

Caruso vs Björling?

by Carl Friedner

Geirr Oppi's article in the previous issue of the Scandinavian *JB Sällskap's Tidning* awakens thoughts and causes objections. What's the sense of trying to decide who of the world-famous tenors, Enrico Caruso and Jussi Björling, was the better singer?

I had the good fortune to hear Jussi Björling live. Of course I have only heard Caruso in recordings, but I have met two people who did hear him live. One of them was noblewoman Giesl (von) Gieslingen, in Vienna in 1965; the other was Fred Schang, of Columbia Artists Management, who was, in his youth, Caruso's US manager, and later became Jussi's US manager. The old Viennese lady of course thought that Caruso was fantastic, and there is no reason to doubt that. Fred Schang, who heard them both many times, was used to judging voices and did not want put them in any particular order at all. He didn't think that one could compare Björling and Caruso. Caruso had a "Latin" voice, with a silky softness which is lacking in the Nordic voices, while the Nordic voices own a clarity, which the Latin voices can hardly imitate. The Latin singers who have tried to follow in Caruso's footsteps have not succeeded fully in doing that, Schang thought. Some were of course very good, like Gigli. Jussi Björling's voice had a purity which reminded him of "deep, cold Nordic waters," and his high notes had a "ping," which no singer from other lands can reproduce.

There are hardly any differing opinions that both Caruso and Björling had extremely good voices and equally splendid ability to interpret music and text. Nor can there be any doubt that their ways of singing were

different. Jussi certainly admired Caruso, but he didn't sing like Caruso: he had been educated in the late 19th century when the ideal of singing was different. Only listen to a recording of the famous tenor Arvid Ödman: he bellowed, and he was not alone in that. Caruso didn't bellow, he raised singing technique to a new level, and that is one of the reasons why he became so famous.

This is very clear from the recordings he left. One can, of course, regret that he could never make any recordings with modern technology, but after having "washed" Caruso's recordings, you still have a good picture of what he sounded like. Michele Susca, whom Oppi quotes, says that the recordings reflect only 15–20% of Caruso's voice quality. Of course that is a very subjective statement. Technology is not a barrier: one can easily compare, for example, Caruso's and Björling's voices and interpretations. Only the fact that music lovers prefer one or the other proves that that is founded on the singers' personalities.

Oppi also advances a strange theory that Jussi's voice would have been relatively weak and that Caruso's voice would have been so strong that it might not have been appropriate for microphone recordings. I don't understand that. Women often have much greater vocal volume than men, and recording still goes well. Think only of Birgit Nilsson!

So does vocal power play any role? Hardly! None of them had any difficulties in reaching across the footlights, their vocal production was a model, they understood the importance of diction in making themselves heard and they were serious artists. It is therefore a question of taste whom you



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prefer, maybe depending on what cultural sphere one comes from. In Southern Europe one sings in a more emotional way, for example, than in Northern Europe. And if you are used to that, you may prefer a "Latin" voice. We Swedes appreciate, of course, Jussi's excellent interpretations of Italian opera roles, but I think we love him most for his interpretation of Swedish songs by among others, Söderman, Peterson-Berger and Alfvén, or songs by the Finn Sibelius. Sibelius maintained that nobody interpreted his songs as well as Jussi, and Alfvén said about the same.

"And even if one were to hear them both on the same stage at the same time, and Caruso had recorded with the same technologies that Jussi did, who would the public have made the 20th century's best-loved singer? Jussi? Probably not!" So believes Geirr Oppi. I ask myself, is that all that interesting? Music is not an exact art, art becomes art through the artist's freedom to make his own interpretations. Oppi, who imagines that this would have happened today does not believe that Jussi would have "won." But if we turn everything around, if Jussi and Caruso, both in top form, had been able to perform as the "Two Tenors" Year 1918, before Pavarotti, Domingo or Carreras had sung a single note, who would have "won" then?

None of them was a racehorse, so why care? Let us instead enjoy them both!

Carl Friedner was a program producer at Sveriges Radio, the Swedish public radio company, between 1975 and 2005. He mainly made journalistic radio programs about music and musicians. Since retiring in 2005 he has been active as one of three editors of the magazine "Kammarmusik-Nytt" (Chamber Music News) and also gives talks on music in varying places, among them The Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge. Friedner produced the Swedish Radio 2-LP set with the Björling brothers in 1980.

In Carl's home Jussi Björling was very highly appreciated, especially by his mother who used to hear him at the Royal Opera in the thirties before she married and moved to a smaller town for a couple of years. The family often heard Jussi on the radio and on March 6, 1960, Jussi's (as it proved to be) last opera performance in Sweden, Il trovatore, was broadcast live and made a tremendous impression on Carl. On June 6, the family went to the open air museum called Skansen where Jussi appeared live. That almost knocked Carl out and would have a great importance for the rest of his life: He had singing lessons for some time; he sang in several choirs, among them the Stockholm University Choir. Eventually he was able to leave his job in a bank to do the job he'd wanted most of all, to work professionally with music and musicians, and extend his

experiences to a wide audience. In 1978 he made a program where Jussi's daughter Ann-Charlotte talked about her father and that program was followed two years later by a series of programs about not only Jussi but also his singing brothers and the issue of a two-LP set containing earlier previously unpublished recordings from the archives of Sveriges Radio made by brothers Olle, Jussi and Gösta from 1920–1950. His written notes for the album were scrutinized by Harald Henrysson. He later also made several shorter programs about Jussi Björling. In 2010 and 2011 Carl presented The Stockholm Boys Choir, where he earlier had been on the board, when it gave a couple of concerts with Jussi's grandson Raymond Björling as soloist in Örebro, Stockholm and Stora Tuna. ■

Translation by Harald Henrysson and Sue Flaster



You have one—I repeat: ONE wish.” “I want to hear Jussi Björling in Till Havs.”

From "Death in Heels,"
Ulf Lundkvist. Tago Publishers.