natural Jussi his whole life long.

Others more qualified than I will surely define his vocal artistry. He was blessed with great musicality as well as receptivity and a good memory. As a result, he found it very much easier than the majority of sing-

ers to learn his many opera roles and retain the music and texts fresh in his memory. His vocal range was very large - almost as large as Caruso's. I have heard Jussi sing bass parts. It amused him to demonstrate how low his voice could go. There have certainly been voices which have gone as high as his, perhaps even higher; but I do not think that any other tenor's voice has had the same beauty of sound in the upper register. There was velvet in that voice!

If one were to specify a special aspect of Jussi's artistry over and above what I have already said, then it would be the expressiveness of his singing. He never descended to anything exaggeratedly theatrical, never indulged in gallery-pleasing sobs and sighs. He was perhaps not so great as an actor, but he allowed the drama in his voice to emerge in the right way, and he was respectful towards both music and text. He deliberately avoided sliding into notes. His strength was such that he could sing a long phrase in one breath and still have the power to end with an incredible crescendo. His phrasing, too, was exemplary. He expressed himself in his singing easily and freely, as though no difficulties existed.

Jussi got to end his career while he was still at the top. He was spared having to see himself passed over and excluded from the great theatres. But even if his voice had gradually diminished in power, he would undoubtedly have continued to delight his public for many more years with his voice's beauty of tone, his phrasing and his musicianship. ■

¹Male inhabitant of Dalarna.

²"Oh, that Björling is fantastic!"

³"Town-Messengers' Union", a charitable organisation in Stockholm

⁴"Sankta Lucia" is one of the main "Lucia" songs sung at the traditional Swedish celebration of St Lucia's day on the 13th December. The tune of the Neapolitan song of the same name is sung to a Swedish text.

With Jussi in Private Life

By Teddy Nyblom



Teddy Nyblom

Teddy Nyblom was born in 1897 as son of the tenor and opera director Sven Nyblom (whose translations of opera libretti included the versions of Boheme and Tosca used by Jussi). He began his journalist career in the 1920s, was editor of the magazine "Scenen" (The Stage) 1932-35 and music critic of "Aftonbladet" from 1936 until his death in 1960 (two months after Jussi). He followed Jussi's career closely since the beginning of the 1930s, and helped Gösta Björling with his book about his "big brother".

The Royal Court Singer, the people's singer, the master singer and the internationally renowned tenor — Jussi Björling has been praised in all manner of superlatives. Of his grandly evident Swedishness and sincere love for his country, many have spoken in the most glowing terms. Allow me now, after all these justified plaudits, to take a look at Jussi "in his shirt-sleeves" and relate a little of what he was like in everyday life.

Jussi had all the merits of the tenor

species and few of the faults, and he was certainly not, as many tenors are commonly held to be, stupid. Among the advantages I would firstly count the tenor virtues which he took over as an inheritance from his predecessors Arvid Ödmann and David Stockman. Both of these idols at the Stockholm Opera were always very neatly dressed and extremely particular about their appearance; indeed each was something of an *arbiter elegantiarum*.

Jussi liked to go out for a stroll. In town everybody knew who he was, and I think he derived a certain pleasure from being recognised. He was "du" to the whole of Stockholm and half of Sweden. He enjoyed going out for a walk between his singing duties, and when spring arrived one would see Jussi wearing an elegant Viennese hat, a light spring-weight suit from an English tailor, a richly coloured tie, purchased perhaps during a visit to Italy for guest performances, and carrying a walking-stick with a handle of silver or crocodile-skin. In this way he maintained a tradition among the soloists at the Opera from an earlier era when the operatic tenor was the charmer amongst the public's favourites. In modern times, of course, this role has been transferred to the film world, while opera singers get a little lost in the crowd, probably because people in general do not recognise them. Operatic artists are often made up and outfitted to look quite monstrous and the physiognomies of villains and scoundrels have little to do with the world of elegance. When the person behind the disguise is seen in the clear light of day, the general public is unaware that there goes Mephistopheles, Faust, Tonio or Rigoletto.

Jussi certainly loved family life and his wife and children, but he was also keen on the social life and, as I've said, knew all and sundry. This world-famous tenor was not