

Report on JBS's Nordic Travels, July 2007

Sweden Days, July 4-10

by Sue Flaster

July 4-7 in Dalarna province, mostly Borlänge and Mora

The 2007 Summer JBS Swedish safari opened on July 4th in Borlänge at the Jussi Björling Museum there, a place that some of us regard as the “center of the universe.” This year’s Museum program was unusual in the emphasis on singers other than JB, and on aspects of Jussi in areas other than singing. Really. Harald welcomed all with good cheer (and a new haircut), and we got a running start on a couple of very full days. Music journalist Göran Forsling gave us a splendid overview of Swedish singers of the past on Wednesday morning, followed in the afternoon by Museum summer staffer Roger Alderstrand, who discussed—with illustrations—Jussi in caricature. Roger’s favorites, and ours, were the drawings more clearly done out of a spirit of affection.

We learned about more Scandinavian singers on Thursday, with a presentation by Ragnhild Nyhus, Director of Norway’s Flagstad Museum, followed by local music critic (and official transfer engineer for Bluebell Records) Christer Eklund who spoke about the Kerstin Thorborg archive in nearby Falun. A subset of our group went off to the resort town of Siljansnäs to hear young mezzo-soprano Ann-Kristin Jones [pronounced “You-nes”] with the Dala Sinfonietta in a program of Nordic songs by Grieg and Alfvén. The scenery along Lake Siljan was gor-

geous on this lovely Swedish evening, and the concert fit that mood with fresh vibrant singing from local favorite Ms. Jones: watch for a big career for this mezzo-soprano from Leksand!

Friday afternoon was devoted to Jussi and an assortment of connections to sports, however tenuous. Jan-Olof Damberg spoke on Jussi as participant, observer, and performer at opening ceremonies live and televised. Harald wrapped up Friday with a carefully researched overview of everything we know about David Björling’s early years and the beginnings of the Björling Male Quartet.

Saturday morning, we loaded on our enormous bus for the first time, and set off first for a quiet visit to Stora Tuna’s church and its graveyard with Jussi and many family members. Then we headed north to Mora and the Anders Zorn Museum. The bus had huge signs on the sides, which announced that we were the “Jussi



Poster advertising a concert to be given by David Björling, June 1912, found early in 2007 by Harald in the archives of the province of Dalarna (previously hidden in a Stockholm archive).

Raymond Björling in concert at Mora Church.



Kerstin Meyer, more beautiful year by year



Björling Society-USA,” and folks stopped and stared, in amazement, I think.

Kerstin Meyer joined us in Mora, and stayed with the group for the remainder of the Swedish part of the tour. She was unfailingly kind to all, generous with her time and energy and willing to listen patiently to any and all.

Raymond Björling gave a lovely concert at the “Music on Lake Siljan” Festival, with a mixture of folk tunes, arias and other concert pieces. The

selections were not always familiar and included some songs from contemporary musicals, but Raymond’s warmth and ease in the material was truly delightful. I’ve heard him sing quite a few times now, and felt that these charming songs might have been written for him.

July 8-9 in Hälsingland Province

Harald, Dan, and Hans Thunström working together had procured for us the huge bus mentioned earlier, together with our young, patient, and good-humored driver, Björn. We set off first for Bolnäs where we were joined by Stefan Olmårs and a contingent from the Scandinavian JB Society. First stop was coffee and cake: the Swedes always have their priorities in order.

Stefan Johansson, Chief Dramaturg of the Royal Opera, joined the group in Bolnäs, and was—as always—a highly informed, articulate, and entertaining companion during the rest of our program in Sweden.

Stefan O. had us tightly scheduled, and we continued our day with a visit to the only linen mill remaining in Scandinavia (where we saw linen being made the really OLD way), then on to Strömsbruk for some of David Björling’s early history, a short bus tour of historical houses in Hälsingland, more coffee and cake—this time at Stefan’s home, courtesy of Christina Olmårs, and finally dinner at Järvsöbaden and at last to bed.

