

He made his Covent Garden debut in *Rigoletto* in 2002–03, and soon returned as Alfredo in *La traviata*, Macduff in *Macbeth*, and in concert as Nicias in Massenet's *Thaïs*. In 2010, he proved himself a "thrilling Adorno" (*Financial Times*) in *Simon Boccanegra*, almost "steal[ing] the show" (*Independent*) opposite Plácido Domingo. He was the soloist at the 2011 Nobel Prize Concert in Stockholm.

In 2012, Joseph was named Malta's first Cultural Ambassador, and the following year he partnered with Bank of Valletta for the creation of the BOV Joseph Calleja Fund, a foundation dedicated to helping Maltese children and families in need. Joseph regularly performs charity concerts in his native Malta before tens of thousands of people. Recent guest artists/collaborators include Dionne Warwick and Michael Bolton. He also appears as Enrico Caruso in James Gray's 2013 film, *The Immigrant*.

Recently CBS broadcast the 2013 Kennedy Center Honors program, a tribute to achievement in American culture, that included Joseph Calleja performing "Celeste Aida" for honoree Martina Arroyo. He also appears there with soprano Sondra Radvanovsky, the Army Herald Trumpets and the Naval Academy Glee Club, for the Act II finale of *Aida*. In November 2013, Joseph flew from his Chicago *Traviata* duties to perform in recital before Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg as part of the bi-annual Supreme Court Musicale, a joint presentation between the Washington Performing Arts Society and the Richard Tucker Music Foundation.

Joseph Calleja is a busy man, an operatic tenor for the people! I recommend his blog to you for its blunt and honest discussions of the problems of an opera singer on tour with the loneliness and performance pressures, etc. <http://josephcalleja.com/category/blog/>. With Jussi, in another era, you could ask a question and often get just a shy, enigmatic phrase. This tenor is definitely different: eager to hold forth intelligently at great length, all very modern! ■

A Recommended Version of Jussi's 1940 *Ballo*

by Göran Forsling

Here is Göran Forsling's fine review of the latest incarnation of the Met's 1940 broadcast of *Un ballo in maschera*. His judgment: this version is sufficiently improved over previous transcriptions, to be considered a MusicWeb International RECORDING OF THE MONTH for December 2013.

Un ballo in maschera (Verdi)

- Jussi Björling (tenor) - Riccardo, King of Sweden; Alexander Svéd (baritone) - Renato, his aide; Zinka Milanov (soprano) - Amelia, Renato's wife; Bruna Castagna (mezzo) - Ulrica, a sorceress; Stella Andrevá (soprano) - Oscar, page to the King; Arthur Kent (bass) - Silvano, a sailor in the King's service; Nicola Moscona (bass) - Tom, conspirator; Norman Cordon (bass) - Samuel, conspirator; John Carter (tenor) - The Chief Magistrate; Lodovico Oliviero (tenor) - Amelia's servant.
- Chorus and Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera/Ettore Panizza
- rec. live, Metropolitan Opera, New York, 14 December 1940

Bonus - Premiere on disc: *La bohème* - Act I, Final scene

- Jussi Björling (tenor) - Rodolfo; Licia Albanese (soprano) - Mimì; Enzo Mascherini (baritone) - Marcello; Nicola Moscona (bass) - Colline
- San Francisco Opera Orchestra/Karl Krutz
- rec. live, San Francisco Opera, 25 September 1949



Göran Forsling

IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES IPCD1033-2 [78:06 + 77:41]

Jussi Björling first sang Riccardo (Riccardo) in Swedish at the Royal Stockholm Opera on 18 April 1934, amassing *in toto* nine performances. This was the Boston version, which had been the 'official' edition everywhere since the premiere in 1859. In 1935 the Royal Opera in Copenhagen mounted a new production, where the setting and the characters were brought back to Sweden in late 18th century and Riccardo became King Gustavus III. Five years later the Metropolitan Opera launched the present version, also set in Sweden but, strangely enough, the central character was entitled Riccardo, King of Sweden. Bearing in mind that as early as 1833 Auber's opera

to a libretto by Scribe had the title *Gustave III, ou Le bal masqué*, one thinks that the Met production could have been a little more radical and exchanged 'Riccardo' for 'Gustavus'. Three syllables in both cases, the stress on the second syllable in both cases. This is no big deal. The opera is certainly based on historical facts. The murder of King Gustavus III of Sweden did take place at a masked ball in 1792. However the story is fictionalized to a great extent. There is no known love affair between the King and his murderer's wife. The murderer, Anckarström, was no close friend of the King's. It is however a fact that the then celebrated

