

Background noise was sometimes overwhelming (snap, crackle, pop!) and there were frequent gaps and sonic imperfections that one simply learned to endure.

With the advent of digital technology in the late eighties, Jussi's recordings began to be reissued and a new generation of admirers was born. The rest, as they say, is history. His reputation continues to grow (thanks in large part to Bluebell) and his status as one of the truly great tenors of all time is well established. As do many of his followers, I delight in this belated glory and say: well, I have pretty good taste after all!

To me, Jussi was a Messianic figure, burdened with all too human flaws but blessed with an extraordinary musical ability and a voice of unusual beauty. To appreciate him fully is a quasi-spiritual experience. He transports us through his music into a new level of existence, one of aesthetic grace and quietude. We become one with an interpreter of divine beauty.... truly a gift from God. ■

#### YouTubeNote:

The Jussi Björling Centennial Memorial Concert from the Royal Opera, Stockholm (from September 3, 2011) may be seen in its entirety in two parts: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQzuVUJknHE> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFI3ta-za7E>



Don Culp

## Don Culp's Website *A Dangerous Place on the Internet!*

by Dan Shea

This is to heartily endorse the website [diarci.com](http://diarci.com), Don Culp's gift to the memories of his favorite singers, as an enjoyable source of great moments in opera and vocalism generally. Go to this site and you'll meet a genial fellow with an interesting biography and some definite ideas of what great singing is. But fair warning: This site also can pull you in, with its hours of fascinating life stories and recordings.

When I meet an opera lover eager to share his views, I tend to expect a few arguments: Two opera lovers talking certainly have at least three opinions about almost anything. But I've found with Don Culp that his enthusiasm is well-based and charming, and helps lead to information about singers that I've admired but need to know more about.

We spoke at length early in October about his plan and methods. Don had just added Teresa Stratas to his roster of over 60 singers, from Aramondi, Battistini, Björling, Borge, Butt to Treigel, Tucker, Verrett, Vickers, Wunderlich.

Here's Don's typical method, as applied to Stratas: First comes his introduction of the singer ("...petite...intimate, warm voice... sometimes referred to as 'The baby Callas,' but...") and then a pause for a sound clip, the first from her film of *La traviata*: five minutes of "Dite alla giovine" with Louis Quilico. The scene is a marvelous illustration of the Stratas qualities his introduction has asserted.

Then Don continues with more complicated points of this singer's contradictory life (...stage fright...vulnerability...manic depression [her father's] and tuberculosis...

Royal College of Music in Toronto...1958 debut...Mimi actually communicated...), then time out for another clip: Mimi introducing herself to Rodolfo, illustrating Don's main point that she wasn't so much singing an aria as "a real person singing words that just happened to come to her mind. And you can't take your eyes off her." Then comes her 1959 Met debut (at 21) as Cherubino and a film clip from that era with her "Non so più" followed by words of Stratas's emerging career—a last-minute cover for Lucine Amara as Liù opposite Nilsson and Corelli, followed by acclaim at Covent Garden and La Scala—then a clip of her terrifying Salome and explanatory words of conductor Böhm's gratitude for her performance.

At this point we are halfway through Don's survey of the Stratas story, and his discussion covers Stratas's need for more varied repertoire: Weill, Berg as well as Lehar and Offenbach, and quotes of Andrew Porter and Stratas herself about her methods. Her

Teresa Stratas as Violetta (*Traviata*)



personal life gets some lines, as well as her films and recordings of *Show Boat*, opera, and TV film *Under The Piano*. Don's story of Teresa Stratas ends on a note of high grace: She gives a concert at George H. W. Bush's White House with comments on poverty, modern life, diversity, opera, Puccini, Weill—a full plate of ideas for the assembled leadership. Wow, what inspiration! I admit that I had not given Teresa Stratas as much admiration as I should have, and thank Don for this inspired traversal of that magnificent career.

When we spoke, Don was pleased with that addition to his website, and was preparing to take on Giovanni Martinelli (and did, in the next month). You can find a Mission Statement there explaining that he wants to offer “an introduction to a variety of singers in hopes of tempting [others] to explore further and possibly learn to love the music that I love ... . My definition of great singing, by the way, is not only producing a thrilling and unique sound, but communicating feelings and emotions. I would include in my pantheon Maria Callas, Rosa Ponselle, Frank Sinatra, Jussi Björling, Joan Baez, and Al Jolson [but not Mick Jagger or Andrea Bocelli because however dramatic or charming they may be, they are essentially performers, not artists and, more important, they lack truly great voices]. “Hey, it's my website, my preferences.”

