

David Björling: Swedish Tenor

Part I: Background, Studies, Early Singing Career

by Harald Henrysson



David Björling in Chicago

Introduction

David Björling, father of Jussi and his three brothers, didn't have the opera career for which he had surely been hoping, and which would have been natural considering the talent recognized by many critics. He did become an appreciated concert singer but his major contribution was as teacher and leader of the unique ensemble mostly called the Björling Quartet after December, 1921. Certainly Jussi Björling received much

of his musical talent from his father, and David's early education was clearly essential in enabling Jussi to use his talent in a way which made him one of the greatest singers of all time.

Almost all of David's career together with his sons—and of the joint concerts by the three oldest brothers after David's death in 1926—has been researched in detail by the author and Roger Alderstrand: over 900 performances are currently known. I have not followed David Björling's earlier life and career in the same detail, but will here give a short account of those years, beginning with a family background which is mainly based on the genealogist Lennart Ekman's work.

Jussi Björling himself mentioned in his memoir *Med bagaget i strupen* (With my baggage in my throat, 1945) that his grandfather, Lars Johan was a master smith in Voxna in the province of Hälsingland (North Central Sweden).

There Lars Johan's ancestors had lived for some generations, and in the churchyard at least 50 ancestors are buried. David Björling's great, great, great grandfather moved from Dalarna to the newly-constructed Voxna ironworks in 1747 and assumed the family name Björn (as opposed to the old form of the father's name plus "son" or "dotter"). Thus, the family's roots go back to Dalarna, and David's oldest known ancestors were born in Southern Dalarna at the end of the 15th Century.

David Björling's father Lars Johan Björn was born in 1842 in Voxna. Two

of his brothers survived into adulthood. In the 1850's the older of them, Per Samuel, became a painter, and was the first of the family to take the name "Björling." (Thus, the name Björling existed in this family only from the generation before David. There are 37 other Björling families—although no connection has been found among them—all presented on the website www.bjorling.org). Lars Johan's younger brother, Carl Erik retained the name Björn. He was deeply religious and his involvement in the Mission Church might have been a reason for leaving his home town. In 1889 he moved to Borlänge (then an expanding town after the railway and ironworks had been built), and was the first of his family to settle there. He was known for his fine tenor voice, and began, like his father, as a smith, but became—like his older brother—a painter and paint dealer. Carl Erik Björn died in Borlänge in 1929.

At 19 years of age, Lars Johan Björn moved from Voxna to Leineperi (Fredriksfors) near Pori (Björneborg) in southwestern Finland. He followed the example of his older brother in changing his name to Björling at about the same time as the move. In Finland he married Matilda Lönnqvist (two years younger than he)—who, like himself, enjoyed singing—in 1864. He returned with her and a child, who died in infancy, to Sweden and Hälsingland in 1866. The next year, the family settled in Strömsbruk, just north of the city of Hudiksvall, where Lars Johan worked at the 200-year-old

ironworks. Four children were born there: the oldest, Gustaf, emigrated to the US; Johanna, known for her fine singing voice, died young; the 3rd surviving child was David, born on 16 November 1873; and the 4th was Lydia. In 1880 the master smith Lars Johan and his family returned over the Bothnian Gulf to Finland, this time to the ironworks in Solla (Fredriksberg). Their last child was born there in 1881 and named Johan Jonatan—names he would lend to his nephew Jussi thirty years later.

From Finland to Sweden and on to America

David Björling thus spent his first seven years in Sweden but grew up mostly in Finland. In 1893, at 19, he returned on his own to Sweden and Strömsbruk. It appears that his father had written to the manager of the smithy in Strömsbruk, complaining about how unruly his son was. The manager replied: send him to me and I will make a man of him. The next year, David went on to Borlänge—probably because his uncle Carl Erik lived there.

The smithy in Fredriksberg was closed in 1895 and that Autumn David's parents and his sister Lydia and brother Johan came to Borlänge from Finland. A relative reported that they had become quite poor in Finland when the work disappeared. Carl Johan helped them through their initial hard times in Borlänge. David moved in with them. For a time he worked at the Domnarvet Iron Works (today SSAB) and it was said that nobody could defeat him at arm wrestling (something also inherited by his son Jussi).