Castagna, who also had stood in for Thorborg two days earlier as Azucena in *Il trovatore*. Admirers of Thorborg need not despair, however, since there is another broadcast of *Ballo*, from 15 January 1944, where she is surrounded by a stellar cast including Milanov, Peerce and Warren and with Bruno Walter in the pit. This is on Myto—released as recently as 9 September 2013.

The present performance has been around in various guises before but here it comes up fresh as a morning in early June. This is thanks to a loving re-creation and restoration by Richard Ciniell. The 73-year-old broadcast has been revitalized to such

from the Metropolitan for forty-three seasons and only missed two broadcasts. Cross also reminds us that this *Ballo* production was a real event, since the opera had not been seen at the Met since 1916. By the way, isn't it strange planning by Edward Johnson to have launched premieres of two Verdi operas within less than two weeks - and with several singers involved in both? On 2 December Björling, Thorborg and Svéd brought *Un ballo in maschera* before the public for the first time in 24 years; on 12 December all three were scheduled for the *Trovatore* premiere. As it turned out both Thorborg and Svéd backed out, due to indisposition, but Svéd recovered quickly and was able to sing two days later.

Hungarian Svéd already had an important career in Europe behind him before arriving in New York—the *Ballo* premiere on 2 December was his Met debut. In 1937 he had sung Renato opposite Björling at the Vienna State Opera. A year before that they had also met on the same stage, then as Amonasro and Radamès. His was a big voice—Oscar Thompson in the New York Sun compared him, not too favourably, to Titta Ruffo. He has the almost animal thrill of Ruffo but could do with more nuance. In "Alla vita che t'arride" he indulges in a lot of rubato and his basic tempo is rather laid-back. In "Eri tu" which receives the longest round of applause of the afternoon, he actually scales down to half-voice at "O dolcezze perdute." The general impression is still that of a grand but not very subtle artist. No one can deny that he sings formidably—a sure-fire way of getting ovations: the louder the singing the longer the applause. Renato's two conspirator colleagues, Tom and Samuel, are sung by two of the mainstays of the Met bass-department: Norman Cordon, who between May 1936 and May 1946 sang 552 performances in a wide variety of roles, and Nicola Moscona, who from December 1937 to Dec 1961 sang no fewer than 720 performances, the very last as Raimondo in *Lucia di Lammermoor* opposite Joan Sutherland. They are confi-



December 10, 1940 cast for Met *Ballo* (l-r) Nicola Moscona, Alexander Sved, Zinka Milanov, Dr. Herbert Graf, Edward Johnson, Ettore Panizza, Stella Andrevva, Jussi Björling, Norman Cordon

medium, Ulrica Arfvidsson, predicted the murder to the King when he visited her in disguise four years earlier.

It is interesting that the role of Ulrica in the Met production in 1940 was also allotted to a Swedish singer, the great Kerstin Thorborg, who had broken her contract with the Vienna State Opera at the German annexation of Austria in 1938 and joined the Metropolitan Opera. She sang the fortune-teller at the premiere on 2 December and had fairly good reviews. Unfortunately she had to cancel her participation in the broadcast of 14 December and was replaced by Bruna

a degree that it can compete with many studio recordings of the same vintage when it comes to dynamics, life-like string tone and transparency of orchestral fabric. The boominess of the timpani was probably not possible to tame without losing the lower frequencies of other instruments. The chorus is also recorded with great impact—and the quality of the singing *anno* 1940 is far superior to what can be heard on some later sets from the same house. A special treat, as on so many issues of Met broadcasts, is the commentary by Milton Cross, who hosted these Saturday-evening radio broadcasts



Jussi Björling as Gustav III – Metropolitan Opera 1941

dent, menacing and black-voiced.

