

Jussi Björling's Italian songs

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Enrico Caruso, 1873-1921

Italian songs were not a particularly large part of JB's repertoire, but the existing recordings show that in this smaller format—as in opera—he could compete well with native singers. We know that Jussi sang 11 different songs at some time, and nine of those are preserved (I do not include “Se i miei sospiri,” which is not of Italian origin although written to an Italian text, and has been attributed to Alessandro Stradella. Nor is “Dreams of long ago,” included, the song written

by Enrico Caruso—and sung by Jussi in Swedish—because the original is in English).

JB recorded four Italian songs in his youth in Swedish, but of those, Giambattista De Curtis's “Carmela” and Enrico Toselli's “Serenata” did not actually belong to his repertoire. Leoncavallo's “Mattinata” on the contrary, was one of his early favorites, already sung when he was a member of the Björling Quartet. It was also one of the songs he auditioned with at HMV (recently released for the first time, with the other test recording from 1929, on Testament), and ‘officially’ recorded the following year, always in Swedish. His gramophone recording in the original language came in 1944. Today one can also hear two concert recordings on CD, and see Jussi sing the song from the 1950 *Voice of Firestone* program.

“Torna a Surriento,” composed by Ernesto De Curtis with lyrics by his brother Giambattista, mentioned above, was also one of Jussi Björling's earliest recordings—in a Swedish version as “Gondolsång,” with the setting moved from Sorrento on the Gulf of Naples, to Venice in the North. He often sang the same song in concert in later years, but in the Neapolitan original. There are two recordings from Gröna Lund, and it was sung as an encore at Skansen on August 20, 1960, at his very last performance. A reviewer actually stated that it was his final—fifth—encore at his very last concert, but another audience member thinks

he remembers that Jussi sang “Sverige” after the Neapolitan song.

“La danza” by Rossini, and “Funiculi, funicula” by Luigi Denza, were sometimes in Jussi's repertoire during his early years. With the tarantella “La danza” in Swedish, he got a school class to dance out of excitement when he unknowingly sang it on school radio in the film *Fram för framgång* (one wonders how students would react today.....). Both it and “Funiculi” (which was written to publicize a funicular to the top of Vesuvius) were recorded in 1940 from one of Jussi's *Ford Hour* concerts. In any case, we know that he sang “Santa Lucia” at “Busstomtens Aquacade Festival” at the Sports Palace in Stockholm on the 16th of December, 1934. There he appeared for the first time together with his future wife, Anna-Lisa, the previous year's Lucia. “Canta pe' me” by Ernesto De Curtis is also a song which was on Jussi's recital program on at least one occasion, in June of 1952 at Albert Hall.

Besides “Mattinata,” already mentioned, Jussi recorded three Italian songs in the original language in the studio. One of Jussi's first recordings for the international market was Eduardo Di Capua's “O sole mio” in 1937 (note that the ‘O is actually the truncated article), but he seldom sang it in concert. His singer-colleague Robert Merrill has told about how Jussi once spontaneously took up the song in a Roman restaurant, accompanied by street musicians, and “Jussi Bjoerling sang as I have heard no other mortal sing.”

The two songs that remain, “Ideale” and “L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra,” were both written by the master of Italian song, Francesco Paolo Tosti. He was born in 1846 in Ortona sul Mare in the middle of the Adriatic coast, and already at the age of 12 year was at the

Naples Conservatory where he studied violin and composition. In 1870 he moved to Rome, and made his debut with a concert where, in his beautiful lyric tenor voice, he sang his own compositions and also performed on the piano. Princess Margherita of Savoy, later Queen of Italy, was in the audience and hired Tosti as her singing teacher and music librarian. In Rome, he made contact with the Ricordi music publishers, who would publish almost all of his works, over 400 songs. In 1880, he settled in London, and was, at the same time that he continued to compose, a well-known singing teacher—here too, at the Court, but also active at Covent Garden opera—and professor at the Royal Academy of Music. He became a British citizen in 1906, which created resentment in Italy, and was knighted two years later (Sir Paolo Tosti is also his correct title). He returned to Italy in 1912, and died in Rome in 1916.

It has been said that Tosti wrote some of the most sincerely romantic and passionate songs that there are in any language. During the decades before WW I, there were few living composers whose songs could compete with his in popularity on the concert stage and in the drawing room. Puccini was one of Tosti's friends and is considered to have been musically influenced by him. After the First World War, Tosti's songs began to seem old-fashioned, but in later years, several famous singers have revived interest in them. CDs devoted only to Tosti songs have been recorded by the tenors Carlo Bergonzi, Ben Heppner and Dennis O'Neill, among others.

Tosti mostly wrote his songs to the texts of contemporary poets. The name of the author of "Ideale" composed in 1882, was Carmelo Errica, while "L'alba separa" was the second of four "Canzoni d'amaranta" from 1907

with texts by the multi-talented Gabriele D'Annunzio, longtime friend of the composer and a spectacular personage who deserves some attention. As a writer, D'Annunzio devoted himself successfully to poetry—he published his first poems already at the age of 16—as well as novels, plays and journalism, and he is regarded as one of the foremost proponents of the "Decadence" movement, which stressed the bizarre and irrational.

Literature was far from his only field of activity, and his dramatic life stands in stark contrast to Tosti's. D'Annunzio, who was born in 1863 in Pescara, just North of Tosti's birthplace Ortona, reached literary fame in the 1890s, and sat in Parliament for a few years, but in 1910 he was forced into exile in France because of debts due to his lavish lifestyle. He returned to Italy when WW I broke out, became known as a fighter pilot, and lost an eye in the war. D'Annunzio then headed an Italian militia unit which occupied Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia) in 1919, an area contested between Italy and Yugoslavia.

