

Upsala College Choir Recollections of Jussi Björling & Carnegie Hall on April 29, 1959

by Karl Pierson

My wife Doris (Anderson) Pierson and I went to an Embassy of Sweden program on November 9, 2008 in Washington, DC presented by Harald Henrysson, then the Curator of the Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge, Sweden. Henrysson's program was entitled "A Jussi Björling Music Cafe—Jussi Björling in the United States: A Singing Career 1919-1960."

Afterward, Doris told Harald she had sung with the Upsala College choir on the same Carnegie Hall concert stage with Jussi Björling and was probably one of the few folks in that audience who had actually heard Björling sing in person. Harald asked whether she had a program from the April 29, 1959 Carnegie Hall concert; she did not. He was well aware of this benefit concert for the Swedish Seamen's Welfare Fund because this is one of the few Björling concerts without some memorabilia in the museum. Harald knew the Upsala College choir sang on the program that night and that Upsala College is no longer in existence.

This concert took place just a little over one year before Björling passed away, so Upsala's choir members were among the last Americans to hear Björling at a live concert in the United States. And because most ranged in age from 18 to 22 at the time, most are still hale and hearty at ages 69 to 73. Some young alums also sang with the choir that night, and are a bit older.

I thought the Björling Museum

would be pleased to get recollections from Upsala choir members who were on the same program that night and who heard Björling sing in person. So I told Harald that I'd get in contact with some of those choir members for their recollections. Seventeen choir members responded, and some of their recollections are included at the end of this article.

Later, I informed Harald that my 1960 college yearbook had a photo of the poster outside Carnegie Hall with photos of Jussi Björling, pianist Grant Johannesen, and the Upsala College Choir. Ticket prices were \$6.00, \$5.00, \$3.00, and \$2.00 (tax exempt). Because college yearbooks back then had to get to the printer by early April, this late April 1959 photo ended up in the choir section of my 1960 yearbook. At that point, Doris and I decided to present my yearbook to Harald for the museum. We joined the Jussi Björling Society and made reservations through Sue Flaster for their May conference in Charleston, SC to hand-deliver the yearbook. We heard the first Jussi Björling Award winner, Swedish tenor Mats Carlsson, at both performances during the conference—another very impressive tenor voice. We had heard Mats in December, 2008 in concert and later at the St. Lucia Fest at the Swedish embassy in Washington, DC.

We also met Jussi's son Anders at the JBS conference. Quite a small world. Anders had worked for Dr. Robert Karsten, the penultimate President of

Upsala, many years ago at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota.

When it appeared that none of the Upsala choir members had kept a copy of the evening's program, we contacted Rob Hudson, the Associate Archivist at Carnegie Hall, and visited him in NYC on October 15, 2009. He showed us the bound copy of the 1959 Carnegie Hall programs, and a copy of the evening's flyer which he later emailed to us. It would have been impossible to unbind the 1959 programs and a copy would not have been complete or clear. But Rob gave us a tour of Carnegie Hall and we were able to briefly hear an orchestra rehearsal. Rob subsequently has traded Jussi Björling material with the Björling Museum in Borlänge—completing both collections! That was indeed a very nice added outcome of this research. That Carnegie Hall Archives/Björling Museum connection will be a subject of an upcoming article in the *JBS Journal*.

Then last November we received a copy of the program from Cary (Carlson) Andren and sent it along to Sue & Harald for the Björling Museum. Sue asked me to do a full write-up of this experience for the *JBS Journal*. I had already emailed a copy of our college newspaper's review of the concert to Harald. As editor-in-chief of the *Upsala Gazette* at the time, I had kept copies from that year.

Here is the *Upsala Gazette* May 1, 1959 review of the concert. Felix Pappalardi, who was a choir member, was most interested in the choir's perform-

New Jersey made up a large percentage of the early student bodies. But Upsala was also the first Lutheran college in the country to admit African-American students. A Black Upsalan in the 1920's was admitted to medical school and became a doctor. Upsala was also the first college to admit women in New Jersey.

So why did Upsala College go out of existence? There were many reasons, but the main factor was that East Orange changed within a couple years from a prosperous New York City and Newark, NJ commuter community, with many high-end stores, to a run-down city with a high crime rate.

There are several other reasons for Upsala's demise—college administration errors; lowering of academic standards; late recognition of the depth of the problems; an NCAA infraction by an Upsala Board chair which led to intercollegiate athletic suspension; subsequent alumni indifference; and zero support (even hostility) from the State of New Jersey. The ensuing financial difficulties forced Upsala's closing in 1995. That was quite sad because the city of East Orange was finally recovering somewhat in the early 1990's. And Upsala College had attracted a student body that Dr. Martin Luther King imagined in his "I have a dream" speech, with a healthy mix of Black, Hispanic, White and international students, all working together.

Upsala College Choir Reputation:

The Upsala Choir was not a "back-up chorus" to Jussi Björling and Grant Johannesen that night. They were the introduction performance on both segments of the program, with full billing. The Swedish-Americans in that audience were there mainly to hear Jussi Björling of course, but if they were also Swedish Lutherans, they

had already heard the Upsala College choir at least once or twice before in their cities. Local Augustana Lutheran churches sponsored the Upsala choir on its tours through New England and the Mid-Atlantic states.

Choir Director Dr. Gladys Grindelund ("Grindy" to her beloved choir) was nationally known. The choir kept all eyes on her, none of them fidgeted or ever moved their heads. Dr. Grindelund directed with great composure, no flailing arms or body. Her directing hands were held in front of her. And like all great directors, her eyes and face were greatly expressive. Newspaper reviews of the Choir's performances were always superior.