At the other end of the voice spectrum Stella Andreva's Oscar glitters enticingly. She was born in London but studied in Sweden and made her operatic debut at the Royal Opera in Stockholm in 1932 as Gilda. In total she sang 27 roles during 2½ years, among them Juliette opposite Jussi Björling. She then returned to London and sang at Covent Garden. Her sojourn lasted three seasons and 43 performances.

Bruna Castagna, the only Italian singer in the cast—Moscona, in spite of his Italian sounding name, was Greek—was one of the truly great mezzo-sopranos of the 1930s and early 1940s. She is largely forgotten today, probably due to a lack of commercial recordings. But there are in fact numerous issues of her Met performances on labels like Myto, Archipel, Arkadia, and Walhall and they are worth seeking out. Her "Re dell'abisso" (CD1, tr.13) is masterly: what *grandezza*, what intensity and what expressivity.

I have left the loving couple until last, since here we have *grandezza* galore. Zinka Milanov, who had been on the Met roster since 1937 and continued to be so until 1966, must be counted one of the great Verdi sopranos of the 20th century. She was born in Zagreb in Croatia in 1906, the same year as Alexander Svéd. Her debut came in Ljubljana in 1927 as Leonora in *Il trovatore*. She spent the next ten years at the Zagreb Opera with guest appearances in Hamburg, Dresden and Prague, where Edward Johnson, Manager of the Metropolitan Opera, heard her and engaged her for the Met. She made her debut there, again as Leonora, on 17 December 1937, and sang 460 times at the Met, fourteen of these

opposite Jussi Björling. Here, at age 34, she is at her freshest and most radiant. She may not peer too deeply into the character of Amelia, but vocally she is superb and her hallmarks, the fearless and ringing top notes and her wonderful floated pianissimos grace her readings of the two arias, "Ecco l'orrido campo" (CD1, tr.21) and "Morrò, ma prima in grazia" (CD2, tr.5), where she is heart-rending. She also reigns in the ensembles, but even better than that is the long duet with Riccardo, "Teco io sto" (CD1, tr.22-23). Here she is both magnificent and loving—One never doubts that this is a woman deeply in love—however immoral the situation is, considering that she is a woman married to the King's best friend.

In 1955 she recorded excerpts from *Ballo* with Jan Peerce and Leonard Warren—available on Nimbus. She sings marvelously there too, though by then her timbre had changed and her sound was more elderly; yes, she was almost fifty. Jan Peerce,

for all his qualities, was rather dry-toned. Here, though, she is at her freshest and produces some of the loveliest Verdi singing of the period. This is not an opinion shared by the noted critic (and composer) Virgil Thomson of the *New York Herald Tribune*. His description of Milanov's singing at the premiere verges on libel. Stephen Hastings, in his as usual utterly penetrating analysis in the booklet, quotes Thomson. The great man seems to have been in unusually fault-finding mood. In his view the production was a write-off. I can't resist quoting the opening of his review:

"Orchestra and chorus shipshape. Costumes fair. Scenery banal and probably inexpensive. Ballet definitely amateurish. Stage direction mostly non-existent, except for the smooth moving of a large choral crowd in and out of a witch's den. Cast excellent, no doubt, in some other work. *Un ballo in maschera* itself a grand old piece."

Yes, there were one or two positive words, but he also detested the opera:

"... clearly one of a score that has great musical interest and no small dramatic power (there is even a tune or two, though nothing like such expressive ones as are in *La traviata* and *Il trovatore*) but that somehow, somewhere probably everywhere, has libretto trouble.

"The story is clear but not in the least convincing. The characters are not even straightforward Italians masquerading as Swedes. They are just plain incomprehensible. Also there is no real love interest; and it is a very difficult thing to hold any public's attention in the theater unless the mating act is actually consummated by two of the characters at some time or other during the course of the story, if possible illegally."

