

## Irene Dalis Joins the JBS Honorary Advisory Board

by Walter Rudolph



Irene Dalis and Walter Rudolph, July 2013

Irene Dalis retires from the company she founded, Opera San Jose, in May 2014. But prior to that, she was one of the finest mezzo-sopranos in the world. A student of Martha Mödl, she learned her craft in the Oldenburgisches Stadttheater in Germany before joining the Berlin Stadtische Oper (Deutsche Oper) where she was singing before her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1957.

I interviewed her last July, and subsequently we invited her to become an Honorary Advisor to the Jussi Björling Society—USA. Her reply was immediate:

*Dear Mr. Rudolph,*

*Please extend my appreciation to the Board of Directors of the Society for nominating me as a member of the Honorary Advisory Board of The Jussi Björling Society—USA.*

*Of course, I accept and consider it an honor, indeed. Thank you so much!*

She honors the name of Jussi Björling, and the Society. We are so grateful for her acceptance, and for the following words she shared about Jussi Björling in July 2013:

Björling was, for me, the finest tenor I performed with, and in my day, I performed with every leading tenor. I mean, Björling was in a class with Caruso. When I was first exposed to Jussi Björling and his great voice, I was a student at Columbia University. I was working on my master's degree, and I used to buy standing room to hear this man—this great voice—I was studying voice.

But many years later, in 1957, when I made my debut at the Metropolitan Opera, it was in *Don Carlo* by Verdi. And the tenor, the Don Carlo, was Jussi Björling—that is how I met Jussi. I was 32. Max Rudolf, the assistant conductor (I think he was the artistic administrator at the time at the Met), ushered me up to the rehearsal which was on the attic of the old Metropolitan Opera and opened the door. I saw across the room Jussi Björling, Cesare Siepi, the bass—he was the King; and, Robert Merrill and Ettore Bastianini (the two Posa's). But my eyes glued on Jussi Björling, because for me, in my book I idolized him. And I personally became paralyzed. Literally, I could not put one foot in front of the other one to enter the room! I was just so overcome by seeing Jussi Björling, and thinking "I'm going to be performing with this man—with this great tenor." I finally managed to get myself together and get in the room and walk over to Jussi Björling. And I said "I have to tell

you this is going to be such an honor to be on stage with you!"

Even now when I think about it I tear up because it was a moment—can you imagine? It was Jussi Björling! And then of course we had many rehearsals together, and he was so supportive. He was so kind and he was so considerate and helpful in every way. I was a debutante and I didn't even have a manager. That I was even arriving at the Met was amazing to me. I'd been in Europe for six years, but here I was. I got a little nervous and of course, I started catching a cold as you do. And he said, "Take care of yourself. And I want you to meet my doctor." And he went to a pay phone and he called his doctor—Dr. Bruno Griesman, and he said, "Bruno wants to talk to you." So I went to the phone and this doctor said "open your mouth!" Of course we made an appointment, and he became my throat doctor. But he was Jussi Björling's throat doctor so you can imagine he was the best in New York.

Jussi Björling was not only a total professional—always prepared; never arrived at a rehearsal less than prepared, totally, and gave his entire self to the rehearsal (although he didn't really need rehearsal).

But what I learned from him was the night of my debut. At that time at the old Metropolitan Opera, all the male singers' dressing rooms were on stage right, and all the females singers were on stage left. On the night of my debut, which was March 16, 1957, he walked clear across from stage right (he had to go behind the stage) over to my dressing room; came into this debutante's dressing room, and he said to me, "Irene, I came to tell you, it is an honor for me to be on stage with you tonight." (See also Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas, *Jussi*, pp 291–92).

Now that you know, it was a very important lesson for me about the genuine humility of the great singers. And I remember thinking "Oh I hope I can do this for another singer someday in my life. I hope I can help another singer just as he has."

He was my first Don Carlo at the Met.

He was also Manrico with me the first time I did Azucena in *Trovatore*. That was my time with him—three years before he died in 1960. So my entire memory of Jussi Björling in my life had to be of us performing together. We didn't sit around having drinks; I mean, we weren't personal friends—I don't want to mis-interpret anything here. He was for me one of my closest mentors, in every way. But I only did those two operas with him. Fortunately they were my first two roles that I had with the Metropolitan. So I attribute a lot of my success to him.