Stefan O. was the usual masterful if perhaps overly ambitious organizer, and we spent several hours traveling between historical places. The passing impressions of Hälsingland’s painted houses made us all want to see more,

and Stefan also arranged that. Monday we got to sleep in a bit, and then gathered to listen to Bertil Bengtsson speak on the history of the Swedish singing tradition. There were plenty of good questions and comments, followed by yet another typical smörgåsbord lunch.

Afternoon travel included a local folk museum in Edsbyn, which was truly extraordinarily fine, both in the quality of exhibits—mostly local folk art—and the quality of the presentations themselves. Our two traveling curators were deeply impressed. A highpoint on Monday was the annual “Jussi in Our Hearts” concert at Voxna Church. Posters identified the event as a “Jussifest,” and it truly was. Our singers were Scandinavian Society President baritone Bengt Krantz, up and coming young tenor Mats Carlsson, and local talent (tenor and weight lifter) Hans Qvarfell.

Krantz and Carlsson, the professionals, gave us a full program of stirring Swedish songs and arias and duets from opera. But the surprise of the event was elderly and masterful bass-baritone Torsten Föllinger, who sang “Ol’ man river.” There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

(Note: This concert is available as a Sällskapet CD, for further information check with the JB Museum.)

We concluded, as always, with the whole audience singing “Land, du välsignade,” and then we were off to Voxna Herrgård for a lovely smörgåsbord dinner.

Two further major musical events of the day still awaited us after dinner: Stefan Olmårs described an interview he had managed with Renee Fleming, and then our magnificent Kerstin Meyer spoke eloquently about her career and especially on her early encounters with our tenor.

Highlights from her Bluebell aria



Jussi’s grave at Stora Tuna Church

Eldon tells Göran Forsling about seeing Kirsten Thorborg in San Francisco (in 1943 and still a teenager).



CD were played, gorgeous scenes from *Carmen* as well as the 'Ai nostri monti' duet from *Trovatore*, with Jussi (1960).

The Bluebell CD shows this great artist's enormous range, with mostly broadcast material from 1954-1972 in scenes from *Mignon* to *Jenufa*, *Samson* and *Don Carlo* to *Walküre* and *Elektra*, *Prince Igor* and *Singoalla* to Stravinsky's *Rake* (Baba) and Offenbach's *Tales* (Nicklaus).

On Monday morning, we had a brief stop for an interview, and then had a look in at Stefan's own painted house, where his son Olle and Olle's new bride will be living.

Most of the Swedes left us at Bolnäs to return to their homes via train, and the rest of us rode on to Stockholm's ferry terminal for our overnight float to Helsinki.

(Members of JBS-USA and JBAS-UK traveling with us included Alex & Bea Bobotek, Steve Crowley & Kathriona Murphy, Sue Flaster & Harald Henryrson, Karl-Heinz Fuhrberg, Vivienne & David Hill, Linda & Beau Kaplan, Desmond Lockett, Dan Shea, Sue & Young So, Don Thomson, and Eldon Wolf.)

July 10-20 in Lahti, Savonlinna, and Helsinki: Across the Baltic and further adventures in Finland.

by David Hill

After arriving in Stockholm (July 10), we bid a fond farewell to our bus driver, Björn, and most of our Swedish companions, and boarded the Silja-line ferry *Symphony* for Helsinki. The ship was more of a floating shopping mall than a cruise ship, but a good time was had by all as we spread ourselves from Commodore Class to Steerage. Some of us slept, some took in the Casino and bar, and Don thought that he had been able to get a glimpse of Siarö. A peaceful night, the Baltic was very calm, and by daylight we were steaming amongst the islands of the Helsinki archipelago.

After docking at the Helsinki city

terminal we left the ship and moved directly to our waiting bus, and headed for Savonlinna with a short stop along the way at Lahti, home of an annual Sibelius festival. There thanks to JBS-USA members Ossi and Karin Rahkonen, a pleasant lunch-meeting on board the restaurant boat *Ilona* had been arranged. We were greeted by Jouko Skinnari, Member of Parliament from Lahti who gave us some insights on how the political process worked to help bring the recently constructed Sibelius Hall to Lahti (it wasn't easy, though now everyone wants part of the credit!). Then we were given a private tour of this magnificent concert hall by its en-

The JBS bus, July 2007



Jouko Skinnari, MP for Lahte at Sibelius Hall