Another section of this “Great Voices of Opera ... plus” website [the *diarci.com* refers to Don's initials, DRC] is titled “The Gods of Opera.” He states plainly that:

“The great thing about opera is that it generates such passion. I have those singers who, to me, represent not only the best examples of their art, but the best that probably ever will be. My Gods of singing are **Enrico Caruso, Feodor Chaliapin, Rosa Ponselle, Lawrence Tibbett, Jussi Björling, and Maria Callas**. All but Callas had flawless voices. Callas did not, but with her, that simply didn't matter.”

He goes on to say, half-seriously, that



he “only asks that you listen and consider. Then, of course, you will know that I am right.” I guess that most of us will agree with a great many of his choices and opinions!

In fact, let's survey what Don's website says about Jussi: The full title is *Jussi Björling—The Supreme Singing of a Shy Man*. (We have heard that before, and we like it too!) The article begins:

“So this 18 year old kid walks into a recording studio and records two songs in Swedish with piano accompaniment. If all went well he would return in a week or so to cut four sides with full orchestral accompaniment. He's a bit insecure since this is his first solo recording and his voice does not yet have the power or depth it would gain later, but his vocal beauty and an elegance of style were superior to almost any other tenor then or now.” The sound clip that's offered here is of Jussi's test recording in 1929, of “Mattinata,” and then the story continues:

“Jussi Björling wasn't an amateur. He had been singing professionally with his father and his brothers since he was eight years old. A year before making this recording he had auditioned for acceptance by the Swedish Royal Academy of Music. The maximum possible score a singer could receive for an audition was 150. Jussi's score was 150.”

The next clip offered is of Wennerberg's “Psalm IV” from the Björling boys [ca. 1920], and quickly we get to a sample of Erik Odde (“Tantis serenad,” 1931) and, contrastingly, the 1956 *Bohème* scene with Tebaldi and the 1959 Beethoven “Die Ehre Göttes,” the 1950 *Firestone Hour* Faust aria, Millöcker's “Free as a bird” aria from *Bettel-*

*student* in Jussi's stunning 1938 recording, “Cujus animam,” “Di' tu se fedele,” in the 1937 Swedish version, “La donna è mobile” from the '57 TV broadcast, the Tomb Scene—1947 *Met Roméo*, “Si, pel ciel!” with Merrill, the *Rigoletto* Quartet from Stockholm (1957), and finally “Donna non vidi mai” from Stockholm '59. Clearly a good representative sample of Jussi's recorded art, together with a generous serving of interesting photographs. Along the way Don offers many judgments that most of us would agree with, for instance:

“Enrico Caruso's widow said that of all tenors, Björling's voice reminded her most of her husband's. That was more of a compliment than an accurate assessment. Caruso had a warm, golden, sound which deepened and darkened as he aged. Björling's voice had a quality usually described as “silvery” in tone, and which remained unchanged all his life, although it did become richer as he aged.

“Björling had stage presence, but in the beginning his acting was perfunctory. His acting improved as he aged and colleagues who sang with him said that his eyes displayed an intense understanding of his character's emotions, but that simply wasn't sufficient to communicate to an audience. Björling acted with his voice. He brought passion and intensity to his singing combined with flawless musicianship and one of the most beautiful voices in history. For modern listeners, many of whom have never been to a live opera performance, the auditory experience is what matters and Björling has no equal there.”

Other comments may be a bit exaggerated, for instance a couple of the remarks toward the end of the essay:

"Bjorling lacked a commanding stage presence, but with the possible exception of Caruso, he had the finest tenor voice of the last two centuries and an even more perfect technical command of that voice than Caruso. He set the bar of musical perfection and vocal beauty so high that no one since has matched, let alone surpassed him. Where many tenors will approach a climactic high note by attacking it at full force and then maintain it to the end, Björling seemed almost to caress the note and then let both the volume and the richness and his tone swell to a thrilling climax.

"His stage fright could be near paralyzing. Preparing to record a series of duets with Robert Merrill for RCA which included the duet from *Otello*, he stayed up half the night listening to Caruso's recording. In the morning, his fear of not equalling Caruso was so strong that Merrill had to walk with him around the block more than twenty times before he could summon the courage to go into the recording studio. They recorded the aria twice but they needn't have bothered. The first take was superb and it was the one released."

