

Singers, Too, Are Human

by Jussi Björling

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When I was asked to write a guest column for *Music News*, I was a bit puzzled as to the choice of subject. I had never thought of myself as a writer. Upon being offered such an opportunity I was eager for success, but well remembered the story of the two businessmen who were amateur singers. A dispute arose as to which of them had the better voice, and the two men took the controversy to Giuseppe Verdi, the great Italian composer. Verdi heard

them and then turned to one and declared, "You are the worst singer I have ever heard." "Then I win," cried the other triumphantly. "No," said Verdi, "you can't sing at all."

Perhaps I should be discreet and stick to music. Many people have stood in apparent awe of the type of life I lead, and seem to be surprised and pleased by the fact that I recognize them. Such poppycock I always find difficult to understand in America. Singers are little different, nor have they ever been, from the public which idolizes them.

Let me tell you a few opera stories which will show singers as everyday human beings. The first concerns Lilli Lehmann, that severe priestess of song, who never tolerated mistakes in others any more than in herself. Lehmann was a member of Walter Damrosch's opera company at the Metropolitan in 1897. The company was playing Pittsburgh and giving *Fidelio*. In the second act of the opera, Fidelio, disguised as a man, enters a gloomy dungeon and discovers her husband chained to the wall without food or water. While the jailer's back is turned, Fidelio offers her spouse a piece of bread. The husband, or Florestan, as he is called in the opera, was Andrea Dippel, then a bit nearsighted. Lehmann offered the bread and the weak-eyed tenor failed to see her hand in the gloom of the dungeon. Hurriedly Damrosch signaled for a repeat and again the bread was offered and again the tenor failed to take it. A third time, and as the or-

chestra was preparing for a fourth repeat, Lilli Lehmann's exasperated stage whisper cut to the back of the theater, "What the hell's the matter with you? Do you want it buttered?"

Most singers fear critics above the public, managers or even their fellow artists. The most stinging rebuke I ever saw was administered by Pitts Sanborn, deceased critic of the *New York Telegram*, who, reporting on a *Faust* performance of the evening before, remarked: "The best of the cast was the prompter, who, while never visible was always audible, which is more than can be said for the singers, who, while always visible were practically never audible."

Perhaps the most famous of all living critics is George Bernard Shaw. The nonagenarian's musical criticisms in London in the late 1880s set a new standard of musical writing which is the backbone of today's criticisms. While it has been over 60 years since Shaw wrote musical criticisms, he has not yet lost his caustic wit. Several years ago the playwright visited a restaurant in London for lunch. He was immediately recognized by the leader of the local jazz orchestra who, remembering Shaw's championship of Wagner in the 1880s and 1890s in England, sent for music and proceeded to massacre *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*. Shaw stood it as long as he could, and then called the leader of the orchestra to his table with an imperious gesture. The conductor, sweating and panting, raced to Shaw's table and bowed low. "Can you play anything," demanded the playwright coldly. "Oh yes sir," eagerly replied the conductor. "Then," snorted Shaw, "until I have finished my lunch, go play dominoes."

Some people always seem envious of the large amounts of money allegedly "earned" by singers for opera and concert work. This might have been true

In *Pagliacci*, a powerful human connection



in the past, but income taxes these days leave little after expenses are paid. Singers today yearn for the good old days, when, for example, Adelina Patti, the great coloratura, was preparing to leave Russia after a tremendous concert and opera tour. Czar Nicolas II asked her how much she would want to stay for a year in Moscow as leading soprano of the Imperial Opera.

Patti demanded approximately \$500,000. The astounded Czar stammered, "But that is more than I pay all my field marshals!" Patti smiled demurely, "Then, your majesty, I suggest you get one of your field marshals to sing at the opera for you."

Fame sometimes is not all that it is cracked up to be. Consider the story of a friend of mine who recently acquired a life-size portrait of Enrico Caruso as Dick Johnson in Puccini's *Fanciulla del West*. He hung it over his bed at a time when his maid was in the apartment. "Who is that," she inquired. Our friend was shocked. "Why, Mary," he exclaimed, "that's Caruso." "Oh," answered the satisfied maid, "Robinson Caruso."

I suppose I should drag myself into this somehow. Shortly after my Metropolitan debut in *Bohème*, a Swedish friend of mine tried to get an Italian to go hear me in performance, and claimed that I would be liked by the Italian as much as any of Italy's former and present stars. Needless to say the Swede was scoffed at, but finally the two went to a *Bohème* performance. In the middle of the first act shortly before the aria, "Che gelida manina," the Italian rose and prepared to depart. "Wait a minute," his friend begged, "and you will yet be convinced." "I know," the Italian replied, "that is why I'm leaving now."

Joan Baez in Borlänge

by Stefan Olmårs

Sunday November 1, 2009, my wife Christina and I had been in the car for an hour, driving to a concert. My cell phone rang, and there was to be no concert for us. A voice said, "Hi, I'm Joan Baez's assistant. Is there any way you could help Joan come to Borlänge to Jussi's grave and to see the Museum?"

I knew Joan was singing at Cirkus (a Stockholm venue) on November 3rd, and I thought that she would want to concentrate on her performance, and come to Borlänge the day after the concert. But no, the next day, Monday, was when she wanted to come.

OK, OK, I said. I'll try. I finally got Jan-Olof Damberg on the phone, and discovered that he and Harald Henrysson had already planned to be at the Museum on Monday, even though it was officially not open. You also need to have a little luck in life! Then I got train schedules and booked tickets for Joan and her tour manager for Monday. Her tour manager's name, by the way, is James Stewart.

After a really early train ride to Stockholm, I met Joan and her manager at their hotel, bringing my own taxi, just for safety's sake. We made it to the train on time and agreed that there would be no media at the graveside, and only at the very end of the Museum visit so she could feel free to enjoy her time there.

The time passed quickly, and we were soon in Borlänge. The formidable head of the Borlänge cultural department, Elsy Andersson, met us at the



Joan gets close to Jussi

train, along with Harald Henrysson, and hauled us over to Stora Tuna Church. I wanted us to start there while there was still daylight. Elsy, who has been very important for the Museum over the years, brought her camera and took some pictures in the churchyard. Joan and Jim lit a candle next to the gravestone, and he added a small evergreen wreath. I understood that the time at Jussi's grave was something really important for Joan, something she had looked forward to for many years—and something we who were with her will not forget.

And then we went on to the Museum, first meeting Jan-Olof Damberg, the new Museum Curator. He, Elsy and Harald gave us a warm welcome