

Jussi Björling in America

by Walter Rudolph

From the Ft. Lauderdale News on March 30, 1958

The subject: Jussi Björling, the celebrated Swedish tenor who knocked 'em cold a week ago. The man is a phenomenon. His voice is perfection. His control is flawless, his power is ample, his intonation is unbelievable and the quality of his voice is unadulterated beauty. We consider the opportunity of having heard him one of the cultural highlights of our life.

Today, over 50 years after that quote from a Florida newspaper, we are gathered in the city of Jussi's operatic debut, celebrating his 100th anniversary. And we are here to confirm every word of that commentary.

Claudia Cassidy was music critic for the Chicago Tribune when she wrote these next words, which she read in memory of Jussi Björling. From the *Chicago Tribune*, September 12, 1960:

Björling's Death Takes Away the Great Tenor of Our Time.

When William Kapell was killed in a plane crash, the involuntary protests from countless throats was "Oh, no, not Kapell." So too, for Guido Cantelli and Dinu Lipatti, who were also one of a kind, and so now for Jussi Björling, though the great Swedish tenor at 49 had had a longer time in the sun.

When I say 'great,' I'm not using the term idly, or in that rapturous vocabulary that so defines all current celebrity, just as it makes every woman lovely who does not actually stop a clock by pink shaded candlelight. A great artist is not just the opposite of a lesser performer, though he is all of that.

He also is one whose qualities as an artist expand in space. That is why he captures and holds allegiance. He sets those who listen, free. Björling was such an artist. His voice was of such soaring beauty that wherever he sang he was unique.

Chicago was twice fortunate in that he joined our resident opera as early as 1937, singing the Duke to Lawrence Tibbett's Rigoletto. And he was a star of the Lyric for four of its six seasons. Illness kept him away last season. But he was singing gloriously, or so the word came, when earlier this year he recorded Verdi's Requiem with Fritz Reiner and the Vienna Philharmonic. This should be a testament, for Björling recorded magnificently. The focus of his voice was such that the microphone rejoiced in its pure, vaulting splendor.

Yet for all the glory of his finest opera performances, and his treasured recordings, nothing quite matched a Björling recital. He would walk out, a bland, sunny little man with a row of decorations on his breast, and he would hold you spellbound. To call him a Swedish nightingale with a supercharger, was to try to define the trajectory his singing carved in space. His repertory was inclusive. He could sing the classic songs, the dreamy Nordic songs, the arias that set the house shouting. A kind of Nordic veil hung over his voice, not dimming it, but giving it translucence. A kind of knightly courtesy touched his presence. So extraordinary was his voice that as Lucrezia Bori could happily sing both Manons, Björling could as serenely sing both Des Grieux. Has any other tenor since Caruso been as much at home in Massenet's fragile "Le rêve," as in Puccini's passionate "Donna non vidi mai"? When it came to pure, soaring, ecstatic song, we

had one matchless tenor, Björling. Who else? [Recorded for Walter Rudolph/KBYU-FM, 1980]

Early days

Every historical period is unique in its detail. Jussi's career was defined, at least in part, by WWII. For many artists, this became a time of emigration to America. It changed the complexion and balance of artistic world power. Recorded sound was becoming a significant new industry. In the realm of what we now call media, there was radio, and later, some television. Newspapers were a different commodity in those days, providing observations of considerable insight. The Metropolitan Opera was appealing to an increased audience and demographic. And solo recitals were the norm across America, reaching great heights of success through the Community Concert campaigns.

When Jussi opened the Metropolitan Opera season in 1940, the house was full (including standing room) and ticket sales set a new record. [Musical America, Dec. 10, 1940, p. 2] America was still a year from entering WWII, and Jussi had arrived in America three years earlier at the age of 26. Of him, we read early reviews like this one. Notice how much more focus there is on the actual voice, compared to most reviews today. This one is from the New York World Telegram on January 5, 1938.

Mr. Bjoerling's voice not only has substance, sonority and compass to recommend it, but is the absolutely unspoiled voice of a young man. His breath support is truly magnificent, and he can command a flawless

legato of prodigiously long sweep, and spin a tone from an imposing fortissimo to a vanishing pianissimo. He possesses an extraordinarily even scale, his attack is remarkably pure, his mezza-voce exquisite. . . . and, Mr. Bjoerling, unlike most tenors, was unembarrassed in the discreet use of the lower part of his extensive range.