Jussi Björling touched you; he touched your heart—that's true, but on the other side of the curtain. And he was a singer's singer. You understand that? There was something about his technique that just seemed so perfect! He was always dependable. He never had a problem with his singing; it was just part of his body.

Actually I would say the feeling that people describe, that "tear" in his voice—that I had when I was a student and I'd go and watch—I'd be in standing room. But why did I go then? It was because of being moved by what he was singing. It was not that much as singer listening to singer and checking the technique; it was him as an interpreter.

What good fortune I had to be onstage that often with him when you think about it. And then he died in 1960. So I was one of the last few mezzo-sopranos he was with.

*Irene Dalis, July 30, 2013  
San Jose, California*

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And here is the *Musical America* review of that wonderful *Don Carlo* debut, clearly a real occasion:

March 16.—One of Verdi's most fascinating operas, *Don Carlo* fortunately is also one of Rudolf Bing's favorites. It has seldom been absent from the Metropolitan's repertoire since the general manager used it to open his first

season with the company, on Nov. 6, 1950.

Its revival on this occasion, after only a season's absence, reaffirmed the opera's great beauty as well as the distinction of the Metropolitan production. Rolf Gerard's sets and costumes still seem among his finest contributions to the repertoire, in visual handsomeness, appropriateness of mood, and usefulness to the stage director. If memory serves correctly, Margaret Webster's clean, concise stage movement has been maintained faithfully by Hans Busch, at the same time that some of the individual characterizations have been deepened. Finally, Fritz Stiedry's eloquent conducting of the score has grown in dramatic vividness and force; it was, on this occasion, one of the finest performances of Italian opera to be heard at the opera house.

The cast was superb. Of the original production there were Cesare Siepi (Philip II); Jussi Björling (Carlo); and Delia Rigal (Elisabeth). From later performances there were Ettore Bastianini (Rodrigo); Louis Sgarro (Friar); Charles Anthony (Lerma); James McCracken (Herald); and Natalie Kelepovsky (Countess of Aremburg). Newcomers were Herman Uhde (Inquisitor); Irene Dalis (Eboli), making her Metropolitan debut; Madelaine Chambers (Theobald); and Emilia Cundari (Celestial Voice). Mr. Siepi has always sung Philip's music with a fabulously beautiful tone, but his characterization, vocally and dramatically, has never before suggested with such rich detail the monarch's troubled, lonely, yet tyrannical spirit. It seemed like one of the major achievements of today's operatic stage.

Miss Dalis, young mezzo-soprano of San Jose, Calif., who has been singing for the past three years with the Berlin Municipal Opera, met the exacting demands of the part of Eboli with such vocal and dramatic authority as to make her debut one of the most exciting in recent seasons. While there are mezzos with more luscious voices at the Metropolitan, hers is of first-rate caliber, a little dry in the lower register but brilliant at the top, with carrying power all



Mezzo-soprano Irene Dalis as Princess Eboli in Verdi's *Don Carlo* at the Metropolitan Opera, 1957 (Courtesy Irene Dalis)

the way through. Her expert vocalism and musicianship were immediately apparent in the Veil Song, which Miss Dalis sang better than I have ever heard it sung. In the tricky ensemble with Carlo and Rodrigo in the Queen's gardens she was just as impressive, and her sweeping, almost torrential handling of "O don fatale" won her a genuine ovation from the capacity audience. Everywhere, Miss Dalis' acting went hand-in-glove with her singing.

Mr. Björling, much slimmer than when he last sang Carlo, was also a more active and dramatic figure and still as fine a singer, with his shining voice, and impeccable phrasing. Rodrigo offers one of the most congenial roles for Mr. Bastianini's luscious voice, and he was less placid an actor than usual. Miss Rigal had some bad moments vocally but in general she sang with a solid, handsome tone, and made a tragic, regal figure.

Mr. Uhde was a wondrously thin, ascetic Inquisitor, with a will of iron. Miss Chambers complemented Miss Dalis charmingly in the Veil Song, and the contributions of the other singers were unflinchingly right. All in all, this was one of the Metropolitan's finest performances in recent years. ■