

# Jussi Björling's Vocal Training

by Michael Mayer



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The process of training to be a singer, especially an opera singer, is not very well understood by the general public. It is really a combination of learning to play music, as for other instruments, and training the body like an athlete to be the instrument. The musical part is pretty obvious. The singer is going to be expected to perform music at the highest level. The athletic part is less obvious: less obvious because if done well it is not noticeable to the audience. The reason it is necessary to develop the physical coordination of the body to such a degree is because of the very nature of the act of singing. The body is the musical instrument. Compared to every other instrument the singer is unique in that he or she is responsible for not only playing their instrument, but also building it.

Before we start to look specifically at the training that Jussi went through to develop into perhaps the greatest all-around singer in history, I would like to introduce

myself and how I come to present this.

I am a researcher and instructor of the voice, as well as a singer. My main professional focus is researching and understanding vocal function. I feel that Jussi Björling is the best example of natural, healthy vocal function. And because of that he has been a major focus of my research.

The request for this article was made after a discussion on the JB Yahoo Group. A popular opinion came up that I have heard in other places before—Jussi was a natural singer with a God-given talent. Sometimes this opinion goes on to say that “he didn’t know what he was doing, he just sang.” It sure does seem like that when we watch and listen. It is such a natural act that we have a hard time identifying any technique as we can with many other singers. I like to point out that this natural behavior is the technique. When I realized this distinction I immediately shifted my focus from “technique” to “function”.

The older generations understood this too, even if they didn’t use the term “function”. When we read the little we have of Jussi talking about how to sing, that word, “natural,” comes up repeatedly. This was ingrained in him—and his brothers—by his father, from the time he was a small boy.

## Jussi's First Lessons

His Father, David, had very strong opinions about how one should use the voice. And he insisted that the boys learn the correct way to do things. Luckily his assertions were well-founded. He developed some on his own, as any good teacher

does. But his concepts were also based on what he learned during his studies at the Metropolitan Opera School and the Conservatory of Vienna.

David Björling was also a great admirer of Caruso. He used him as an example repeatedly. When in New York at the Met Opera School he had the opportunity to observe the great tenor, and according to family lore even studied with him. Undoubtedly he used what he learned in his own singing and in what he taught his boys. David wrote a little pamphlet (available from the Museum) presenting his views on the teaching of the voice as well as the upbringing of children. In it he discusses the importance of a good vocal instructor and the health of the respiratory system.

Next he emphasizes the importance of good breath control. He compares it to the violinist’s bowing and describes how to breathe, inhaling by raising the chest and “imagine that you extend it on all sides in order to give the lungs plenty of room to receive the air that is used in producing the tone.” He describes how to keep the lower part of the abdomen drawn in. He also emphasizes the importance of not dropping the chest when exhaling or singing. “Train yourself to keep the chest high and the back straight.” We certainly can observe this in JB’s singing from the videos.

In the section titled “Placing the Tone”, David instructs to “Open the mouth as in laughing. It is not enough to open the mouth, but the cavity of the throat as well, in order to produce a rich and beautiful tone.” There is a warning against children singing *pianissimo* because that contracts the throat and affects the voice. Nor must they sing too loud so that it sounds like screaming, but let them produce a rich and powerful tone with open throat cavity and chest high and deep breathing, and you will soon obtain results.”

David also explains a relatively rare aspect of opening the throat. “By opening the throat you also open the canals of the

nasal cavities, and the tone places itself—or the resonance in head and nasal cavities—and thereby becomes soft and beautiful. A tone taken with a contracted throat also turns out a contracted nasal tone, which is disagreeable to listen to. But an open and free tone, instead of sounding nasal, becomes true and beautiful—and it becomes easy to the singer and enjoyable to the listener.” Jussi in his own words credits this aspect of using the resonators as being most important.