If we don't agree with every one of Don's judgments, still, it's his website, as he has reminded us! I consider it ideal for those getting to know Jussi's voice and story: For the Compleat Jussicologist we already have the Henrysson *Phonography*, the Björling-Farkas biography *Jussi*, the Hastings recordings-analysis, the Forsell photography book, Jussi's own autobiography (in Swedish or translated), and many other insightful books and articles. I especially appreciate Don's final line:

For more information on Jussi Björling, I suggest you try the Jussi Bjorling-USA site: <http://www.jussibjorlingsociety.org/>.

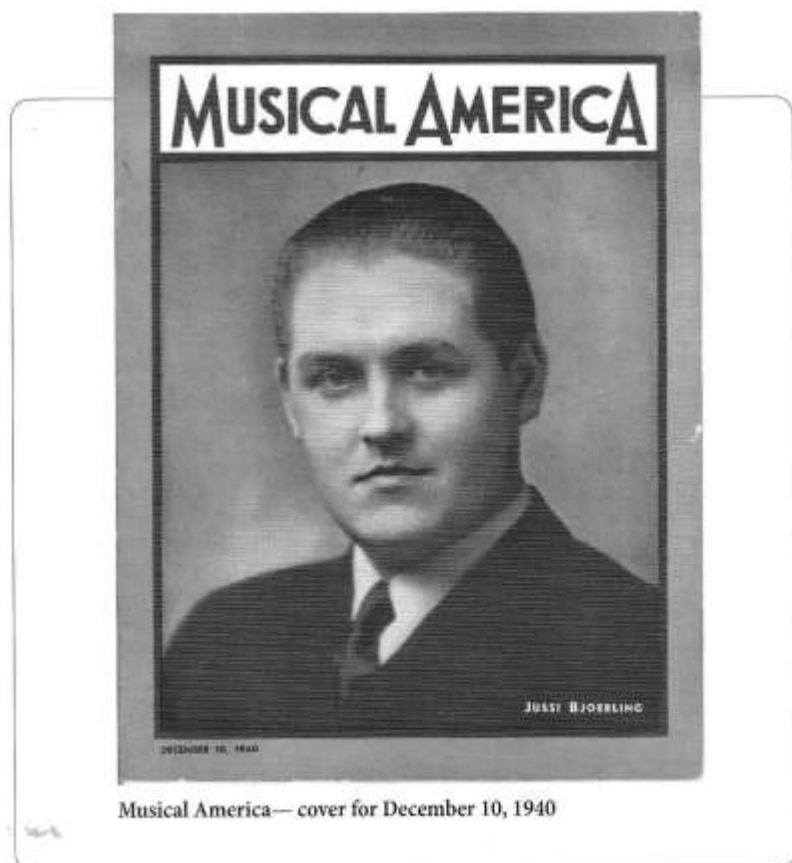
Thank you, Don Culp! We look forward to reading through your articles on Gobbi, Ponselle, Caruso, Gigli, Quartararo, Anderson, Merrill, Tucker, Caballé, and 50 others. And yes, Al Jolson too! ■

#### DOCUMENTARY DVD REVIEW

Jussi Björling: He Sang with a Tear in his Voice—a film by Torbjörn Linqvist, Kultur 4873, 77 min., subtitled

One of the responsibilities and pleasures of JBS-USA is to keep members informed about everything "Jussi." This DVD was first made available here in the USA by the Society. Admittedly, our import price was necessarily higher than the one now available via Amazon ([http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss?url=search-alias%3Dmovies-tv&field-keywords=he+sang+with+a+tear+in+his+voice+jussi+bjorling](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dmovies-tv&field-keywords=he+sang+with+a+tear+in+his+voice+jussi+bjorling)). Sales by JBS-USA helped enable the broader distribution. But those of you who snarfed it up were early witnesses to the review given in this February 2014 *Opera News* by Ira Siff.

Well-known commentator for the Saturday Metropolitan Opera Matinee broadcast, Mr. Siff acknowledges the principal documents on Jussi Björling—*Jussi* by Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas (1996), and *The Björling Sound* by Stephen Hastings (2012). That he omitted the third part of the troika, Harald Henrysson's *Phonography* must be forgiven—unfortunately now out-of-print. (see p. 16) Still Harald is a presence in the program, along with Anders, Ann-Charlotte and Lars Björling. The final sentence provides a strong summary of the full review: "But all in all, this is an endearing portrait of one of the very great singers, and each time his voice is used, goose bumps are guaranteed." *Opera News*, February 2014, p. 59.



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