

Jussi's Century: The very human voice of a pure musician

by Stephen Hastings



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In the history of Western music, the 20th century is the first in which the most important instrumentalists dedicated themselves primarily to the compositions of others, while the performance freedom granted to the great singers becomes steadily more limited due to detailed notation and the iron control of conductors. But it is also the first in which the interpreter can leave evidence of his own creativity through the media of sound recording. And since a disk is a document which is much richer in information and communicative potential than a written score, it seems right to me that the most brilliant interpreters should be part of the history of music of the 20th century.

One of those interpreters is Jussi Björling—who was described in 1982 by the experienced critic Giuseppe Pugliese, as a performer, “who had his moment—period, even—of great fame and success, supported by positive reviews. Results and evaluations, all in all, *a posteriori*, excessive, even if of short duration.” While in the same decade (1989) there are two belittling paragraphs not free of factual errors dedicated to Björling in “The tenor voice,” by Rodolfo Celletti. These writings are, in any event, in line with the historical approach favored by music critics during the 20th century: sometimes with acuity, sometimes with myopic or provincial attitudes.

Reviewing choices

Today, Jussi Björling—notwithstanding the judgment of some Italian critics—is the tenor who “sells” the most among those who arrived during the middle of the 20th century. One must bear in mind the enormous number of live recordings which have been added in the last few years to the “official” recordings, and which have significantly raised the critical stature of the interpreter. And it should be added that Pugliese’s remarks concerned perhaps the most disappointing of the complete opera recordings made by the tenor for RCA. That is in fact how the *Rigoletto* directed by Jonel Perlea in 1956 can be described: lacking theatrical atmosphere, and with a tenor who seems little disposed to give the best of himself and is sacrificed by the sound technicians—as often occurred at RCA—in the reproduc-

tion of overtones in the upper register. To have proof of this, it is enough to compare the “La donna è mobile” recorded in Rome with the more imaginative and ringing version recorded a month later in a Swedish recital (Bluebell ABCD 057), or to compare the duet recorded with the Gilda of Roberta Peters to that recorded together with Eva Prytz during the complete performance of the opera recorded in Stockholm in January of 1957 (Bluebell ABCD 044). It is here, in fact, that we hear the most complete Duke of Mantua from a Björling somewhat fallible linguistically but alive and responsive in every way, a supreme musician and surprising interpreter.

If, on the one hand, Pugliese wasn’t mistaken in expressing his reservations about the Roman recording (Naxos 8.111276-77), in any case he should have acknowledged an elite musician, capable of shaping a recitative and aria in the second act which has very few rivals in elegant timbre and smoothness of legato (which he dismisses as “pleasurable and completely superficial”); a quartet stamped with authentic tenor disdain, and a repeat, offstage, of the “donna è mobile” supported with a mezza-voce which seems almost miraculous.

But how does one recognize, through listening to recordings, the stamp of an elite musician? One means of judging (not absolute, but useful) can be the apparent “modernity” of phrasing. It is difficult that a listener of today could discount this tenor, deeming him “archaic” or “dated,” even if, in reality, some aspects of his singing are relatively unusual today. I refer

in particular to the frequent use, totally instinctive, of *portamento*. The *portamenti* of Björling, however, are of such lightness and perform their legitimate function so naturally, making the melodic line warmer and more cohesive, that often one doesn't even notice them.

Style and comparisons

In truth, the *portamenti* provoked a certain disapproval already in the postwar years when Björling was at the apex of his career (Richard Tucker tended to eliminate them, for example, in his "Celeste Aida" with Toscanini), but the Swede was resistant to similar fashions. For him, the number of *portamenti* was directly determined by the tempi of the conductor. The more slowly one went, the more need there was to reinforce connections, as we can hear, for example in the lushly relaxed readings of "Nessun dorma" and "Che gelida manina" recorded with Tor Mann in 1944-45 (Bluebell 092). Björling's ability to produce a spiritually elevated and architectonically aware sculpture of a melody is perhaps his greatest virtue; that which permits him to distinguish himself from so many "Verdian" tenors of the 20th century even when his accent lacks somewhat. Nobody, for example, has surpassed him in Manrico's "Ah si, ben mio" (Bluebell ABCD 016) or in the "Ingemisco" from the *Requiem* (Naxos 8.110792) or in the final duets of *Don Carlo* (WHRA-6021) or *Aida* (Naxos 8.111042-44).

And Jussi can compare himself head-to-head with his idol Caruso in immortal melodies such as Handel's "Ombra mai fu" (SRO 845-1), Giordano's "Amor ti vieta" (Decca 443930-2), Tosti's "L'alba separa" (Naxos 8.110792) and Massenet's "Elégie" (Bluebell ABCD 036).