### Academy Years

After David’s death Jussi was on his own for a couple years. Through some fortunate connections he auditioned for, and was accepted into, John Forsell’s class at the Royal Academy. Forsell was a highly respected baritone and teacher, famous for his *Don Giovanni*. Although Forsell became a father figure to Jussi, his brothers convinced Jussi that some of the technical aspects of Forsell’s teaching were not what was needed. Jussi stood his ground with Forsell and insisted that he must sing in the natural manner learned from his father. It would be very interesting to hear exactly what Forsell had taught him that they disapproved of! Even though the young singer stuck to his father’s lessons as far as vocal technique, the experienced teacher had much to offer. Forsell coached Jussi in all aspects of performance in preparation for his stage career.

### Young professional opera singer

Ironically it was through Forsell that Jussi was introduced to the teacher who would help him put the finishing touches on the technique he formed with his father. During the summers the Forsells would have guests at their villa on “Singers’ Island”. Jussi joined other students and family friends. It was here that Björn Forsell, John’s son and Jussi’s friend, suggested he consult Joseph Hislop for help with his

highest notes. Hislop was a friend and also a guest of the Forsells for the summers, and gave lessons to the students. He was winding down his own career at the time and was considering going into teaching.

Hislop was a Scottish tenor who had trained in Stockholm with Dr. Gillis Bratt. Bratt was a medical doctor of the voice and most famous for being Kirsten Flagstad’s teacher. Hislop had originally moved to Gothenburg to work as a photo-process engraver. In his free time he sang with a local chorus. He was “discovered” in 1910 by a professional soloing with the group, Magnus Lindström. Lindström studied with Dr. Bratt and convinced Hislop to travel to Stockholm to audition for him. In this twist of fate Hislop managed to end up as a world famous tenor often described as the *Scottish Caruso*.

The extent of Jussi’s contact with Hislop that we learn from official accounts generally leads us to believe that it was limited to a few informal lessons on Singers’ Island. But Joseph Hislop’s biography gives a little more information. It was on Singers’ Island that Hislop gave Jussi a demonstration of how to sing the high C. Jussi couldn’t replicate it at first and Hislop demanded that he just imitate him. After a short time Jussi got the C and even added a high D.

Hislop invited Jussi to study with him during the summer of 1934 at his house at Brottkärr. The following May Jussi wrote to Hislop, “I want to thank you for your great kindness to me last summer and for what I learnt from you in the difficult art of singing. It has been very useful to me and I realize more and more that it is the only right way.”

Unfortunately there aren’t any clues as to how much they worked together over the next few years. In 1936 Hislop received an appointment to teach at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. He supplemented that with a post in the opera school of the Royal Swedish Opera as well as taking on private students.

In October 1937 Hislop made his final

four appearances at the Royal Opera, where he had made his start as an opera singer. The morning after his first performance he received a note from Jussi, “You sang like a god yesterday. You delighted the ear and the eye, you were just wonderful. The papers think that you were finer 20 years ago, but I believe you are today more impressive than ever! Joseph, it was a marvellous night.” The next day Hislop received a contract from Jussi’s lawyer for lessons to prepare operatic roles for his planned American tour.

### The Finishing Touches

The teacher relationships of a professional singer often are not well-known publicly. Sometimes they are even kept secret to avoid conflict. I don’t think Hislop qualified as a *ghost teacher* to Jussi. But there isn’t much in Jussi’s memoirs to go on. A helpful source in my research was the recollections of a Swedish-American voice teacher, Allan Rogers Lindquest, who studied with Hislop in 1938–39. In an interview he told of meeting Jussi on more than one occasion and *talking shop*. These conversations were extremely helpful to understanding what Hislop was after. The basic concepts were along the same lines as what Jussi had learned from his father: complete naturalness and ease, without any interfering tension in the throat. The only missing piece was the perfect attack.

Hislop taught what he had learned from Dr. Bratt—that the vowel tone originated in the vocal cords. This principle is easily recognized theoretically. After all, the vibration of the vocal cords is what creates the sound of the voice. But because of the dangers of incorrect application, this concept is generally denounced as a “voice-wrecker”. Although the focus was on starting the vowel in the vocal cords, it was constantly stressed that the act must not be self-conscious or over-done. There must not be any violence in the attack. Breath control is critical to avoid an explo-

sive, violent start. Gentleness and sweetness were always emphasized to find "the silver thread" ring of resonance that we hear in the finest Scandinavian singers. This is why it was often referred to as the "sweet attack".