In 1896 David moved to Stockholm where he was employed in the Separator Factory (maker of milk separators) in the following year. For some period he was engaged to Christina Irma

Matsdotter from Djur in Dalarna. In 1899, David took the steamship *Cameo* to Grimsby in England and went on to America, as so many other Swedes had done before him. His cousin, Gustaf, who would be called Gust in America, had already emigrated in 1888 and became a successful farmer. While David was in America, his older brother Gustaf followed him there. There isn't much known with certainty about David's time in the US. From different sources he is said to have been a boxer, a gold prospector, insurance agent, machinist, and medical office manager. The only known picture of him from this trip was taken in Chicago (picture 1).

David had already taken some singing lessons in Stockholm, but in the US he got a decisive push into a new career. This occasion has been described by his brother Johan: "when he was sitting one evening together with friends in a saloon, he felt homesick and sang a Swedish folksong which made all the customers applaud. One of the customers, involved in music, was struck by the beautiful voice.....and advised him to use it." David decided to apply for the Metropolitan Opera school, and his son Olle related the following: "He did not have an appropriate song to audition with in front of the school jury, of which the great Caruso was a member. Instead, he was asked to try a scale or an *arpeggio*. He surprised those present with a scale up to high C as proof of his brilliant tenor voice."

According to Olle, because of this performance, David was immediately accepted as a student at the Metropolitan Opera school. The only document about him that is known from this period is the Met opera program of 15 February 1906 for a gala performance of the *Gypsy Baron*. David is named there together with the other opera school students who took part.



September 1907 Borlänge ad photo

It's interesting that Caruso was also in the same performance (picture 3). He would become the model for both David and Jussi.

Back to Sweden as a singer, and Then on to Vienna

David Björling probably came back to Borlänge in 1907. The first trace of him after his return is a concert given on 16 June 1907 (in a club house operated by local associations) together with the Stora Tuna men's chorus. He had sung with the chorus before he left for America. "Concert singer David Björling from America" sang in four languages, Swedish, German, Italian and Finnish, and the Borlänge Tidning wrote that "Mr. Björling, who was provided with a good and well-trained voice, sang two opera arias and a few folk songs, all of which were very well performed." At the same time, the newspaper regretted the "not very large public." The *Falu-Kuriren* on the

other hand, judged the public quite large and assured that "all numbers were received with great acclaim". A little later David participated in a concert which the male chorus Lyran gave in Grängesberg, southwest of Borlänge, for the benefit of his continued studies.

On August 31st of the same year, David appeared at Folkets Hus in Borlänge. He had hired the place—opened in 1905 and with the choir loft not yet finished—for 20 kronor (about \$125 today). David sang solo but also as a member of a quartet. (A propos of the quartet singing, I would like to quote an interview of 1949 with Edward E. Johnson. He was a man from Borlänge who emigrated to the US after the big strike of 1909 and became a leading figure in the American Union of Swedish Singers, returning to Borlänge in his old age. Johnson mentioned in the interview that he "had the honor of singing in the sextet which David Björling formed and with which they successfully toured all around Sweden"—but no other trace of David's sextet is known!) The Borlänge Tidning described the Folkets Hus concert as very successful and admitted that David had a voice "which after further training, might become very good, especially in the higher parts of the range, where his voice already in many places, is flexible and warm." At the same time, the reviewer had certain reservations: "it would not have been harmful if there had been a little more feeling and life in the singing, which together with Mr. Björling's appearance would have given more color to the performance."

The advertisement for a big concert in the Fornby sports hall on 15 September, again together with the Stora Tuna men's chorus, also showed David's portrait. This was not common in newspapers of the time, and seems

to indicate a certain self-assurance. No review was published after this concert, but David's next local performance at Rommehed on 18 September, together with a violinist, got a short notice: both the large and beautiful program and the good execution were appreciated. Before David left Sweden again, he gave his first concert at Stora Tuna church on September 28th together with the Dala Regiment band (for the benefit of a children's home). The newspaper remarked that the concert was not very well attended due to "an inappropriate time" and only "earned a little more than 66 kronor (about \$400 today)."

