

Jussi Björling in Norway

by Kristian Krogholm

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Jussi Björling on May 17, 1952

That Jussi Björling's reputation as one of the greatest singers is upheld all over the globe 45 years after his death, is quite remarkable and unique. And his star is certainly not shining any less brightly in Sweden's neighbor-country, Norway. Before Christmas 1995, BMG in Norway released an anthology with Jussi Björling which they called "The best of Jussi." With hardly any advertising at all, it easily sold more than any other

Christmas CD that year, and it has been more or less constantly in the top five best-selling classical records in Norway ever since. Surely, it must be BMG's best selling classical record in Norway ever. Jussi Björling's studio version of Adam's "Cantique de Noël" ("O helga natt") from 1959 is played continually on Norwegian radio stations during the Christmas season.

To many of us, Jussi's voice seems to reflect Norwegian scenery. This singer offers more than high notes as pure and focused as laser beams and low notes just as resonant and projecting as the highest notes. In addition, he offers something much more to the listener; he communicates with the hearts of whoever listens to those soaring free notes. There is so much of beautiful fjords, breathtaking waterfalls, deep forests and wild mountains in that voice; when he thunders out his "Till havs," it surely makes you think of the forces of nature.

Jussi Björling didn't sing as many concerts in Norway as he did in the other two Nordic countries of Denmark and Finland. He sang two opera performances and six concerts between 1934 and 1959. It is possible that he already had sung in Norway as a child with the Björling Quartet but that has yet to be confirmed.

His first performances in Norway as a tenor were in 1934, when he came with the Stockholm Opera to Oslo to perform in *Don Giovanni* and *Fanac*. The reviews actually don't tell much

about his singing, although it was commented that Björling surely has a fine voice. Most of the reviews are about his teacher and mentor John Forsell, and his interpretation of Don Giovanni.

Thirteen more years would pass before Björling's next performance, this time in Oslo, on August 1947, in a joint concert with the baritone Joel Berglund at the Misjonshuset in Calmeyergaten. The hall held over 4000 people and the crowd received the two Swedes' singing with a standing ovation. Jussi suffered from serious back trouble at this time (as one can read in the biography *Jussi*), and had to leave the stage after his first song. After a break he returned to sing "Addio alla madre" with such power that he received according to *Morgenbladet* an avalanche of applause. The *Verdens Gang* critic wrote "His voice is mighty and powerful, and when he sings at full voice, the sound sends shivers down the spine of many a listener." Berglund's singing also received much praise.

Aftenposten writes that the King received the two Swedish singers at the Royal Castle. And when the King heard that Björling had brought his oldest son Anders with him, he expressed a wish to meet him. The pianist Robert Levin accompanied the two singers, as he would also do on two more occasions for Jussi in 1959, in Oslo and in Porsgrunn.

Five more years passed before Jussi returned to Norway. On the Norwegian National Day on May 17th 1952, there was a great concert at the Sports Stadium Jordal Amfi with many famous Norwegian actors and artists participating, and Anne Brown and Jussi Björling represented the musical part of the program together with pianist Kåre Siem. According to the reviews, Jussi was in his absolute best



The May 17, 1952 concert

form on this occasion. His singing brought the audience to ecstasy and the critics tried to outdo one another in praising him. Perhaps Erling Westher in *Arbeiderbladet* summed it all up best by writing, "About Jussi Björling, one can only say: he came, he sang and he conquered. And his victory was great." He was introduced as "Tenor World Champion" and as *Verdens Gang* writes, "That title certainly no one would deny him afterwards." After the singers' last encores, the audience of 7000 screamed like mad people and many tried to force their way up to the

stage, but they were held back by the police. Björling sang songs by Grieg, Sibelius and Söderman and several arias from *LAfricaine*, *La Gioconda*, *Andrea Chenier*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Tosca*, then several encores, among others "Mattinata." *Aftenposten* wrote, "Jussi Björling was introduced as the world's greatest tenor and it must be admitted that he sang more beautifully than anyone could have imagined. What pure gold he has in that divine voice! And what we learned of his artistry was that it was of no less world class than his singing. The way he can shape a phrase: Gigli is obviously not the only one who can do that." After the concert the host Finn Amundsen told the audience, "Now we can all go home and say that we have heard real singing."

Two years later, on June 9th 1954, Björling was invited to the Festspillene in Bergen, the native town of Edvard Grieg and the violinist Ole Bull. This time, he was not in good vocal form, as can easily be heard on the recording made of the concert and released on Bluebell. He had had serious vocal trouble for quite some time due to a severe laryngitis, and this had kept him out of action almost entirely since the late Fall of 1953, when he had to leave in the middle of a performance of *Faust* at the Metropolitan because the voice simply faded away. Now he was here to honor the people of Bergen with his presence, but it was obvious also through the reviews afterwards that he was vocally indisposed. In spite of his vocal troubles, *Morgenbladet* wrote, "But there is still only one Jussi. Although he had to fight with his indisposition, he gave ample proof of possessing one of the most beautiful tenor voices of today, and his direct, natural interpretations and essential musicality gave us the feeling of hearing true art. His interpretation of

"En drøm" received an ovation from the audience, but he was modest and shared the applause with the orchestra and conductor Carl Garaguly."

