

David Björling, Part II

His career after studies in Vienna

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From left, Johan, Lydia and David, around 1897

David Björling's first appearance after his return to Borlänge was once more at Folkets Hus on Ascension Day, May 28, 1908. Frequent advertising had not raised much interest, and the audience was not large. Perhaps the reason for that was that a nearby amusement park opened the same day and its opening day party went on until late in the evening. David's varying program with arias, songs, folksongs and duets with baritone Arvid Kull was well received both by the audience and two reviewers.

On July 14, David sang in Stora Tuna Church again, but there is no information about the attendance. Maybe this was when Ester Elisabet Sund was seen sitting in one of the front pews, dressed in folk costume. According to family legend, David lost himself twice when he saw her, and he would soon court her. In July he also took part in the "Bellman-and patriotic festival" in Stureparken, accompanied on the lute.

In September of 1908, David gave several concerts in Dalarna, among them two in the club hall at Rommehed. The first, on September 17, was operatic in character and "the performance was in all aspects attractive and seemed to testify to a new progress in voice-management." The audience was not large, however. An interesting review was published in Borlänge Tidning of David's concert in Hedemora three days later. The reviewer regretted so little interest from the public and wrote: "It is not often that we here in town have the opportunity to hear a singer with so decidedly beautiful a timbre as what Mr. Björling showed that he owns. It is well known that real tenors are rare, but Mr. Björling should actually be counted among this species. And this is not only about the compass of the voice but also regarding his timbre which is of the real Nordic kind, bright and caressing the ears." The reviewer assumed that David wanted to become an opera singer, but here he had reservations. Those possibilities were also dependent on "the dramatic talent for the profession" and "certain signs make us fear that Mr. Björling has his weakness here."

It demonstrates David Björling's lack of respect for bureaucratic formalities that only now, on the 6th of October 1908, he registered as returned from the United States to his parents' house in Magasinsgatan in Borlänge. In 1905, his father, Lars Johan had bought a wooden house on lot #186 in the Harald block, from hotel clerk Pettersson. Magasinsgatan, also called Black Street due to its covering of coal dust, ran parallel to the railway and the larger part of it today corresponds to Jussi Björling Road.

The house was probably built at the beginning of the 19th century and moved from another location. It was damaged in a fire in 1899, but Lars Johan rebuilt it, and it was possibly he who added the second floor and put siding on the house. Whoever wants to see the actual spot where the house stood can look for the marker now near the Traffic Management Office (Trafikverket): it shows that here Lars Johan's grandson Jussi Björling was born in 1911—at that time just inside the Borlänge city limits. When Jussi was born, Lars Johan was already dead. He passed away in 1909 and the house had been inherited by his daughter Lydia.

Family and children

David Björling's courting of Ester Sund has already been mentioned. Ester was the daughter of the baker Lars Erik Sund and his wife Betty, who both lived at and ran the bakery at Rommevägen 40 in North Romme. Ester was often called Lisa, her middle name. She was born in Falun in 1882, and had moved to Stora Tuna with



A unique and unpublished family picture, taken in Örebro in 1915. Jussi is at the extreme left, in the front row. Father David behind him in a cap. Olle is in the white bonnet, and Gösta is to the right in a lap (probably Ester's).

her family when she was ten. Her father had been born there and his ancestors had lived there for 300 years. Ester was musically gifted, a choral singer and good pianist, playing at a Borlänge cinema. She was educated as a seamstress, probably in Uppsala. She had lung problems from an early age; later diagnosed as tuberculosis.

Ester's father Lars Erik at first objected to her marriage to David Björling. Maybe he considered the singing profession too risky. When Ester got pregnant, her parents yielded. Olle was born on May 2, 1909 the same day as the second (of three) postings of the banns at the local church. The wedding took place on July 19. David moved in with his in-laws in North Romme, but the little family probably mostly lived in another nearby house, in an attic room without heat. Olle is reported to have been born there, and at one time some believed that Jussi had also been born there.

