

IN MEMORIAM: Hjördis Schymberg

by Stefan Johansson, Head of Dramaturgy, Royal Swedish Opera

Hjördis Schymberg, the soprano with whom Jussi Björling was most often paired at the Royal Opera, died on September 8th at the age of 99.

Mme. Schymberg was a great artist and a colorful personage. A few years after her retirement from the Royal Opera 1959, it has been told that she explained her presence in the ladies' room on the upper gallery by not accepting free tickets from an ungrateful opera management. When she later returned as a guest during the 1960s, her charisma was undiminished and her voice fresher than when she, still with a permanent contract in her upper 40s, had been fighting for her position among younger hungry sopranos.

Perhaps there was too much and too long of her undisputed favorite role in *Traviata* – Verdi's version of *La Dame aux Camélias* – when the most brilliant top notes had faded and the tenors looked more like sons than lovers. But I still remember from a performance in the late 60s how her *pisksnärtsnabb* (= quick like a whiplash), oversensitive reaction to the lover's worst offense in the festival scene could set fire to the indignation of the whole audience. That was real music theatre.

But the Countess in Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* was perfectly in the register of her voice still at her last performance in 1968 – the sense of style intact, the expression deepened, the timbre intact. As a concert and church singer, Schymberg continued to satisfy her listeners still longer and the quick-witted primadonna with her northern roots came out well on TV. Her career had begun with a factory's "children's orchestra" and per-

formances at movie theatres before she came to Stockholm, singing lessons with Baroness von Vegesack and the despot John Forsell's opera school. Schymberg came from the common people and she never forgot it, even when she had the primadonna's claims to attention.

Her career was long and brilliant at the Royal Opera from her debut in 1934 and the girl from Alnön (near Sundsvall in northern Sweden) is still world-famous for her recordings with her favorite partner Jussi Björling, constantly reissued in new formats. Schymberg sang at Covent Garden in London and at the Met in New York, visited the Nordic countries, sang Violetta in Havana and Mimì on German radio.

But her wide popularity in Sweden wasn't founded only on the great roles at the Opera – primarily Mozart, Verdi and French opera – or recitals all over the country.

Today, no artist with her reputation would sing *Barbiere* or *Bohème* with reduced chorus and orchestra night after night on month-long tours from Ystad to Haparanda. And as long as there was only one radio channel, no Swede could avoid Hjördis Schymberg, even if they preferred [a 1940s-era crooner like] Ulla Billquist.

Schymberg is still able to catch young listeners, who were not yet born when she left the stage. A couple of years ago I discovered with astonishment that it wasn't a pensioner but a 25-year-old who had put her discography on the web. As late as 2007 a double CD was released on Bluebell, where all can listen to a voice that lives in a wide repertoire. ■



Hjördis Schymberg and tenor colleague enjoy a relaxed moment