Jussi told Allan Lindquest that it took him several years to really perfect the "sweet" attack. It is very tempting to overdo it. That is what caused Birgit Nilsson to disapprove of Hislop's teaching, as she stated later in her interviews. She always thought Hislop wanted the tight closure which feels uncomfortable. It wasn't until she was on her own as a professional and faced with a performance while sick that she deeply investigated the proper way of doing it. It is reasonable to believe that the early foundation she received from Hislop, even though she felt it was wrong, was what gave her the unique quality that made her a top Wagnerian.

Hislop described things like this: "Think of your body, lungs and stomach as a triangle. When you inhale, without exaggerated support, loosen up your throat, lift up your head, relax the lower jaw, don't squeeze the vocal cords, just let the air flow. Don't press violently. Then you will form 'the silver thread,' (the ping). You could sing a high C in a different way but, without doing what I have explained to you, it will be an ugly sound."

In 1947 Hislop accepted a position as Director of the Opera School at Covent Garden and Artistic Director of Sadler's Wells Opera Company, which brought him back to the UK and London. In 1949 he was made an honorary Professor at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. Then in 1952 he was appointed Professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Jussi's relationship with Joseph Hislop continued to the end of his life. In London their meetings were limited, but they visited whenever Jussi was there. In 1951 when Anna-Lisa was preparing to sing *Roméo et Juliette* with Jussi in San Francisco, Jussi sent her to study with Hislop.

Jussi was singing a concert at Royal Albert Hall, so they were in London. She found his "useful" and "insightful" suggestions a boost to her confidence.

There are stories of Jussi calling Hislop on the phone before a London recital, singing a note and asking how it sounds. Another, told by Donald Pilley, tells of his unexpected introduction to Jussi. "In 1960, I went for a lesson. I used to lay bricks in the daytime to pay for my singing lesson in the evenings and with fear and trembling I went along to the elegant vestibule in the music room at Westbourne Terrace. I was sitting there one evening at about half past five. I heard this voice. 'Fantastic.' He was better than me and I was jealous. Out came Joseph 'Come in, Donald, there's somebody you might like to meet.' I walked in and there the great man was seated, Jussi Björling, singing 'I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair'."

Hislop tells of his last meeting with Jussi. He was visiting with Jussi in his dressing-room during a break of an orchestra rehearsal for his March 1960 *La bohème* at Covent Garden. He had noticed that Jussi's voice was occasionally losing its freedom in the highest notes. Hislop gave a couple suggestions to resolve this and on the night of the performance everything was "a flower of perfection". Unfortunately this is also the run of performances where Jussi suffered a heart attack in the wings. And six months later he was dead at home in Sweden.

### Conclusions

It is not really possible to quantify the influence of a teacher. The ideal is when a teacher gives accurate instruction that the singer adopts correctly with a successful result. The reality is not always that straight-forward. Some singers may achieve a positive result *in spite* of what they were taught. But more often unnatural instruction results in stand-stills and

confusion for the singer. We can't say how much Joseph Hislop's teaching influenced Jussi's singing. Nor can we know what it would have been like without Hislop's involvement. I'm sure he would have still been a great tenor. But as great to be considered one of the best ever? We can't know because it didn't happen that way.

Jussi stated that he could not be a teacher. It takes a special kind of person to be able to communicate how to use the voice. He did admire Joseph Hislop for his ability to communicate abstract concepts. He kept in touch with him throughout his life seeking his advice. His interpretations of arias often show great similarities to the interpretation of Hislop (Especially the cavatina from Faust: not only are they similar—no one else phrases it the way they do). Jussi even brought his wife to study with him. So although Jussi didn't publicly state much about his association with Joseph Hislop, from his actions we can draw the conclusion that Joseph Hislop had a big influence on Jussi Björling's development and career. ■

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