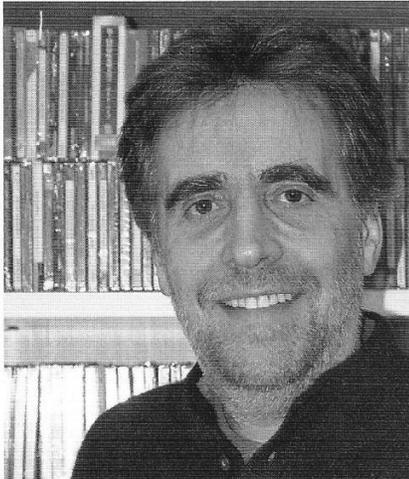


Writing about Jussi's Recordings,

by Stephen Hastings



Stephen Hastings

In his 1945 autobiography Jussi Björling advocated setting up a national archive of sound recordings. There is thus no doubting his awareness of the significance of his own legacy in this field, as well as that of earlier singers like Caruso. The Neapolitan of course was the tenor who influenced the adult Björling more than any other, and in writing a full-length study of Jussi's most significant recordings—building on the invaluable research undertaken by Harald Henrysson for his *PHONOGRAPHY*—I have come across multiple examples of that influence.

Comparison, not only with Caruso but also with tens of other tenors, plays a fundamental role in my book, and has made it possible to see Björling's career within the broader context of tenor singing in the 20th century, helping me to assess more objectively his specific qualities as an interpreter in a very broad repertoire (the principal chapters range from Adam to Wagner). And of course it has been

equally instructive to compare the Björling of the 1950s with his earlier self. Sometimes the singer in his forties seems unable to match his earlier achievements (his 1930s recordings of Beethoven's "Adelaide", Meyerbeer's "O paradiso" and Verdi's *Il trovatore* were in some ways never surpassed). In other contexts maturity—which brought with it a denser and sometimes darker lower-middle register—resulted in a greater psychological awareness. This is particularly true of the music of Puccini, whose erotic undercurrents in some ways eluded the younger Björling. Jussi's performances as Cavaradossi and Des Grieux continued to improve right up to 1959. Other times his interpretative path seems to move in a circle: the Garden Scene in his final Met *Faust* in 1959 echoes delightfully the fragrant lyricism of his broadcast from Vienna twenty-two years earlier.

It would be mistaken however to think of these developments in terms of conscious interpretative decisions. Björling had one of the most refined musical sensibilities of the 20th century (combined with a voice capable of expressing that refinement to a rare degree), but his phrasing was largely instinctive. This was especially true in recital, where there is no doubt that it was Jussi who dictated the tempi, while in opera and concert performances he could be quite strongly influenced by the conductor and the overall musical context. Notice for example how the spacious tempi of Tor Mann in broadcast arias by Puccini and Mascagni (1944-45) are exploited by the tenor to explore different facets of the music. He also adds extra *portamenti* to maintain the architec-

tural solidity of those arias at a slower pace. And he was clearly inspired by the presence of a great musician on the podium, as his performances with Toscanini, De Sabata, Mitropoulos and Beecham demonstrate.

Björling's impeccable sense of style derived not from any real historical knowledge of performance practice but from his ability to understand the music from within, drawing inspiration from the instrumental accompaniment. In the 1930s his *mezza voce* often had the haunting quality of a woodwind instrument of surpassing beauty. The sweetness of his phrasing in Gounod's "Salut! demeure" and Massenet's "Élégie" matches that of the solo violin, while in "Adelaide" or Mozart's "Il mio tesoro" the pearly purity of the piano accompaniment is echoed to uniquely satisfying effect.

Writing about vocal performances has always been a challenge: in this book I try on the one hand to describe as objectively as possible what Björling does in musical terms (regarding such things as duration, volume, pitch, diction and embellishments), while at the same time interpreting the emotional effect of his phrasing as freely as I think necessary, without any diplomatic adjustments of tone, in the hope however that at least some of my impressions will mesh creatively with the reader's own.

THE BJÖRLING SOUND: A RECORDED LEGACY, by Stephen Hastings, will be published in the late Fall by Boydell and Brewer. ■