I will spare you his 'sawing' of Milanov, he had a few good words about the other soloists—but they were in the wrong opera—and about Jussi Björling he wrote:

"Jussi Björling, as the tenor king, was the most elegantly costumed of the cast; and he interpreted his role with dignity and some style, if [not] with passion. He has

Immortal Performances *Ballo* cover

a smooth and handsomely schooled voice which he forced only once or twice."

As a matter of fact Jussi is in marvelous shape here. Riccardo, more than perhaps any other Verdi role, needs lightness and elegance, paired with brilliance. The only latter-day tenor who has lived up to these prerequisites is Carlo Bergonzi. He was arguably the best possible tenor to replace Jussi after his contretemps with Georg Solti. (*) Bergonzi's somewhat later recording for RCA with Leontyne Price and Robert Merrill is still the recording I return to when I want to listen to *Un ballo in maschera*. In spite of Thomson's lack of understanding this is one of Verdi's most cogent masterpieces. The only excerpt from *Ballo* with Jussi that has been available on commercial recordings is "Di tu se fedele" from the Ulrica scene. He sings it splendidly here (CD1, tr.16), with the right swagger and taking that 'impossible' low D twice. Earlier than that, at the very opening he has presented his credentials very convincingly in an elegant, airy "La rivedrà nell'estasi" (CD1, tr.5). Returning to the Ulrica scene his silver tones lend an elegance to "È scherzo od è follia" (CD1, tr. 17) that surpasses even Bergonzi.

When Riccardo meets Amelia at the gallows-place, Jussi at first seems at a disadvantage in relation to Zinka Milanov,

placed more distantly from the microphone. He soon comes into his own and then he is superb: lyrical, warm and impassioned. At the opening of the final scene, "Forse la soglia attinse" (CD2, tr.10) is sung with such ardour and glow, that it is a double pity that he omits the *romanza*, "Ma se m'è forza perderti." It seems that he sang it at the premiere but after that thought he had so much to sing in this opera that it could be omitted. He is also deeply touching in his death scene.

All in all this is a very valuable addition to the catalogue of recordings of *Un ballo in maschera*. Now that its sound has been restored it is more or less comparable with studio recordings from the same period. Wait—there is yet more cause for joy. As a bonus we get the Act I finale from *La bohème*, recorded in San Francisco in 1949 with Licia Albanese as Mimì and never before issued. This is a private recording by a Björling admirer, who only wanted Björling's voice, so he didn't record "Si, mi chiamano Mimì" and the shouts from the street before the duet. Here Richard Caniell has done some cutting and pasting: inserting Mimì's aria from a broadcast in 1948 and Marcello and Colline from a Met broadcast, also from 1948. This works perfectly well under the circumstances. The sound quality is nowhere in the vicinity of the 1940 *Ballo* but we get an indispensable opportunity to hear Jussi Björling in his signature role, singing opposite Albanese, with whom he sang the role eight times.

The recording of *Un ballo in maschera* has been available in various disguises before but never, to my knowledge, in such excellent sound. A 'must-buy' for every admirer of Jussi Björling. ■

(*) This review for MusicWeb International has been lightly edited, and the sentence on Decca's 1961 *Ballo* has been slightly altered, with author Forsling's kind permission.



Book Alert: Harald Henrysson informs us that an updated, printed version of parts of his Jussi Björling *Phonography* may become available. On about 300 pages, it would include the complete list of recordings known today and an index, as well as issues of the recordings on CD (about 1300) and DVD. The price would be around \$30.00 each, plus domestic postage (\$5-\$7 each). Availability in the USA will depend on interest. If you would likely purchase this new and expanded *Phonography*, as described above, please send an email to Walter Rudolph (codyite@gmail.com). **And please let us hear from you within two weeks of receiving the 2014 Journal.**

Hear Bud Herseth on Jussi

YouTube offers a wealth of Jussi related materials. You may wish to listen to the late Bud Herseth (former principal trumpet), Chicago Symphony Orchestra Australian Radio Profile and Interview from 1997 [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YgeXE38eC4>]. He mentions Jussi Björling (as he almost always did) at 32:30-36:40, including a recording of "I Dream of Jeannie."