

Birgit Nilsson: *La Nilsson, My Life in Opera*

Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2007, 308 pp

By Andrew Farkas

The American edition of Birgit Nilsson's memoirs has a long and unhappy history. The book barely hit the best seller list on the domestic Swedish market in 1995, when I urged the publisher for whom I edited an Opera Biography series to issue the book in English. The company was reluctant to invest the cost of translation on top of Mme Nilsson's demands for a large advance against royalties, and they declined. Appreciating the value and broad interest of the book, I recommended it to another publisher. They enthusiastically jumped at the opportunity and negotiated a contract with Mme Nilsson. The project was on its way, or so it seemed.

Unfortunately, the sample chapters were substandard and Nilsson found them unacceptable. Soon after, the firm experienced internal problems and looked for a buyer, and the project was halted. When the agreement was

eventually terminated, other individuals sought permission to translate, without success. Opera fans and the reading public at large now have access to the English language edition of Birgit Nilsson's memoirs, but there was a final bump on the bumpy road to publication: the present translation was prepared not from the Swedish original but the German edition. Translator Doris Jung Popper (a singer herself with fifteen years experience in German opera houses) sent her work to Nilsson for approval. She replied in a handwritten note: "I have 'tried' 3 different translations but, alas, none of them were to my liking. So far I have read only part of it, but it is enough to see that this is the translation I like. Thank you!" While the credit for a well-built, flowing narrative is entirely Nilsson's, the fact that it reads like an English original is Ms. Popper's merit. She is to be congratulated for rising to

the challenge and accomplishing not merely a translation but the rendering of Nilsson's stylish prose in idiomatic English. Whatever the actual circumstances under which the text was born—writing, dictating, or taping—the narrative voice of Nilsson is consistent throughout and her well-chosen words read as if captured while relaxing in her armchair. Why did she decide to commit her life story to paper? Among the four reasons she enumerates in the Preface, the most convincing is her third: "I want to forestall the coming of the day when some nasty little writer will cook up a brew of lies about la Nilsson."

Predictably and reassuringly, the book is teeming with details: facts, names, stories, incidents, vignettes, anecdotes, quips and comebacks. A list of career milestones, a discography,

Continued on page 8

Bust a move (move a bust): New location for Jussi's bust

By Beau Kaplan and Dan Shea



Several months after the JB bust vanished from sight at the Met, we learned in mid-March that the Björling bust was back on display in the concourse gallery, conspicuously located between busts of Verdi and Caruso! Several of our members documented this fact with photographs: our thanks to Bea Bobotek, Beau Kaplan, and Bill Lessard for sending us copies. And special thanks to the Met's Archivist Bob Tuggle for his patience in dealing with our members' anxieties! Mr. Tuggle explained that a new photo gallery had also been installed in the bust's previous home, with some 70 singers represented, and Jussi Björling would be there among them. Further, in honor of this season's revival of *Manon Lescaut*, the costumes made for Dorothy Kirsten and JB for the 1949 revival of this opera were being put on display in the costume cases on the parterre level. (Alas, the photos of the bust in its new location are too large for publication here, so we show the Borlänge version in its Winter costume.)