

# A Centennial Tribute to Jussi Björling

## Part I: New York

by Allan Buchalter

On October 27, 2011—the coldest evening to date of the season in NYC—we were warmed physically and spiritually at the Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church by “A Centennial Tribute to Jussi Björling” concert and lecture. Mats Carlsson, tenor, first winner of the Scandinavian Jussi Bjorling Society Prize, Love Derwinger, pianist (also the regular accompanist of Barbara Hendricks), and Bertil Bengtsson, Scandinavian Jussi Bjorling Society co-founder, came from Sweden to perform in this series of seven concerts across the United States.

The church, which is quite beautiful inside, is not a stranger to hosting wonderful performers. In fact, as we learned from Bertil, Jussi performed there twice, first as a youngster, as part of the Björling Male Quartet, on November 20, 1919. This was Jussi’s debut in the United States. Then on February 2, 1947, the day after appearing at the Met in the historic *Roméo et Juliette* broadcast, Jussi returned to this church to join in a memorial service for Prince Gustaf Adolf (as Bertil pointed out). Prince Gustaf was killed, together with soprano Grace Moore, in a plane crash on January 26, 1947.

### Difficult arrangements

The only negative comment that I would make, a concern that was shared by others that I spoke with during the intermission, was that the acoustics were much less than ideal. There was, to me, anyway, an unpleasant reverberation. Unfortunately the grand piano was played from the right rear of the balcony, whereas Mats sang

from the left front of the balcony. Mats had to stand at the front of the balcony because had he stood near the piano, at the rear of the balcony, the people sitting on the main floor would not have been able to see him unless they turned completely around in their non-moveable seats.

The program was a Jussi-like mix of Scandinavian songs and classic operatic arias. Especially notable was Mats’s heartfelt rendition of “Tonerna” as well as his rousing majestic singing of “Land du välsignade.”

After singing the beautiful “Recondita armonia,” we were treated to a nicely nuanced “Una furtiva lagrima,” which began in a melancholy *piano* but opened up full voice at climactic moments, as in the words “M’ama” from the phrase “M’ama! Sì, m’ama, lo vedo.” After “Cielo e mar,” from Mats’s favorite opera, *La Gioconda*, the program closed with a charming rendition of the ever popular, aria in 3/8, “La donna é mobile.”

### A variety of voices

The real surprise of the evening, however, was provided by the wonderfully virtuosic playing of two piano works by Love Derwinger. Before intermission he played Liszt’s Petrarch Sonnet 104 and after intermission, Ballad #4 in F minor by Chopin.

Bertil’s lectures alternated with the concert numbers, and offered both familiar and unfamiliar material, depending upon one’s knowledge about things Jussian. His presentations were insightful and



Interior of Gustavus Adolphus Church



From the left: Beau Kaplan, Bertil Bengtsson, Monica Valley, Allan Buchalter, Kendall Svengalis, Paul Galbraith

rewarding. For example, I mentioned at the beginning of this article about the church and Jussi’s performing there. In conclusion, I also really enjoyed again meeting the members of JBS-USA whom I first met at the conference in St. Peter, MN this past June, and meeting other members who did not attend the June conference and whom I had never met before. ■