David's repertoire in these early concerts is uncompletely known. All opera arias we know he performed were the usual tenor favorites, also sung by Jussi (*Martha*, *Rigoletto*,

Trovatore, *Aida*). Two of the songs I have found on these programs were inherited by his son (*Aftonstämning*, *Som stjärnorna på himmelen*), but there were also, not surprisingly, some Finnish ones (with original Finnish texts, unlike the Sibelius ones which would become an important part of Jussi's song repertoire).

In October of 1907, David Björling went to Vienna for seven months of further singing education. JB stated in his autobiography that before leaving, his father had sung a concert at the royal palace in Stockholm together with John Forsell, and that the concert inspired King Oscar to give him a study stipend. According to another version of the story, David would have sung for the King at Mora church, but I have not found any evidence for either in spite of checking several

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(NOTE.—Owing to a sudden indisposition of Mme. Nordi's, selection number 7 will be omitted.)

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The Gypsy Baron, Metropolitan Opera program

sources. David was interviewed in a Gothenburg newspaper at the beginning of May of 1908, after his return from Vienna. In that interview he did not mention any royal stipend but said instead that his studies were supported by the Metropolitan Opera manager Heinrich Conried. Thus Conried, who in his youth had been an actor in Vienna, evidently had great hopes for David. In November of 1907, the head of the Swedish legation in Vienna, Joachim Beck-Friis made a formal request for a free pass for David to attend the Vienna opera; that written request has been preserved. From Vienna, it is also reported that David worked at the Separator Factory there (an early multinational company!) and that the manager had him sing for the Minister and other Swedes.

The annual report of the Vienna Conservatory for 1907/08 proves that in his major subject, singing, David Björling received the highest mark "Vorzüglich (excellent)" and in his minor subject, piano "Genügend (satisfactory)." Two other minor subjects are noted without grades, choral conducting and Italian. David's main teacher in Vienna was professor Franz Haböck, who is known for a standard work on castrato singing.

End of part I. Next time: David's career continues and he starts a family.

Harald Henrysson has recently retired as Curator of the JB Museum in Borlänge, Sweden. He is currently, among other things, working on a database combining a revised and updated PHONOGRAPHY and an expanded performance chronology.

Hugo Hasslo, Baritone at The Stockholm Opera, Colleague and Cast-comrade of Jussi's: Memories of Jussi

When there was talk about Jussi Björling, my Norwegian singing teacher used to say, "he is the devil himself for singing."

And certainly Jussi was quite incredible. I don't know anybody who sounded like an instrument as he did, and he sang like an instrumentalist. It was precise and still natural. He was a musician.

Many singers acquire mannerisms. Jussi didn't, and therefore everything remained perfect. His enormously sharp memory certainly helped. He never sang anything wrong. I admired him immensely.

What I remember best is of course, his musicality, but also his generosity. Jussi was great, so great that he didn't have to make himself greater. I remember one occasion when we had sung *Rigoletto*. I had the title role, and Jussi sang the Duke. Afterwards during the applause, he took my hand so that we could take the applause together. But just when I had entered the stage and he was still behind the curtain, he dropped my hand and I received the ovation by myself. What other tenor would have done that??

It was always something special to sing when Jussi took part. The auditorium was always full and there was an exclusive audience that didn't always come otherwise. There were thrilling evenings. The air vibrated. I was never especially nervous. It was rather excitement, a feeling that only appeared a few times.

Some people thought that he was

uncomfortable on stage. "Oh yes—certainly he sings well, but he can't move," they said. I don't agree. On the contrary, Jussi never made an unnecessary movement. He stood still, but he stood well.

Today, of course, I regret that I didn't make any recordings with him. I believe that both of us wanted it then, but it never happened. There wasn't enough time. I often had 5 or 6 performances a week and Jussi was away for long periods.

The private person Jussi Björling, I didn't know. We never met outside the theater. My debut was so much later than his and he had already finished his Royal Opera employment when I arrived there in 1941. In spite of the fact that we were of the same age, we belonged to different generations of singers, one could say.

After Jussi, many new tenors have appeared, but I don't think the world will ever see or hear his equal—could that voice, musicality and intelligence ever again be united in the same way in one and the same person? No, I don't believe that.

Hugo Hasslo