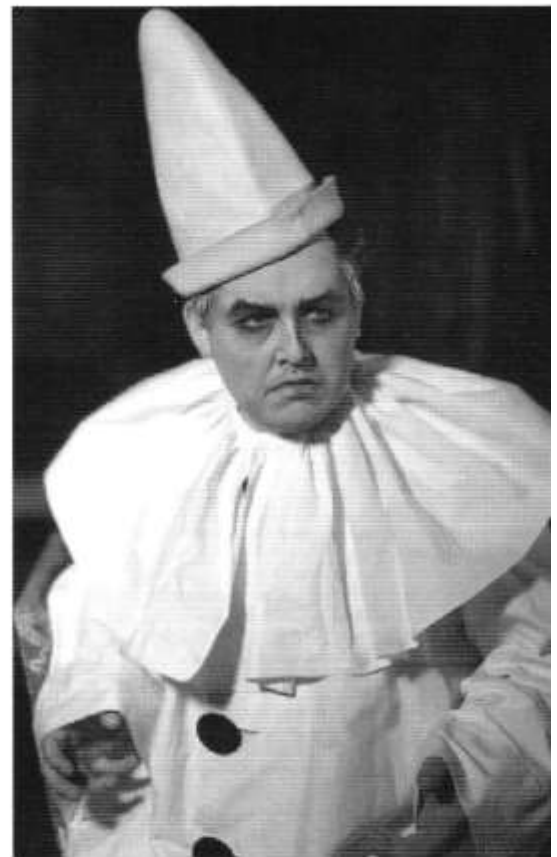
Another method of judgment is to look at how the voice inserts itself into the instrumental context. Björling's voice was without a doubt one of the most valued of the 20th century: less phenomenal in rich-

ness of overtones than those of Caruso, Gigli and Lauritz Melchior, but still well able to defend itself compared to those of Lauri Volpi and Giuseppe Di Stefano, Franco Corelli and Fritz Wunderlich, Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo, in part because what Roland Barthes defined as the "grain" of the voice was of an almost unique purity, as one can verify listening to the a capella version of the Swedish song "Hej dunkom"—with a high C—in the 1937 version issued by Bluebell (ABCD 092).

But where Björling surpassed even Caruso, Gigli and Melchior was in his ability to use his timbre to mirror the orchestral sound. Often one is dealing with very small details which add musical variety and interpretive freshness to the phrasing. One is also aware of this sensitivity with the piano—the Björling of 1939 is one of the very few voices which is not distorted after the luminous piano introduction, *piano e dolce*, to Beethoven's "Adelaide" (Naxos 8.110789)—but above all, with wind instruments. In the first decade of his adult career (1930-40) when he sang in Swedish, his mezza voce had a very effective instrumental quality which was accentuated, for example, when the melody began with the clarinet as in the "O ma femme" in the last act of *Roméo et Juliette* (Bluebell ABCD 088), or in the opening phrases of his first version of "E lucevan le stelle" (Naxos 8.110722). And in those years, the "squillo" of the high register had a truly heroic brilliance, as shown in the direct comparison with the trumpet in Radamès "Nel fiero anelito"—recorded in Vienna in 1937 (Koch Schwann 3-1454-2).

Expressive color

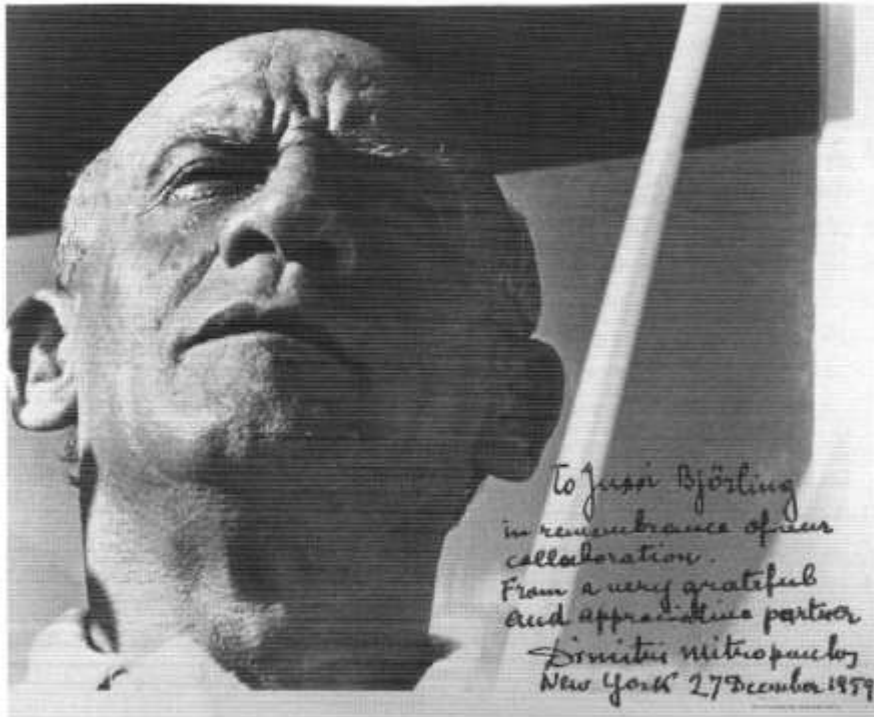
But even after the war, when he sang a large part of his repertoire in the original languages, Björling was capable of exquisite musical effects. The color of his "Io vengo a domandar" in the 1950 Met *Don Carlo*