David nourished plans to be hired at the Royal Opera in Stockholm. Olle said that he had moved with his father and mother to Stockholm when he was a one-year-old (thus in 1910) and that they had stayed on Djurgården. He later related that

David had an audition at the Royal Opera the same year, which, according to John Forsell (later opera manager) who was present, had "gone very well." The theater and music magazine *Thalia* reported that "the recently-discovered tenor singer" David Björling, would make his debut in *Aida* in early April of that year, but there was never to be any Stockholm opera debut for him.

In April the Royal Opera was still managed by a private entrepreneur, Albert Ranft, who took over the financial responsibility as well as all the hiring. After substantial losses he was forced out and replaced at the end of June by Royal Chamberlain Hans von Stedingk. There are rumors of a conflict between David and the new opera management due to David's unwillingness to sing the prescribed three opera debut roles. David may have kicked the opera manager in the rear in a public quarrel, according to his brother Johan. David continued his singing studies in Stockholm with Oscar Lomberg.

In February of 1911, Ester expected her next child. Since David couldn't be at home in N. Romme, she stayed with his

sister Lydia and her husband, furniture maker and tobacco dealer Reinhold Lindblad, on Magasinsgatan. On February 5th, she went into labor and Reinhold had to fetch the midwife Helena Andersson. She is reported to have said that men are always the same: "when their wives are going to give birth, they run away, and then they send flowers and a telegram." At 10 PM Ester gave birth to another boy. He was baptized Johan Jonatan on March 18, named after his father's brother, who lived in Borlänge. Eventually he would be called Jussi, a nickname given to him by his Finnish grandmother Matilda (Jussi is a nickname for the Finnish form of Johan, Juho or Juhani). In her old age, Jussi's cousin Märta still remembered how his grandmother used to call him "Jussipoika (Jussiboy)."

Those who visit Jussi's grave find that February 2 appears as his birthday. He also celebrated that date as his birthday and it appears in the church register. After the Magasinsgatan house was razed in 1965, there was a discussion in Borlänge about whether Jussi was actually born there or in N. Romme. The journalist Ingrid Thor of the Borlänge Tidning suc-

PICTURE 1:
Drawing of David
Björling from August
11, 1911 at Berns
Restaurant, from
Dagens Nyheter.
Their caption reads:
"A Swedish-American
guest singer"



PICTURE 2: A sketch of cast members at a performance of *La bohème* at the New Theater in Gothenburg on October 21, 1912. David is center and at right.

ceeded in finding the midwife's diary, which should give the most reliable information. There she also found that the actual birth date was the 5th (also the birth date recorded in one of the school documents from Örebro).

Opera plans

Before Jussi was baptized, David was back in Stockholm, and the fact that he participated in a soiree given by foreign minister Taube for the Danish royals and King Gustav V, shows that he already had a certain reputation. On September 17, 1911, a concert was arranged at Stora Tuna Church with David as the promoter and featured artist, for the benefit of a planned orphanage. A bass singer and a male chorus took part. The railway considerably let the afternoon train from Borlänge stop at the closest road crossing to allow the public to come to the church more easily. The concert was "so well attended that one couldn't have hoped for a better result." It was described as "real musical delight," and "one felt that only the sanctity of the church could prevent applause" after David had sung an aria from Mendelssohn's oratorio *Paulus*.

In November of that year, David had public success with several recitals at Berns restaurant in Stockholm (see picture 1) but reviews were mixed. The Sven-

ska Dagbladet wrote—remarkably enough about a singer who had left the Vienna conservatory with the highest marks—"Mr. Björling was in possession of an unusual voice, though he had not yet learned the difficult art of using it. But he gives great promise, without doubt." On the other hand, Dagens Nyheter thought his performance as a whole could be "described as unusually fine."

