

# Two Faces of Jussi (But One Voice)

by William C. Clayton



Bjoerling Sings at Carnegie Hall



Bjoerling in Opera

I discovered Jussi Björling in 1953 when I was 18. Like George Jellinek, my awareness came through a local record store, in my case supplied by an enthusiastic owner who played Björling's "Che gelida manina" for me. Though I had earlier embraced di Stefano and Tagliavini, I pretty quickly appreciated what all the JB fuss was about, and eventually I procured Jussi's complete versions of *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci*, *Aida*, *Il Trovatore*, and various recital albums. Despite my admiration of his voice, however, for many years I was troubled by two faces of Jussi as depicted on two LP albums: *Bjoerling Sings at Carnegie Hall* (1955) and *Bjoerling in Opera* (1959).

The two albums presented two very different Jussis to me. The former showed him as round-faced, almost cherubic, robust, and healthy. The lat-

ter depicted not only an undoubtedly slimmer Jussi but a physiognomy which was decidedly gaunt, dour, and far from healthy looking. Of course, none could have predicted his untimely death in 1960. Still, I wondered why the two such disparate appearances.

I saw Jussi at the old Met twice, a few weeks apart, in the 1959 performances of *Cavalleria* and *Faust*, the former in Orchestra, Row 11 and the latter in Standing Room. I must say that, like the rest of the audience, I was so taken by his splendid vocal performances that I noted neither his face nor figure. However, as years went by, and I periodically pulled out the two albums, I continued to be puzzled by those two very different album photos which seemed to depict two different physical conditions but one, consistent voice.

Now to the first of these "two faces of Jussi." Sometime during the last twenty

years, I acquired the video of part of *La bohème*, Act One, with Renata Tebaldi (1956). In those years of listening and, in this case viewing, I was constantly struck by the similarity of his appearance between the 1955 recital photo and in this video performance. Even though on my version the video quality is poor, very visible is JB as he had appeared in various photos. He is stocky with a healthy looking physiognomy even to the extent of the same widow's peak evident in the 1955 photo.

As to the voice, it is in one word, magnificent. Every syllable whether *semi-parlando* or extended *legato* is crystal clear with that silver quality so characteristic of Jussi. He produces everything with the utmost ease; he is both convincingly conversational and dramatically ardent. Every note from the bottom of the register to the top is spot on, sheer perfection, easily held

for just the right amount of time.

As for the duet with Renata Tebaldi, all is perfection. He looks ardent, direct, and engaged with her. It is amazing for those of us now used to all TV productions being taped with opportunities for changes (much as in the recording studio) that this went out live as if a live production in the opera house. In short, Jussi sings magnificently and looks wonderful.

Though I was pleased to see him looking "normal," I was still puzzled by the stark difference between the two photos. In addition to the 1955 album, I had seen and/or acquired many other photos, but I had never seen another one like the thin, sad one on the 1959 album.

Now to the 1957 televised performance (*The Ed Sullivan Show*) of portions of *Rigoletto* with Hilde Güden. For some years I had heard the two selections on cassettes and, of course, I highly admired his vocalism. But less than a year ago, I finally saw the performance, and that is when I put the two album photos together in my mind's eye. To repeat, the contrast between the two album photos was almost palpable, but the voice was, if possible, even better in 1957.

I believe that this video *Rigoletto* segment is one for the ages. Bodily, Jussi seems as the 1959 picture would suggest, but his face looks drawn, and he does not look healthy as he does on the *Bohème* excerpts. However, musically and vocally he is stupendous. He enters for the first part of the duet with Güden with marked confidence and directness. His shading and legato are wonderful. In the second part of the duet, he is even more ardent, and they are a splendid duo. His rendition of "La donna è mobile" reveals stunning elan and focus with a wonderful diminuendo. His concluding high note is electrifying.

Perhaps now some information about Björling's health will be helpful. My source is *JUSSI* by Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas (Amadeus Press, 1996). Anna-Lisa says that, "I believe it was around this time in 1957 that I became aware of how severe Jussi's arrhythmia was. Spells grew more frequent, and each lasted longer." She describes his weight then and subsequent loss, the latter of which coincides with the second album picture and his physical appearance on *The Sullivan Show*: "Another thing that strained his heart was his weight. At five feet, seven inches tall, even his usual weight of 200 pounds was too much . . . , and he could reach 220 pounds . . . But now he announced, 'I'm tired of always hearing 'I'm too fat' . . . He went on a rigorous diet. It was frightening to see how the pounds fell away . . . He lost 35 pounds in less than five months . . . I was shaken by the results. *His round, happy face became drawn and serious, its lines more defined. His age was showing*" [emphasis mine].