Jussi Björling speaks:

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm delighted Mr. Cross to have the opportunity to send you a greeting from Stockholm, and I'm looking forward to the end of November, then I will come to America. As a little boy I have been in United States and I'm very glad to come back again. And I hope you will be satisfied with me and my song. [Jussi Björling Live, West Hill Radio Archives WHRA 6036, CD4, track 1]

Words recorded for American broadcast by the 26-year-old tenor on October 3rd, 1937. I detect an enthusiasm in his voice that suggests his excitement not only of “coming” to America, but maybe more precisely of “returning” to America.

Back to the USA

How much did he remember the tour years of 1919–1921 when the three brothers had toured the States with their father as the Björling Male Quartet? Knowing the language may have contributed, and good memories may have provided additional incentive for his return.

Among the songs and arias performed on his second American broadcast—*The General Motors Concert* on December 5th, 1937, was “O paradiso” from Meyerbeer’s *Lafricana*. [Jussi Björling Live, West Hill Radio Archives WHRA 6036, CD4, track 5]

In 1939, Provo, Utah was a small university town of only 18,000 people. Jussi had just completed his trans-Atlantic voyage to New York. Almost immediately, he flew to Provo where he gave his first

American performance of the 1939–40 season. The student newspaper’s introduction to the already Celebrated Swedish Tenor is one to cherish, with a smile. From November 17th, it reads:

Jussi Bjoerling is 5 feet 8 inches in height and as strong as an ox. He can perform all the parlor trick tests of strength with ease. He is capable of making people who shake his hand too effusively wish they had not . . . His beautiful, free-flowing voice, and the ease with which he sings the high notes, command and hold the attention of any audience. He dresses in excellent taste with rather quiet colors.

At the age of 28, Mr. Bjoerling has affable personality. He is full of fun if he desires to be, yet when it is necessary to be serious or positive, he abandons his fun. Although he is not so temperamental as most artists, he is very nervous just before a concert. He is likely to throw anything at hand at any person who enters the dressing room at such a time. After a concert he is affable and friendly again. [The Y News, Brigham Young University, Friday, November 17, 1939, p. 2]

Consider for a moment, the opened-armed reception the young tenor from Sweden had already received in America: enthusiastic national notices for his broadcast debut, followed by recital tours, more broadcasts and his Metropolitan Opera debut, November 24, 1938.

In 1940, *Etude* magazine published an article with the title, “Good Singing is Natural,” by Jussi Björling. Even at the age of 29 years, his technique and musical persona was of sufficient astonishment to the American public that his methodology was not only sought, but also effectively conveyed in his commentary. Here’s an excerpt:

One of the most important lessons the young singer must learn has no direct bearing on vocal problems. He must realize that



February 27, 1954, Miami: with Astrid Varnay in *Trovatore*

he is first of all a musician, and secondly, a singer. He must believe that the best technical singing is valuable only insofar as it serves music.

There is a possibly natural tendency among young students to look longingly at the “fireworks” of vocal style—the trills, the runs, the long held high C’s. Where these accomplishments follow the normal lines of vocal technique they are, of course, necessary. But the moment they open the door upon conscious showing off, they become harmful. Technical display for its own sake is well named fireworks; it may be brilliant and showy, perhaps—but it is also artificial, ephemeral, musically meaningless.

The wise student early realizes that his vocal equipment is but an instrument upon which music may be performed – and the music is always more important than the instrument!

We owe a vote of thanks to the keen eyes of a California Jussiphile—who found some recorded glass discs at a flea market—and to Seth Winner who restored the content of those discs. The discovered

repertoire dates from the same year as Jussi's "Good Singing is Natural" article. Those glass discs contain the Ford Sunday Evening Hour broadcast of December 8th, 1940, including "Funiculi, funicula" (Luigi Denza), which Jussi sang only once, conducted by Eugene Ormandy. [Unpublished]

That Jussi's influence and example has sustained itself over the years is amply proven by the dedicatory comments of one of America's most noted professors of voice, the late Richard Miller of the Oberlin Conservatory. Jussi's name shows up throughout his several books, but in *Training Tenor Voices* (1993), we find these words:

This book is dedicated to the memory of Jussi Bjoerling, perhaps the greatest tenor technician of the century, whose vocal proficiency, artistry, and professional objectivity serve as inspiration and goal to all tenors. [Training Tenor Voices, p. xi]

Dr. Miller analyzes Jussi's voice in terms of frequency and intensity, resulting in this more scientifically based comment:

Bjoerling's voice is admirable in the cleanliness of its distribution of acoustic strength; that is to say, there is almost no indication of undesirable nonharmonic energy between the harmonic multiples of the fundamental frequency. In addition, the bandwidth terminates at about 3200 Hz, with little acoustic energy located above. Bjoerling's remarkable ability in combining lyricism and energy to produce beautiful vocal sound is apparent. [Training Tenor Voices, p. 146]

Great partnerships

Any examination of the Björling career in the United States rather quickly reveals his connection with America's legacy of outstanding baritones. If we limit the group to just Lawrence Tibbett, Robert Weede, Leonard Warren, Robert Merrill and

Cornell MacNeil, we learn that he was the Duke to each baritone's Rigoletto.

These were pungent days of intoxicating vocal articulation. Jussi recorded commercially with both Warren and Merrill, leaving a legacy of recorded sound never-to-be-forgotten. Since Jussi and Leonard Warren were born the same year, debuted at the Met the same season, and passed away within months of each other, let us remember both for the most impressive recorded ending to act III, *Aida*, from what is still recognized as *the* benchmark for all recordings of that opera. [RCA CD 6652-2-RG, CD2, tracks 26, 27]

In the world of sports, whenever there is one outstanding star on the team, it is the norm to expect the remainder of the team to be inspired to greater achievement. And thus it was whenever Jussi was on-stage. Colleagues regularly acknowledged that they sang better when they sang with Jussi.

Off the opera stage, Jussi continued his radio appearances; even a few on television. His repertoire favored the American public. Surely he learned songs and ballads, plus translations and new arrangements that he would have never prepared in Sweden or other European musical capitals. For example, *The Voice of Firestone* broadcast on January 21st, 1946, included Jussi with the young Eleanor Steber, singing the "Sweethearts" duet from Sigmund Romberg's Broadway hit, *Maytime*. [*Jussi Björling Live*, West Hill Radio Archives WHRA 6036, *Will You Remember*, CD1, track 12]

When the Jussi Björling Society-USA gathered in St. Peter, Minnesota last June to remember his 100th anniversary, Andrew Farkas pronounced a keynote address of thoughtful scholarship, insight, and affection. Among other things, he determined those roles for which Jussi still holds "title"—Faust, Rodolfo, Manrico, Des Grieux and Roméo. The February 2, 1947 radio transmission of *Roméo et Juliette* qualifies as one of the Met's legendary and



The Stars at Night

singularly spectacular broadcasts. It was the week of Jussi's 36th birthday. It wasn't just Jussi's performance, but an occasion for Bidú Sayão as Juliette, and the entire company. One of most memorable moments in that broadcast belongs to Roméo/Jussi, following the death of Mercutio and Tybalt, when he is banished from Verona. [Sony 88697 80465-2, CD2, track 8]

Into the '50s

Now we enter his final decade—the 1950s—and the arrival of Rudolf Bing as the new general director of the Metropolitan Opera. Jussi had just added the role of Des Grieux in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. Then Bing presented him in the title role of Verdi's *Don Carlo*. All of Jussi's commercial opera recordings come from this decade. And beginning it all in 1950 was the duet album Jussi recorded with Robert Merrill.

On March 12, 1951, he did a *Bell Telephone Hour* broadcast with St. Patrick's Day in mind, singing, once again for the only time, "The Rose of Tralee," by Charles W. Glover. [*Jussi Björling LIVE*, CD4, track 15]

The complete recording of *Il trovatore* came in 1952 followed by *Cavalleria rusticana & I pagliacci* in 1953; *Manon Lescaut*

in 1954; *Aida* in 1955, and both *La bohème* and *Rigoletto* in 1956. Coupled with Carnegie Hall (and other) recitals, continued broadcasts and opera performances, principally at the Met, Chicago and San Francisco, Jussi's combined contributions qualify for Mark Twain's comment: *It was almost too much for the money.*

The concluding sentence in the New York Times review of his September 24, 1955 Carnegie Hall recital was:

Mr. Bjoerling was welcomed back to the New York musical scene with cheers that reached almost football stadium proportions.