A powerful Canio

(WHRA-6021) comes from the woodwinds which have just taken up the theme (as if the infante himself were already thinking of what he had to say to the queen). While the oboe's sustained *B* in the *Bohème* conducted by Beecham (Naxos 8.111249-50) gives him the correct color for "Ed ora come faccio?" during the first meeting with Mimì. And the bassoon which introduces the melody of "Una furtiva lagrima"—in a recital of 1957—leads him to the ideal color for the delayed entrance of an aria in which Nemorino reveals a capacity for feeling which conquers us.

In the expressive palette of Björling, there is a dominant color, which is the unmistakably Nordic melancholy which emerges in its purest form in the Sibelius songs (Bluebell ABCD 0500 but also works very well with the Southern fatalism of Turiddu (Decca 458-224-2) and with the



A powerful Canio

"Eastern" fatalism of Calaf ("Non piangere Liu" in the RCA recording 09026-62687-2).

Perhaps the tenor might not rate a spot among the great musicians of the 20th century if he were limited to that tonality of expression. More than a few times, recordings find him in a light and sparkling humor: two recordings in Swedish from 1937—the "Di' tu se fedele" of Riccardo and "La danza" of Rossini (Bluebell ABCD 092) show us a contagiously rhythmic exuberance, just as in "Nu är jag pank" from the *Beggar Student* (Naxos 8.110722) and the appearance of Des Grieux among the students in the first act of *Manon Lescaut* in the 1956 live recording with Mitropoulos (WHRA-6020). At other times we hear in the voice that half-smile which makes "Clorinda" by Orlando Morgan more gracious and ironic (WHRA-6036) and in the Shakespearean Schubert of "An Sylvia" (DVD Kultur D2424). Friendship is an extremely congenial feeling for him, as the celebrated duets from *The Pearl Fishers*

and *Don Carlo* with Robert Merrill demonstrate (Naxos 8.110788), just as are all the variations of love. One passes from the incomparable "Salut, demeure" of Faust (in the Kultur DVD) to Vladimir's aria from *Prince Igor* (RCA 5934); from the duets of *Roméo et Juliette* (more fevered those with Bidú Sayão in NY: Immortal Performances IPCD 1003-2) to "Parigi, o cara" sung entirely in mezza-voce in a Swedish *Traviata* (Bluebell ABCD 103) and to the enchanted "Soave fanciulla" in the *Bohème* conducted by Beecham. And if pure eroticism isn't his forte—one feels a more knowing and lived-in sensuality in his last Cavaradossi at the Met (House of opera CD9175)—Björling had no problem in communicating the loving degradation suffered by Des Grieux (above all with Mitropoulos) and the jealousy of Canio, which in the official recording of *Pagliacci* (EMI 5 66778 2) reveals a destructive longing for a love which was "febre e follia (fever and madness)."

Words and music

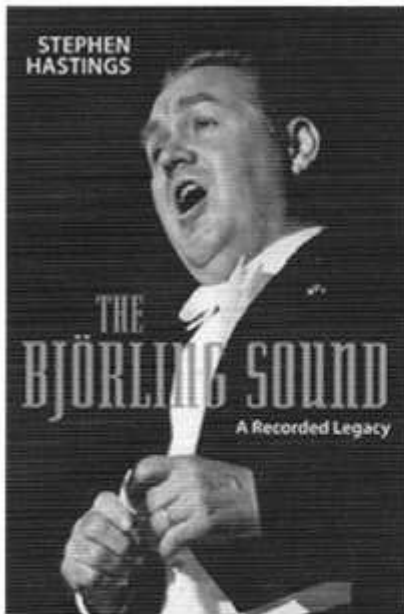
The role of Canio—especially in the last live recording (in Swedish, on Bluebell ABCD 085)—shows us a man truly capable of murder: very few times is Björling so willing to sacrifice the beauty of his sound to personify the boiling intensity of the character. An intensity which we find again in the duet from *Otello* ("Sì pel ciel") recorded with Merrill. Very few tenors have approached the sense of tragic desolation with which his Des Grieux (with Mitropoulos) turns to the gods in "O immoto ciel."