In a short interview afterwards, Bergens Tidens's journalist asked Björling what he thought about Bing Crosby, who also had sung on television, and the singer replied, "Sure, we have sung on television both of us. The only difference is that Bing gets forty thousand dollars and I only three. It is strange that the more you try to produce real art, the less it pays." And of course Jussi Björling was right. This delusion is obvious when looking at the music stars of today (mainly stars within pop/rock music), many of whom cannot produce even a single note which is not off key or poorly produced in some way. But many of these stars get much praise from the so-called musical experts in TV, radio and media elsewhere. This is certainly the time for idolizing mediocrity, and is an enormous contrast to the power and energy projecting from Jussi Björling's absolutely perfect and musical voice.

In June, 1955, Björling returned to Oslo for a concert at Jordal Amfi stadium with the soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and the Filharmonisk Selskaps Orkester under the direction of Dean Dixon. As usual, the journalists tracked him down as fast as they could, looking for headlines after his arrival in Oslo. *Aftenposten* writes the day before the concert: "It was about midnight when we finally met Jussi Björling at the Continental Hotel, eating an enormous hamburger. He wasn't particularly happy or talkative. He couldn't say anything that we didn't already know, as everything he does is always in the papers anyway.—"Do you look forward to singing with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf?"—"Mmmmm," Björling is eating his hamburger—"There is no onion on this burger," he



May 26, 1959

says and doesn't seem much happier (note: It seems never to have occurred to the journalist that the singer probably would have preferred to eat in peace and quiet). But then he eventually began to talk, and said he had been singing opera in Sweden lately, and also with Aase Nordmo-Løvberg: "Splendid, a very fine voice," Björling says. "She will become a new Flagstad before long." The concert turned out to be another "smashing success" as *Verdens Gang* writes. According to *Dagbladet*, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf sang better than ever before: "I cannot remember hearing her sing more beautifully, more tenderly and with a more sensitive phrasing." *Aftenposten* wrote about Björling, "Jussi Björling's tenor with its amazingly radiant sound in the upper register had an extraordinary effect on the listeners." King Haakon heard the concert together with 7000 other people.

Jussi Björling had to cancel his announced concert in Skien in 1958 due to illness. He had just appeared in *Tosca* at the Stockholm opera with Birgit Nilsson in May, but had been forced to stop after one act. He had gotten yet another case of laryngitis (as described in *Jussi*, pp. 308-9). He returned to Norway however in fine form in the spring of 1959 for two concerts. Björling at this stage was already seriously ill with heart failure, but still kept up an incredible pace with a full program. The first concert was at the Universitets Aula (Hall) in Oslo and again the audience went completely wild when hearing that voice. It could almost seem that people had forgotten how unbelievably good he actually was. *Verdens Gang* writes: "KING JUSSI. It was certainly a fantastic experience to hear Jussi Björling's concert yesterday. It is just too rare that we get to hear such vocal splendour in the Aula. This singer possesses such an

amazingly brilliant singing voice. There seem not to be any limits for what that voice can do." *Arbeiderbladet* writes: "The voice is large and projecting. The very heart of the voice is so incredibly pure and resonant, something which you seldom or never find in other tenors. And the singer executes all technical demands with superb brilliance. In addition he is a fine artist who not for a moment let go of the true meaning of what he interprets ...like in "Jeg elsker dig" and "En drøm"—truly a dream both vocally and musically. Superbly great art from a rich and generous mind."

Aftenposten wrote, "If anyone has a golden voice, then it is certainly Jussi Björling. Yesterday in the Aula one sat there in constant amazement at how beautiful a sound the human voice can produce." And from the auditorium a female spectator said, "My God, what a tenor! Surely there isn't anyone who is better!" *Morgenbladet* wrote "It was when he got to the operatic arias when you could really hear the full voice in all its splendour. The ringing high notes which he can hold forever make the chandeliers 'shiver' and hearts beat twice as fast. In the Italian arias from *Fedora* and *Andrea Chenier*, there was a warm glow in his Nordic voice which explains why Jussi Björling is called the new Caruso." The concert was sold out, and the applause so enormous that one was afraid that the Aula would explode from all the noise. Björling concluded the concert with Richard Strauss's "Zueignung."

Two days later he sang a concert in Porsgrunn about which one could read in *Porsgrunns Dagblad*, "What vocal brilliance! What a natural gift! What superb vocal nuances, and what complete command of all vocal details that a song could ask for, from the most thundering dramatic high notes of an aria to the most tender diminuendo of

a romance. We all gathered up here in Porsgrunns Movie Hall yesterday with the greatest of expectations for this Jussi Björling concert. But the meeting with the greatest tenor in the world was more than any of us could have wished or hoped or even dreamed of. This was singing of absolutely world class!...Ecstatic, wild cheering and shouting before and after each song or aria. Everyone stood on their feet screaming like mad towards the greatest tenor of our time who responded generously with encores. Robert Levin who accompanied the singer on piano received his well-earned share of the applause."

A year and half later the voice was gone from this world. But he is still loved in Norway and elsewhere in the world, because the world will not hear a voice like his again. ■

Translation by the author

Editor's note: Kristian Krogholm is a language teacher in Torød, Norway, who has lived in Italy for several years. He has researched the Björling career and written on new recordings for the US, UK, and Scandinavian chapters of the Björling Society. During summers he sails competitively in Norway.