

On the Road with Jussi: an Interview with Frederick Schauwecker



Frederick Schauwecker was Jussi's long-time accompanist. He worked with several singers, among them Martinelli and Crooks, before he became Jussi's colleague. In the February 26, 1972, issue of Opera News, Mr. Schauwecker reminisced with Morris Springer about the Swedish tenor. We reproduce here, with the kind permission of Opera News, an abridged version of that interview.

Frederick Schauwecker was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1896, and died in Los Angeles in 1975.

Q. When did you first meet Jussi?

A. I'd finished a spring tour in Tampa with Richard Crooks just before he retired. That was in 1945. I went up to Nantucket during the summer, and Mr. Coppicus of Columbia Artists Management wrote asking me if I was interested in accompanying Bjoerling. I said yes, so Mr. Coppicus arranged for me to meet with Jussi and his wife in New York, over lunch at Pavillon. That was in September. I remained Jussi's accompanist until his death in 1960.

Q. How did Bjoerling build his recital programs?

A. Oh, they followed a pretty fixed pattern. He'd start off with a classic group of songs: Handel, Mozart, old English airs or Beethoven's "Adelaide," a particular favorite. Then came a German group: Schubert, Brahms, Wolf or Strauss. He didn't have too big a lieder repertory, actually; just those that suited his particular talents. Then he'd do an Italian or French aria. Or maybe Lenski's aria from *Onegin*; he was very fond of that. After intermission came the Scandinavian stuff: Swedish or Norwegian selections, or Sibelius songs. He often ended with Stephen Foster, or English songs that weren't out of the top drawer but were things he loved to do and did wonders with: "Ah, Love, but a Day," "Spirit Flower." Encores? He was generous with them—sometimes he'd give half a dozen or more.

Q. How much territory did your tours cover?

A. Oh, the U.S. and Canada. My goodness, I couldn't possibly recall all the places! No, I didn't play European concerts with Jussi. He wanted me to, during the summers, but I preferred a change of activities then.

Q. How did he prepare for recitals?

A. He loathed rehearsals, but he didn't really need much preparation. Neither did I, for that matter. Outside of having to learn some Scandinavian songs for him, I had no problem: he sang pretty much the same things I'd done for Martinelli and Crooks, and he was so easy to play for, because he had a good background and was an intuitive musician. Shortly before a concert, he'd vocalize in his hotel room or dressing room. I never knew him to forget a line; he always knew what he planned to do. In the fall of '45 he sang a series of recitals down the West Coast which culminated in some joint recitals in Los Angeles with Dorothy Kirsten, plus a performance of *La bohème* I asked him if he wanted to go over the role, as he'd sung no excerpts from it on the tour, but he said no. He didn't even have the score with him! He just walked into the rehearsal cold.

Q. Would you say that his records generally caught the full quality of his voice?

A. Not always. In my opinion the recording that did this best was *Manon Lescaut*, with Albanese.

Q. Have you any idea why he never sang Calaf on the stage?

A. It wasn't for lack of encouragement! Mr. Coppicus tried to interest him in the role and took him to the City Center to see *Turandot*. Jussi said no, but that didn't prevent him from often programming "Nessun dorma."

Q. On tour, what sort of schedule did he follow? How did he relax, for instance?

A. Well, to begin with, Anna-Lisa [Mrs. Bjoerling] usually went along, because Jussi wanted her to. He needed companionship very much. The children were in school in Stockholm, under the care of Mrs. Bjoerling's mother. Jussi was a moody person. Between recitals he'd go to the zoo or to the movies—he was crazy about Westerns. Of course, he was often entertained in the communities where he sang, especially if there were any Swedes around. He was the idol of Swedes everywhere. Before a recital he'd drink hot tea or orange juice. He'd rest from two to 4:30 p.m., then have a big dinner at five. He loved steak and always had either a porterhouse or sirloin, because he couldn't get those cuts in Sweden.

Q. And after recitals?

A. He wasn't too fond of giving autographs. After his programs he just wanted to get away and be with friends. One time, after he'd appeared in Constitution Hall, we went to a banquet at the Swedish Embassy. Well, after a while he began feeling good and decided to do some Spanish songs. For greater effect he pulled the cover off the piano and tried to swing it around his shoulders, so he'd look like a torador. The fringes caught on a chandelier, and the crystals began crashing down!

Q. You say that Bjoerling "began feeling good"—presumably after a few drinks?

A. Yes. He did do some drinking between concerts, but not always. I told you he was a moody person. Between recitals he sometimes wavered between depression and exhilaration. He—well, he drank in fits, and no hard liquor, either—just wine. I never knew him to drink on the day of a concert, though, and there were whole seasons when he didn't touch a drop. This is the Jussi I knew. During his seasons with the Met, things may have been different.

Q. But in your experience he never missed a performance because of drinking?

A. Not once. I do recall one time, I think early in the fifties, when Jussi was due to sing Faust in San Antonio and we decided to work our way south in a series of recitals. I went by train to meet him somewhere in Kansas, but when I got there, no Jussi! At seven on the evening of the recital, unknown to me, it was announced over the radio that he wasn't coming. Only later did I find this out, at the hotel desk, along with a message from New York to proceed directly to San Antonio, where I found the opera manager frantic. Jussi hadn't shown up there either! Finally, a call from Mr. Schang of Columbia Artists to go back to Chicago: it turned out Jussi had never left his New York hotel room. He was ill: some sort of nervous ailment affecting his memory, if I remember correctly. He returned to Sweden without doing that Southern tour at all. But his had nothing to do with his drinking.

Q. Did he ever have trouble with his heart before his fatal attack?

A. Yes. He suffered a slight attack in Pasadena in 1960. We had to start his concert half an hour late, but he went on and finished it. He'd gotten pretty

heavy, you know, though he did pay some attention to his diet. If I remember correctly, he'd had attacks before the one in Pasadena.

Q. When was the last time you saw him?

A. At his recital in Los Angeles early in April 1960. He left for Sweden after that. I heard of his death over the radio, on June [sic] 9.

Q. Have you any souvenirs of him? Are you in touch with his family?

A. Oh, yes! For some reason, I still have the atomizer he used on tour. . . . I'm still in touch with Anna-Lisa, whom I saw in Sweden in 1968. . . . Anders . . . met his wife while he was going to school [in Minnesota] I was at their wedding. . . .

Q. How does Bjoerling compare, in your opinion, with other great tenors?

A. It's often been said that he was the logical successor to Caruso, and I quite agree. He sang the same roles, had the same style and even used Caruso's coach for his Italian roles. . . . His Italian diction was perfect, by the way, though he didn't speak the language. And he was not a ham—like Gigli, for instance. Gigli had a fine instrument but wasn't much of a stylist.

Q. What about other tenors of the post-Caruso era—let's say Lauri-Volpi?

A. I heard him in his prime, in the twenties. Let me tell you, he yelled—always trying to outdo and outshout anyone singing with him. Jussi never yelled. He was an artist.

Reference notes: The San Antonio Faust performance was actually on February 10, 1952. Their actual last concert together was in Santa Monica on April 7, 1960.