

JUSSI BJÖRLING SOCIETY

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Of the great voices of the past century, which does the public most want to hear?

John Steane finds out (reprinted, in part, from *Gramophone* magazine, February, 2009)

More or less everything, it seems, is now “historical” if it dates back beyond the day before yesterday. At least it won’t be long before 100 years of recording will be seen as falling under that heading. A hundred years, among other things, of singing voices. And if the recent lists are any indication, whom from out of that century of singers does the general public most want to hear? The name that leads all the rest, by some distance, is Jussi Björling. The edition on Naxos reaches its seventh volume, a collection of songs is published on one label and arias on another, and from EMI comes the grand tribute of a five-CD album covering a period of 30 years.

Most specialized is the Naxos disc, presented as “Swedish National Romantic Songs,” recorded between 1929 and 1953. The rarest of the “DB” series (DB5787) is there. “Skogen sover,” mag-

ically delicate, contrasting with the sturdy deep-voiced “Morgan.” Most listeners will probably be content with the selection included in the EMI album. That overlaps very little with Testament’s collection of songs and Nimbus’s of arias and duets with Robert Merrill. The duets are the well known five from their best-selling 1951 album with solos by both singers aptly interspersed. The transfers are fine, as indeed are they all, with Naxos the brightest (comfortably so, I found, for a few tracks at a time; thereafter a little wearying). Most interesting is probably the Testament issue, with some test pressings new to CD and a major portion given over to the elusive RCA song album of 1952. These are particularly faithful recordings of Björling’s voice as I remember it in London concerts around that time—it is not easy to describe what one perceived as layers of sound (overtones or wear?)

around the main core of the voice, and here they are, clearly to be heard. Much of the singing, it must be added, is masterly. Brahms’s “Die Mainacht” and Grieg’s “En svane” are fine examples.

The EMI album has something of everything and, in its last disc, generous excerpts form three of the complete operas Björling recorded on LP. The soprano is Victoria de los Angeles in each of these, a distinguished Nedda, an adorable Mimi and a deeply moving Butterfly. She too has an EMI album devoted to her, this time running to seven discs, again ranging widely in its coverage of opera and song, the hoped-for classics with a sufficient mingling of the less expected. ■