I cannot imagine a better description of my reaction to that 1959 album picture, and that is how, to me, he appears in the *Sullivan* video. Again, this was in 1957, the time of the video performance. Jussi's doctor had insisted on three weeks' bed rest, and JB complied, necessitating cancelling his Met appearances. By early June, however, according to Anna-Lisa, with his voice in "fantastic condition," he sang Radames, Manrico, and Rodolfo at the Royal Opera House, Stockholm. His excellent vocal state continued as seen in the reactions to his Carnegie Hall recital on March 2, 1958. According to a reviewer, the voice "seemed to have gained in power and intensity since last heard. [It was] magnificent." But Anna-Lisa tells us that he had his "first heart failure" in the fall of 1958.

The rest of Jussi's shortened life was

a series of worsening health conditions alternating with almost consistent reviews of splendid singing. Detailed coverage of these phases is beyond the scope of this article, but the major events are admirably covered in *Jussi*. The sad story of heart attacks, eventual daily spells of arrhythmia, and occasional bouts of alcohol continued apace. Just a few examples should suffice.

One such episode is narrated by Nils Grevillus in the liner notes of the LP, *Jussi Bjoerling in Concert* (1960): "When in May 1958 I was to conduct *Tosca* . . . Jussi became nervous before curtain time and confided to me that there was nothing wrong with his voice but that something in his breast was not as it should be. He sang "Recondita armonia" in the beginning with great difficulty. Then his voice suddenly ceased . . . It was evident that Jussi could not continue . . . He returned to Stockholm the next season [for other performances] . . . but the cancelled *Tosca* remained a shock for him."

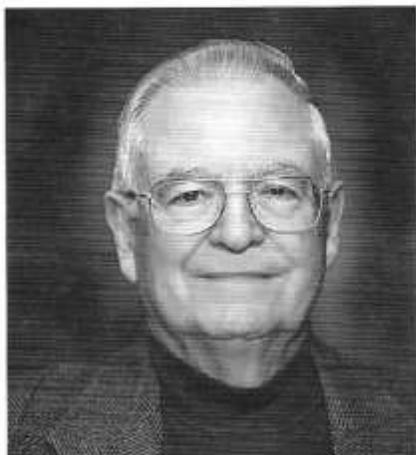
Another sad occurrence was the heart episode which delayed the 1960 Covent Garden performance of *Bohème* before the Queen Mother. All those around him counseled withdrawing, but he felt obligated to perform because of the Queen Mother's presence. As one album reviewer commented with marked understatement, "that could not have done him any good."

Anna-Lisa further says that in March, 1960, "His heart was acting up again . . . Nonetheless, he sang the strenuous *Il trovatore* . . . Jussi's voice is veiled and below its customary brilliance . . . , but his musically and interpretatively correct and ardently heroic Manrico suggests his ripe readiness to record *Otello*." I have recently heard this performance, and I am quite amazed. She is correct about the color of his voice, and though he transposed "Di quella pira" down by a full tone,

his breath control is stunning. She tells us that the June “*Requiem* recording shows Jussi’s voice in optimal condition,” but the end was near. Jussi was despondent because of the contretemps with Solti over the recording of *Ballo*, and “his drinking took on monumental proportions . . . His spirit was broken somehow” as his heart condition worsened. On August 5 he “participated, in stupendous voice, in a radio concert”—later released by RCA (now available as Bluebell ABCD 092). This was his last recording, for his heart distressed him throughout the concert, and shortly thereafter he was hospitalized. Still, he sang again on August 20th, his last public appearance. Of course, we all know that he died in his sleep on September 9, 1960.

So there they are: two pictures, two Jussis, but one voice. For me those two pictures are poignant testimony of what he endured during those nearly five years as so vividly narrated by Anna-Lisa and Andrew in *JUSSI*. I believe that his complete story, supported by the photos and the videos, should make us admire the heroism he showed in continuing to perform so well until the very end.

*Professor Bill Clayton is a long-time member of the JBS-USA, and has often contributed to our publications. His articles have been translated into Swedish and published in the Scandinavian Journal more than any other US contributor.*



## Toscanini at The End

by Lee Alperin



Toscanini has pride of place

In 1954 Arturo Toscanini (1873-1957) chose to include Verdi’s *A Masked Ball* in his NBC Symphony radio broadcasts. For soloists, the 87-year-old maestro had in the past few years been relying on a familiar troop of singers: Herva Nelli, Licia Albanese, Giuseppe Valdengo, Jan Peerce, Nicola

Moscona, and Robert Merrill, among others. Besides providing Toscanini with a set of able-bodied voices these brave-hearts also accommodated themselves to Toscanini’s occasional blow-ups. Toscanini himself wanted no superstars; by now he was inclined to consider a singer as simply another