

Jussi Björling—A Good Friend at Fund Drive Time for Classical Music Radio

by Sallie McKenna, Phyllis Josell, and Dan Shea



Jussi Björling, Radio Singer

What motivates you to contribute to your favorite classical music radio station, at fund drive time? This is a key question for the station's program hosts who want to show that they know what the station's listeners appreciate.

Well, if the station carries some opera programming, then the program

hosts want to present those special singers who can put over the big tunes (think Puccini and Verdi especially) in the most thrilling way possible, with tonal beauty that demands attention; if the voices are distinctive, and the vocal thrills are produced without strain or shouting, then it's likely that listeners will want to learn more about that

music and those singers. Here's one choice that's been successful for decades: Jussi Björling!

This point was made yet again last spring during the membership drive of California's biggest classical music station KUSC. Three key voices were chosen to be featured during the drive period, with one hour-long program devoted to each voice. The program hosts decided on Luciano Pavarotti, Victoria de los Angeles, and Jussi Björling, with Jussi's recordings chosen for the final wrap-up weekend when listeners could be expected to be tired and jaded from the repeated appeals.

KUSC's radio hosts in charge of opera programming are well known: Duff Murphy who produces Saturday morning's *The Opera Show*, and Jim Svejda who among other things produces *The Record Shelf* and, with Murphy, the *Sunday Night Opera* show. Both were enthusiastically on hand for the Björling hour and the special appeal was for pledges of \$240, for which the contributor would receive EMI's new 5-CD set called *The Swedish Caruso* (available on-line for about \$35, e.g. via the JB Museum in Borlänge).

You can guess that key tracks played during the hour included EMI's 1944 classic recording of *Nessun dorma*, *Questa o quella*, *Ah lève-toi soleil*, *Amor ti vieta*. As the music played, Svejda noted that "Jussi's voice sounds as if he is singing through a silk screen—two notes and you recognize that beautiful voice—the artistry, the passion, the intelligence, the musician-

ship, the beauty of that sound: this guy just does it for me.”

Murphy noted that the 5-CD premium offering included Jussi's earliest recordings from 1929-1935 when he was still under 25 and sang almost everything in Swedish, as well as excerpts from *Bohème* and *Pagliacci* made 25 or 30 years later “when he sounded almost exactly the same.” As he spoke the music for the aria “Amor ti vieta” began and Svejda commented that he had “snuck this in because it’s Duff’s favorite Björling recording” and Murphy observed that this aria is one of the shortest ever written and that “it perfectly shows off the exquisite beauty of the instrument throughout its full range—Jussi seems to sing it in one exhale, one sweeping breath.” Luckily all this talk was arranged to leave time for the main climactic phrase of the aria to make its effect!

As the hour ended the hosts made their final pleas to “keep opera on the air in Southern California—opera is the greatest of all art forms and without you there is no KUSC” while Jussi sings over and over the long arching climactic phrases from “Nessun dorma.” The net result is indeed quite stunning and persuasive: Almost anyone walking into a room with that music playing at full volume would have to stop in his tracks and say “I want to hear more of that!”

And that’s what our KUSC hosts were hoping for, like many of their radio colleagues throughout the Americas and the rest of the world who hope to use their medium to spread a love of great music and brilliant vocalism. Thanks again to Jussi Björling for providing so many perfect examples of what glorious singing should be!

Goethe-Schubert-Björling: “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh”

by Åke Elmér

The Testament issue, *Jussi Björling in Song* (SBT-1427) has been very well received, and we are all surely happy to have it.

Several songs on this CD have already been discussed, but as far as I know Goethe’s beautiful and moving song, “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh” has not. Perhaps a few words about the origin of this poem could be of interest.

It was written in pencil on the 6th of September of 1780 on a wooden wall in a hunting lodge on Kickelbahn near Ilmenau in the Thüringer Forest in Eastern Germany. The poem could be read on the wall until 1880 when the lodge burned down. It was printed for the first time in the complete edition of Goethe’s works, whose publication began in 1815. People have wondered why it wasn’t included in the first (1789) collection of poems, where “Wanderers Nachtlied (Der du von dem Himmel bist)” appeared. No, he couldn’t allow it to be published earlier, because it was too personal and precious to him.

In a letter of September 6th, the same day or night, to his friend Charlotte von Stein, we have the distinctly described background of great and serene nature against which the poem with its sublime harmony should be read and understood.

The Swedish philosopher Hans Larsson (1862-1944) says in his commentary on the poem: “the simple facts are approximately the following: there is no wind, the birds are asleep and one can soon go to bed, nothing

remarkable. And still, as we see, we have to try to keep away from the otherworldly that these facts imply.” The fact that a poem which relates a few simple facts like this “evening song” can have such a powerful effect is something that one can’t stop marveling at.

The Danish literary critic Georg Brandes (1842-1927) was inclined to see the poem as the purest thing of poetry written by Goethe, even the most perfect thing ever written on this earth.

There are songs by Goethe, Hugo von Hofmannsthal says, “which are light as a breath and simple as a Mozartean melody.” He may have thought of the Goethe epigram “Nur ein Hauch sei dein Gedicht!” “your poetry must be like breathing” but also certainly of “Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh” which more than any other poem fills this demand when he wrote the dialogue “Über Gedichte (About Poetry).” It is as if it were spoken in one breath; as if it were itself the barely-felt breeze which moves the tops of the trees before it finally fades away.

The Swedish poet and critic Anders Österling (1884-1981) has said that the eight apparently so-simple lines of this poem are built like a Bach cello sonata. The unity between words and music contribute to the fact that the poem provokes a feeling of unbounded pleasure. Finally, the German-Swiss literary scholar Fritz Strich (1883-1963) wrote that “the whole poem is so tuned