On February 18, 1912, David sang on his own turf again. Together with the Sångarvännerna Quartet (Singing Friends), he appeared at the same day in the sports hall and at Folkets Hus in Borlänge. In the advertisement he was now described as "opera singer Mr. David Björling from Stockholm," which indicates that he counted on a continued career there. The attendance at Folkets Hus was not large, but the reception was warm. In March, David gave a concert in Gothenburg together with the local orchestra association. It impressed the composer Wilhelm Stenhammar, who wrote an often-quoted letter about an "unusually fresh and beautiful high tenor voice, with a distinctly Nordic timbre which he treated in a most sympathetic and natural manner, free from all artificiality, and without the

slightest trace of that sentimental tediousness which is regrettably too often inherent in Swedish tenors." Further he added that, "this demonstrates great talents and I would recommend our opera management to take advantage of them, and to support their further development."

In the Summer of 1912, David was heard in Stureparken in Borlänge again, and in the Fall he was engaged by Sigrid Eklöf-Trobäck's touring opera and operetta company. His first known appearances were as Rodolfo in *Bohème* in Örebro around the end of August—perhaps the first time he appeared in that city where he would return as a singing teacher.

David sang the same role in Falun on September 15 and 17: the second performance took place four days before the birth of Gösta. Later in the Autumn David sang at the New Theater in Gothenburg, in *Cavalleria* and *Daughter of the Regiment*, in addition to *Bohème* (see picture 2). The Göteborgs-Posten wrote about his Rodolfo, "Mr. Björling is new on the stage and of course not dramatically mature for the lover-role of Rodolfo. Vocally, on the other hand, he was quite good and the fine quality of the voice is evident."

Another newspaper heard "an unusu-



PICTURE 3: Jussi Björling's birthplace on Magasinsgatan in Borlänge, 1912. Left to right: Lydia Lindblad with her son Erik and her daughter Rut; Finnish grandmother Matilda with the oldest Björling brother, Olle.

ally beautiful tenor voice, treated without any tenor manners at all." In *Daughter of the Regiment*, the Göteborgs Morgonpost found a singer who "sang Tonio's part with surprising assurance and took his high C's con amore," while the Göteborgs-Tidningen in its review of the same opera had a strangely different view of the distribution of David's talents: "Mr. Björling's voice is unremarkable, but on the other hand, there is more of dramatic acting in him."

To Magasinsgatan

In 1912 the house at Nybrovägen 14 in Norr Romme where the Björling family lived was sold, and they moved into the ground floor in the house where Jussi was born (see picture 3). About then David began to teach little Olle to sing. In his brochure "How to sing," he claimed that you could start to train children in singing at about three years of age. Around a year after David and his family had moved in, his brother Johan also arrived with his four children, after his wife had died in September of 1913. Johan was a painter who had been trained by his uncle Carl Erik Björn. David's mother, the widow Matilda, also lived in that little house for a

total of four adults and six children (Lydia and her family had just moved to a new house in Borlänge when David and his family moved in).

Johan's oldest child, Märta, who would later come along on one of David's tours, was then nine years old. She said in an interview that "everyone sang and over the years there was so much singing that one wondered that the walls themselves didn't begin to sing."

I have talked with a person who remembered from her childhood that she used to cross to the other side of the street when she passed the house: She had heard David sing scales and supposed

that a person who sounded like that might be mad and therefore dangerous!

Right after Jussi's death in 1960, Göte Åhsberg, a local shopkeeper, took up the question of preserving the house, which was slated to be razed when the railway area was expanded and redesigned. When the house was finally pulled down in 1963, the structural timbers from the first floor (the second floor had none) were saved. This meant that the second floor—where Jussi Björling was born—was lost. After many discussions, the timbers were used in 1969 in the building of the small museum, Jussi Björlinggården, at the local open air museum.

In January of 1913, David sang in Jönköping in Southern Sweden, advertised as the "Swedish-American Caruso." Little is known about his activities until Christmas of that year when he sang at the Gagnef Church and Kristine Church in Falun, and on New Year's Day at the church in Säter. About this time, picture 4 must have been taken, up to now, the only one known which shows both parents and their three boys.

In February and March of 1914, David gave concerts in Örebro, where he chose to set himself up as a singing teacher. His Örebro students gave their first known concert in September of that year. In December of 1915 the Björling boys made their debut in Örebro in another concert with David's students; their touring began in 1916 in Dalarna. ■

PICTURE 4: From left, David, Olle, Jussi, Ester, Gösta