He proclaimed a Fascist government in Fiume, and named himself Duce there, which led to a conflict with the democratic Italian government. The whole thing ended with D'Annunzio declaring war on Italy, and he was driven out of Fiume shortly thereafter. His ideas came to have a strong influence on Mussolini and on the development of Fascism, but he never formally joined the Fascist Party. Gabriele D'Annunzio (knighted as Prince of Montenevoso) died in 1938, and was buried in a magnificent mausoleum on the shore of Lake Garda, where he lived during the last years of his life.

"Ideale" was the first of the two Tosti songs which entered Jussi Björling's repertoire. The first time he is known to have sung it was in the Summer of 1936 and the next year he recorded it



Gabriele D'Annunzio shown on a stamp as Duce of Fiume in 1920. "hic manebimus optime (we are better off staying here)" is an old Roman citation referring to his decisiveness.

in Stockholm with Nils Grevillius. He recorded a version with piano in 1952, and from the 50s there are several live recordings from Sweden and America. The last time he seems to have sung it was on his final American tour in Spring of 1960. Below, the text in Italian and in English translation.

Ideale

Io ti seguì, com'iride di pace
Lungo le vie del cielo;
Io ti seguì come un'amica face
Della notte nel velo.

E ti sentii nella luce, nell'aria,
Nel profumo dei fiori;
E fu piena la stanza solitaria
Di te, dei tuoi splendori.

In te rapito, al suon de la tua voce
Lungamente sognai;
E de la terra ogni affano, ogni croce
In quel giorno scordai.

Torna, caro ideal, torna un istante
a sorridermi ancora
E a me risplenderà, nel tuo sembiante,
Una novella aurora, una novella aurora,
Torna, caro ideal, torna, torna!

I followed you like a rainbow of peace
 A long way across the sky;
 I followed you like a friendly face
 Of the night under a veil.
 And I felt you in the light, in the air,
 In the scent of the flowers;
 And the solitary room was full of you,
 Of your splendors.
 Captivated by you,
 By the sound of your voice
 A long time I dreamed,
 And all the worry of the earth,
 every cross
 In that day is forgotten.
 Return, beloved ideal,
 Return for an instant.
 Give me a smile again,
 And to me the sparkle of your
 countenance
 Will be a new dawn.
 ... a new dawn.

In November of 1948, when Jussi Björling was to sing on the prestigious radio program, *The Telephone Hour*, his agent Fred Schang, who had once worked for Caruso, wanted to find something new for the repertoire



Francesco Paolo Tosti, 1846-1916

which would fit Jussi perfectly. Schang thought of "L'Alba separa," often sung by Caruso as an encore. He called Jussi to his office and played the Caruso recording from 1917. In JUSSI, Anna-Lisa tells the story.

"Just listen to the way Caruso sings it," Freddie said. When the record was over, Jussi said, "Play it again!" Freddie did. "Again!" commanded Jussi. This time he took off his tie, unbuttoned his collar, and at the top of his voice, sang along with Caruso. "Anna-Lisa, he sang it with such power that the windows rattled!"

On the radio program, the song was a sensation, the music was re-published as "sung by Jussi Bjoerling," and Jussi recorded it the following year in Sweden with Grevillius. He liked to hear Caruso's performance—which was a model for his own—and that record stayed on his turntable on Siarö for a long time (I myself have seen it, but the machine itself is now at the Björling Museum).

Even if the song was most closely tied to Caruso—one of Tosti's friends—who had launched it, it hadn't been entirely forgotten. Another well-known tenor, Tito Schipa, had, for example, recorded it in 1938. Jussi continued to sing "L'Alba" on his 1949 American Spring tour. In April he performed it in a rather surprising connection in the *Sweden in Music* concert at Carnegie Hall. Maybe his temporary accompanist James Quillian didn't have more Swedish songs in his repertoire? The first performance in Sweden was probably at Gröna Lund on June 16, 1949, when a reviewer noted as an encore something that he prudently called "a thing by Tosti." Jussi sang it, in any case, up to 1959.

"L'Alba" is regarded as one of Tosti's best songs. It has, like many of his songs, a melancholically sensual char-

acter. It deals with love, night, death and eternity, themes common to D'Annunzio's sonorous poetry, and ends with a powerful climax in what somebody called a "Liebestod light." Few have sung it with more intensity than Jussi Björling.

L'Alba separa dalla luce l'ombra

L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra,
 E la mia voluttà dal mio desire.
 O dolci stelle, è l'ora di morire.
 Un più divino amor dal ciel vi sgombra.

Pupille ardenti, O voi senza ritorno
 Stelle tristi, spegnetevi incorrotte!
 Morir debbo. Veder non voglio il giorno,
 Per amor del mio sogno e della notte.

Chiudimi, O Notte, nel tuo sen materno,
 Mentre la terra pallida s'irrorra.
 Ma che dal sangue mio nasca l'aurora
 E dal sogno mio breve il sole eterno!

The dawn divides the darkness
 from light,
 And my sensual pleasure from
 my desire,
 O sweet stars, it is the hour of death.
 A love more holy clears you from
 the skies.

Gleaming eyes, O you who'll ne'er
 return,
 Sad stars, snuff out your uncorrupted
 light!
 I must die, I do not want to see the day,
 For love of my own dream and of the
 night.

Envelop me,
 O Night, in your maternal breast,
 While the pale earth bathes itself in dew;
 But let the dawn rise from my blood
 And from my brief dream the eternal
 sun!

*Translation Harald Henrysson
 and Sue Flaster*