And nobody—in the history of the disk—has surpassed him in giving voice to the collective suffering in "Ah, jour de deuil" from *Roméo et Juliette*, where he displays phrasing which is truly magnificent, ending in the most striking high C which has ever issued from a human throat.

Björling is often a model in the marriage of sound and words, and even when he mispronounces, his diction is so clear (the vowels of an exemplary purity) that in the most lyrical moments the text seems projected with genuine tenderness. He is not, nonetheless, an interpreter who strikes one with his eloquence, if for that we mean the ability to make us imagine the physical character of the part he sings. And even when we see him on DVD his face is not particularly mobile or varied in expression.

On the other hand, the phrasing often acquires a rare evocative power: when he speaks to us in "Adelaide" of the "lieblichen Zauberlicht," the glow of his pure head voice has a truly magical effect. And when he recovers after the faint in *Don Carlo*—"Qual voce a me dal ciel"—we seem to hear that same heavenly voice together with him.

This spiritual dimension inhabits many aspects of Björling's art, and the naturalness with which he communicates with the transcendent is profoundly comforting both in the "Hostias" of the Verdi *Requiem*



The upcoming book

(Decca 467 119-2) and the "O holy night" of Adam (WHRA 6036). In the "Wanderers Nachtlied" of Schubert (Bluebell ABCD 050) one is struck by the Goethean calm of a man who comprehends everything (even the mysteries of death), while the gesture of forgiveness of his Riccardo in *Ballo in maschera* (Myto 981 H008) has an otherworldly grace entirely the equal of the Verdian inspiration. Even the short tenor soli in Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* acquire in his voice an unusual prominence, and "et incarnatus est" from the Credo makes tangible the presence of a divine spirit which invests man. It is the man, Björling, although troubled and sometimes disordered in his private life, who never stops finding inspiration through music. Even in the last recorded concert of August 1960, we hear a Grail song of Lohengrin ("In fernem land," WHRA-6036), which seems the noblest farewell of "one of the purest among men." ■

"*The Björling Sound, A Recorded Legacy*" by Stephen Hastings, will be published by the University of Rochester Press in May, 2012.

Jussi Björling *Phonography* revision published on the web

By Harald Henrysson

At the end of November 2011, I published an update of substantial parts of my Jussi Björling *Phonography* on the Jussi Björling Museum's web site. Four PDF files, comprised of 304 pages, can be accessed directly at http://www.borlange.se/templates/BlgPage_____65925.aspx. An introduction describes in detail the principles applied for each part.

The Chronological List of Recordings (226 pages) now, as in the book, consists of two parts: A) Studio Recordings for Record Companies (152 pp.); B) Live Recordings; Studio Recordings for Broadcasting Companies; Radio Interviews; Films (74 pp). Nine recordings found since the book was published in 1993 have been added to the latter part.

The numbering principle remains the same as in the book, with recorded *items* consecutively numbered under A), and recorded *performances* numbered year by year, with individual items sub-numbered by letters, under B). The addition of recordings made re-numbering necessary for certain years. To avoid confusion, all numbers in the web edition, changed or not, have a period between year and the number within that year (3601 becomes 36.01, etc.).

Though I have compiled updated lists of all media with Björling recordings, only media sold today are included in the present web version: CDs (over 1100 compared to about 175 in 1993) and DVDs (not yet available in 1993). The number of CDs in an issue, sleeve titles and release dates are now also available for issues in the list of recordings.

The separate lists of CDs (48 pp.) and DVDs (2 pp.) offer further information about the issues (alternative numbers, series titles, first issue of a compilation, purposes of special issues, names of some authors of notes and engineers, etc.) besides the issue reference numbers.

The index (28 pages) is similar to the composer index in the printed *Phonography*, with an addition: an appendix lists music known to have been performed by Jussi Björling in public, but never recorded.

Ulf Sahlin, S2 Communications AB, Uppsala, Sweden, was responsible for the IT part of the project. A great deal of work has been needed to develop a well-functioning system which could encompass the many formats and types of information now viewable in the PDF files. We originally began this project intending to publish an on-line database including not only all recording information, but also the complete chronology of Jussi's performances (now available in the book *Jussi: sången, människan, bilderna*, edited by Jacob Forsell) and possibly more information like program details, pictures, etc. This will, however, still need much development. ■