There are no current alumni records to access to find the 1959 choir alumni. But many alums have stayed in touch, so I was able to ask several choir members for their recollections of that night at Carnegie Hall. Most cited that night as a highlight of not only their college careers, but a memory they will gladly repeat if the words "Carnegie Hall" or "Jussi Björling" are mentioned.

There was some confusion as to whether the choir backed Jussi Björling on one number and which one it was. Harald Henrysson said the two reviews he had on file did not indicate that Jussi sang with the choir. He wondered if it might have been in *Sverige*, but there was no report that Jussi had ever sung that with a chorus. Perhaps it could have been an encore number at the end of the evening's formal program in front of the packed Swedish-American audience with all performers on stage: Björling, Johannesen and the Upsala choir.

Some of the choir members recall singing one of their signature pieces, *Tryggare kan ingen vara*, during part of the program. It makes sense then that *Tryggare* could have been one of the encores.

Doris (Anderson) Pierson, '61:

What an amazing thrill! After frequently listening to my Aunt Svea's Björling LPs and knowing she would be in the audience, it was so exciting (and I was nervous) to think I would hear Jussi Björling in person! When he began to sing, his great voice just went through your whole heart and body. I recall the choir actually singing along with Björling for one number. But there was no mention of this in Pappalardi's review. I also recall the choir sang their signature piece *Tryggare* which was not mentioned by Pappalardi either. When we sang *Sverige*, I saw all those white handkerchiefs come out across the tiers and understood the Upsala College choir was touching hearts also. It was an unforgettable momentous night, and I'm ever grateful for that opportunity.

Cary (Carlson)Andren '61

I just came across the program for the Jussi Björling—Grant Johannesen—Upsala College Choir Concert at Carnegie Hall, as well as a flyer that must have been used at Upsala College. I was digging in my archives for something else and found these two things—souvenirs of a great and memorable evening. I remember being overwhelmed by the size of Carnegie Hall—tiers of balconies. And then to hear the brilliant voice of Jussi Björling with such dramatic presentation of his numbers. Our choir had to follow him. How could we? It was a night to remember.

Ralph & Barbara (Larson) Madsen, '54: (two of the young alums invited by Dr. Grindelund):

Hej på dej Kalle. Both Barb and I talk about that evening still. We feel it was our most exciting time ever with the expanded choir. We talk about it all the time. What else do old people do? The

Gus Karlson, '60: (choir president): That experience was surely once in a lifetime for most (all?) of us. The splendor of Carnegie Hall, the responsive audience and the feeling of security from being a member of our splendid choir. Grindy had us "peaked up" to sing our hearts out, with a result I feel we can be proud of. The only recollection I have which was not already well covered very well by others would be that of the immensely talented Mr. Björling gargling in the wings. The whole experience was thrilling, and thanks for recalling it.

About the Piersons

Karl Pierson is the retired VP- Human Resources of ITT Defense Electronics. He continues to consult in executive search and volunteer in civic & church organizations. Doris Pierson is a former teacher & assistant principal who has founded four non-profit organizations. She continues to consult with churches & non-profits on strategic planning and the management of volunteers. Happily married for 47 years, they reside in Great Falls, Virginia.



Doris and Karl Pierson

Recordings of Jussi Björling's American Radio Concerts Slated for Release in 2010

by Dan Shea

Recall our "Progress Report on Björling Radio Broadcasts" from p. 26 of our previous *Journal* issue No. 17: we've been able to secure fresh-sounding original audio recordings of Jussi's radio and television concerts from 1937 - 1956 and are moving to make most of that material to be available on a set of three CDs. We can now report that these CDs of treasured song and opera material from programs like the Bell Telephone Hour, the Standard Hour, and the Ford Sunday Evening Hour, are scheduled to be released before September of this year. We've even arranged for a major celebration of this release at a special meeting of the Vocal Record Collectors' Society in New York City on September 3. Related announcements to showcase the fine sound of this material will be made at the May 2010 Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC) Conference in New Orleans. These programs will allow our sound engineer, Seth Winner, to demonstrate how he has worked to improve the original source material. Further, they will allow chapters of the Björling Society to publicize the recordings and JBS as well, as part of commemorations of the 50th anniversary of Jussi's death on September 9, 1960.

One example of an unexpected breakthrough for our project was provided by Harald Henrysson, who obtained original acetate recordings of the April 1949 Carnegie Hall "Sweden in Music" benefit concert from Swedish collector Harald Löwing. This concert

(program 4902 in the Henrysson JB Phonography) was broadcast via WNYC-FM and includes spectacular performances of songs of Rangström and Söderman as well as more familiar material by Alfvén, Sjögren, Peterson-Berger, and Tosti.

Other events taking place during the centennial year 2011 also will help publicize these recordings, especially the release of Stephen Hastings's new book analyzing all of Björling's recordings. We expect also to publicize all this new material—recordings and books—via classical music radio stations in the US and around the world. For those of you who have available copies of Henrysson's JB Phonography, here is a list of the audio recordings available for this project to date (using the numerology of HH's JBP): 3708, 4504, 4602, 4603, 4605, 4801, 4803, 4901, 4902, 4905, 4907, 5006, 5101, A72, 5102, 5108, 5202, 5601. Accumulating this material has been the work of many hands, including the names cited already, above and in our 2009 *Journal* cited above. We look forward to completing this work in a few more years, with luck and your continuing stalwart support!