And as gloriously productive as the 1950's were, hindsight makes us resistant to that one element pointing relentlessly to his approaching death at the end of the decade. Nor can we forget the complications of just *living-a-life*. Jussi's young family, and his wife, Anna-Lisa were his anchor. In turn, they needed his contribution to their family life. The superstar life and all of the accompanying expectations of being the world's greatest tenor was taking its yet-unknown toll.

More great achievements

There were four essential facets in Jussi's American career: (1) operatic performances, (2) recitals and concerts, (3) radio and television broadcasts, and (4) studio recordings.

1957 revealed the complex and ultimately negative negotiations between Rudolf Bing and Jussi Björling—the result being that he did not sign a Met contract for 1958. And he was delivering Met performances for the ages at the same time he was clashing with Bing.

For example, February 27, 1957 brought Renata Tebaldi, Leonard Warren and Jussi together for Puccini's *Tosca*. Jussi already held the record for number of curtain calls, shared with Zinka Milanov—the number being 25. But that night, he and

Tebaldi set a new record at 28! Later that year came his 2nd *Cavalleria* and the *Tosca* recording in Rome. [Jussi, Anna-Lisa Björling/ Farkas, p. 291]

Then came a Met revival of *Don Carlo*, and the debut of the young Irene Dalis as Princess Eboli. In Jussi's biography she meets him, saying: *"It is a great honor to meet you and a greater honor to be onstage with you!"* Jussi became her strongest supporter, sensing her debut apprehensions. When she arrived at a rehearsal, partially hoarse from her nerves, Jussi called his personal throat doctor, who resolved her problem. Then, in her words:

The big night came. At the old Met the male singers' dressing rooms were at stage right, and the ladies' on stage left; so it was a long walk and chore to greet a colleague. But there was a knock at my door, and it was Jussi Björling himself. It is a moment I will never forget, for this great man, this legend among performing artists said, "I want you to know that it will be an honor for me to be onstage with you tonight." He taught me that night just how genuinely humble a great artist is . . . [Jussi, Anna-Lisa Björling/ Farkas, p. 292]

Following an American recital in which Jussi had sung a group of songs by Jan Sibelius, the late Karl Hekler, suddenly realized that Sibelius was still living:

Visiting backstage after the performance, I (Karl) asked Jussi Björling if Sibelius had heard him sing his songs. When Jussi answered "Yes," I followed, "He must have really felt honored." And Jussi, with a bit of an edge in his voice said, "No, it was I who was honored." [Karl Hekler, personal anecdote related to Walter Rudolph]

December 8th, 1957 was the Sibelius memorial concert given by the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall. Sibelius and Björling had been kindred spirits, and for that occasion, Jussi sang five Sibelius

songs, including "Flickan kom ifrån sin älsklings möte." [Bluebell ABCD 050 Track 19]

Besides the death of Sibelius, his brother, Gösta, and Beniamino Gigli were also casualties of 1957—all additional distress for Jussi.

In 1958, New York had only one Björling performance—his Carnegie Hall recital on March 2nd. The exact same week, Maria Callas was singing *Tosca* at the Met with Richard Tucker and George London. Samuel Barber's *Vanessa* was in its world premiere performances with Eleanor Steber, Nicolai Gedda, Rosalind Elias and Giorgio Tozzi, while Verdi's *Otello* was represented by no less than Victoria de los Angeles, Mario del Monaco and Leonard Warren. Dimitri Mitropoulos was conducting the New York Philharmonic, Jennie Tourel had a Town Hall recital while Rudolf Firkusny was at Carnegie Hall; and Zino Francescatti and Rudolf Serkin both had solo recitals at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Any performance Jussi gave required an exactness, a consistency, a level of perfection that he could not allow for anything to fall below the world's expectation. And whose expectation was greater—the world's, or Jussi's?

The next day (March 3rd), the *New York Times* included these words:

Mr. Bjoerling's voice seemed to have gained in power and intensity since last heard. The adjective "magnificent" should be used sparingly, but in this case it seemed justified. His singing also . . . has added new solidity in the lower register. In Schubert's "Die Allmacht," the phrase beginning "Du hörst sie im brausenden Sturm" had an almost baritonal solidity. [Jussi Björling at Carnegie Hall, BMG 60520-2-RG, track 6]

In 1959, he recorded *Turandot* and *Butterfly*, and his Met performances included *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Tosca* and *Faust*.

Musical America said:

No victorious Caesar returning to Rome could have produced a greater ovation than that which greeted Jussi Bjoerling when he made his entrance as Turiddu in "Cavalleria Rusticana." The opera came to a standstill, and the audience gave forth an explosive bravo that even now continues to linger as a reminder of a performance which was transcendent and electrifying. [Richard Lewis, Musical America, December 1st, 1959]

A few weeks later the same publication said this of his *Tosca*:

This Cavaradossi's singing was sheer delight, his acting truly convincing, while his rousing cry "Vittoria! Vittoria!" nearly started a peaceful Risorgimento in the gallery. [Bodo Igesz, Musical America, January 1st, 1960]

This is documented in the existing in-house recording of the Met's *Tosca* from November 21st, 1959.

June 1960 took him to Vienna to record the Verdi *Requiem*. It would be his last commercial recording. The late Giorgio Tozzi shares this recollection:

I remember on the occasion of our recording the Verdi Requiem, which was conducted by the immortal Fritz Reiner, with the soprano Leontyne Price and the mezzo-soprano Rosalind Elias and myself. This recording took place in Vienna, and the day that Jussi was to record the "Ingemisco," he was very nervous. And I asked him why he was nervous? After all he had sung it so many times.

He said, "Well, you know, this orchestra here is comprised of the finest musicians in Vienna. And if I don't sing well today, it'll be all over Vienna by tonight."

So you see he was very conscious and very aware of the responsibility of his position. Well, needless to say he had nothing to

worry about. He sang magnificently. And the evidence of the truth of that statement can readily be had by just listening to the recording. [Recorded for Walter Rudolph/KBYU-FM, 1980]

As Mozart's *Requiem* was to his death, the Verdi *Requiem* was to Jussi's [Decca 289 467 119-2, CD1, track 8].

In American literature, there is a 19th century epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow entitled "The Song of Hiawatha." It is a Native American story about the legendary Indian chief of that name.

Hiawatha's closest and most trusted friend is a musician and singer named Chibiabos. I will read to you of Chibiabos. Each time you hear his name, think instead Jussi Björling.

VI Hiawatha's Friends [excerpts]

*Most beloved by Hiawatha
Was the gentle Chibiabos,
He the best of all musicians,
He the sweetest of all singers.
When he sang, the village listened;
All the warriors gathered round him,
All the women came to hear him;
Now he stirred their souls to passion,
Now he melted them to pity.*

*All the many sounds of nature
Borrowed sweetness from his singing;
All the hearts of men were softened
By the pathos of his music;
For he sang of peace and freedom,
Sang of beauty, love, and longing;
Sang of death, and life undying
In the Islands of the Blessed,
In the kingdom of Ponemah,
In the land of the hereafter.*

*Very dear to Hiawatha —
Was the gentle Chibiabos,
He the best of all musicians,
He the sweetest of all singers;
For his gentleness he loved him,
And the magic of his singing.*

History is an exacting teacher. What's done is done—it cannot be changed. Books are full of the what-if's of this world. And yet we too seldom reflect on the occasions when knowledge, experience, artistry and talent, plus that fleeting element sometimes called "luck," produced results of such perfection that we can only look back and say, "It is enough!"

Yes, "to you, Jussi," as you expressed your hope to us in America in 1937; we have been "satisfied with you and your song." Surely you are with us on this great occasion. You left us far too soon. But it would not have mattered when you left — it would always have been too soon

*For you remain the sweetest of all singers.
And for your gentleness we love you,
And the magic of your singing.*

Note: This paper was presented on September 3, 2011 in Stockholm, Sweden at the Centennial Jussi Björling Conference. It included recorded audio interviews and musical excerpts. While these recordings cannot be heard as you read the paper, each of these recordings is identified, and the interview segments have been transcribed.