

Jussi Björling's Canio on Stage

by Harald Henrysson



With Einar Larsson as Tonio, Stockholm, January 1936.



The theatrical troupe arrives, Vienna, spring 1937.

Canio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* occupies a special position in Jussi Björling's repertoire. During the twenty years he sang the role (1936-55), he gave only twenty performances, always in Swedish and almost always at the Stockholm Opera (the exceptions: three early performances in Germany and Austria). The present article will follow his reviews, in chronological order; they show that his singing was found brilliant from the very beginning while his acting developed over the years, even if some reviewers always retained their reservations in that respect.

Jussi Björling made his *Pagliacci* debut in Stockholm on 11 January 1936. Already by that early date he had

learnt and sung 45 opera and operetta roles, and thus the role of Canio became his 46th role of the 55 which would comprise his total stage repertoire. *Pagliacci* was one of the most popular operas in Stockholm, where it had been offered since 1893. This was the 334th performance of the opera, given in a production directed by Ragnar Hyltén-Cavallius and with *Prima-ballerina*, a ballet choreographed to Offenbach's music, filling out the evening. The public interest was not overwhelming—the opera house was reportedly only half filled—but the Stockholm critics didn't miss the occasion and their reports give us a good idea of Jussi's performance in his new role. Conducting Jussi's *Pagliacci*

debut was Herbert Sandberg, who had led the orchestra already at his 1930 debut in *Guillaume Tell*. The day didn't end with this performance for either of them: later in the evening they entertained as soloist and accompanist at a cabaret program.

In *Arbetaren*, critic Sven Lindström wrote the most detailed review: "At the dramatic climaxes, the young singer gave the last drop of his phenomenal voice—which is ab-

solutely right ... and the solo 'Vesti la giubba' was sung with a saturated and noble sound, a shivering passion, a legato line and phrasing which his predecessors in the role have every reason to envy him for, and which puts his delivery of the well-known aria beside the very greatest Canio performers. I make an exception for Caruso, but Mr. Björling still has his whole artistic career before him."

The reviewer in *Stockholms Dagblad* wrote of "a brio and a glorious sound which made the audience surrender completely" and he called "Vesti la giubba" and "No! Pagliaccio non son" the high points of the evening. "The size of Björling's voice increases more and more, and it is getting more and more equalized. In the beginning of the play, there are some low notes which he sings with quite a baritone breadth and timbre—and then we

hear this tenorial top with shimmering smooth notes which possess at the same time an unexpected volume and power.”

In *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, William Seymer confirmed that Jussi Björling was as usual singing “with musical assurance and a magnificent voice,” but he also criticised him for “sometimes, as he also tends to do, forcing too much.” Seymer was less impressed by “Vesti la giubba,” which he actually thought sounded “tame,” than by the second act.

Gösta Rybrant in *Aftonbladet* praised “a fervour in the diction, an insight into the musical nuances of the part and a dramatic strength, that I don’t think I have heard since Jussi Björling sang Rodolfo in *Bohème*,” but also noted the appearance of “some kind of throaty sound, impossible to say if it was due to indisposition or a new experiment in his way of singing.” However, even if this disturbed “a little, still ... for the rest, the vocal splendour was enormous”.

Moses Pergament in *Svenska Dagbladet* concluded: “With his voice in excellent condition and with an unusual fervour in his diction, Jussi Björling attained a hold on the new role which elevated the interpretation as a whole to a higher level of musical drama than the singer had achieved before. The intensity of the delivery also gave the acting a feeling of richer expressivity.”

Two other newspapers also noticed an improvement in Jussi’s acting. Most striking was the trust in his dramatic talent expressed by Sven Lindström in *Arbetaren*. Especially Jussi’s rendition of “Un tal gioco” convinced Lindström there was “a temperament also in the otherwise deadpan facial expression” which made him “cry out for an instructor with the ability to liberate what there seemed to be in

him of dramatic talent.” He stressed the need for the singer to develop self-confidence in this respect and feared that the often heard criticism of his acting might “be creating a feeling of insecurity which in this case seems as little justified as regrettable.” Lindström voiced a direct appeal: “Come on, let it go, Mr. Björling! And trust your own judgement and your own power!”

The performers of the other main roles, Karin Rydqvist as Nedda, Einar Larson as Tonio and Carl Richter as Silvio, were also well received. (In two of the following performances Silvio was sung by Set Svanholm, who in 1930 had made his debut in that baritone role. He would in the same year begin to take on tenor parts and eventually became internationally famous especially as a Wagnerian tenor.)

The *Pagliacci* performance on 21 April, Jussi Björling’s third in 1936, was the first occasion that he combined it with *Cavalleria* on the same evening. (Thereafter, he would always do so in Stockholm on evenings when the two veristic operas were given together, i.e. for 10 of his 17 performances at the Royal Opera. Otherwise, *Pagliacci* with Jussi was mostly matched with various ballets: Prima-ballerina and *Offenbach i Olympen*, both to Offenbach’s music, Darius Milhaud’s “opérette-dansée” *Le train bleu*, Emil Reesen’s Gudindernes Strid and Hilding Rosenberg’s *Orfeus i sta’n*, and on one occasion with Franz von Suppé’s opéra-comique *Die schöne Galathee*.) Most of the *Pagliacci* cast was new, with four debuts in the opera: the conductor Sten-Åke Axelson, Hjördis Schymberg as Nedda, Sigurd Björling as Tonio and Gösta Kjellertz as Silvio. Due to these debuts, the performance attracted several reviewers. The newcomers were generally well received, though the opinion about

Kjellertz was notably mixed.

Two papers mentioned in passing Jussi Björling’s excellent form, but the third observed a striking development in his art. In *Arbetaren*, Sven Lindström found Jussi Björling’s Canio “not new—but still new.” He recalled his review of the debut three months earlier, and his appeal then to the singer to “come on, let it go!” “He may have paid attention to my appeal or not; what I had been longing for in any case materialized yesterday. The actor Jussi Björling herewith made his appearance on the stage, and this caused the singer to appear as a mature artist. I defy anybody to equal his “Vesti la giubba,” as genuinely felt as his singing was and as splendidly as it sounded. Without any doubt, this is the young singer’s very greatest victory up to now, a victory so great that it gave lustre to the whole performance. And this was still so full of promising talents that one was stunned and happy.”

Jussi Björling sang three more *Pagliacci* performances in Stockholm in 1936, but his following three, in the spring of 1937, were the only ones he ever sang outside Sweden, though still using the Swedish language. His Nuremberg performance on 4 February (when *Pagliacci* shared the evening with *Spitzwegmärchen*, a ballet pantomime by Hans Grimm) was his very first appearance in Germany. In *Fränkischer Kurier*, Karl Foesel wrote about Jussi’s German debut: “Jussi Björling seems to be an exception among tenor stars... The character of his voice is lyrical and the volume modest rather than robust. That explains why the orchestra many times dominated over the tenor... The wonderful thing with Björling’s art is founded in his technical skill. Not vocal power, but rather tonal beauty is the primary thing for him. The soft

“schmelz,” the so to say inward brilliance of this voice is not only a valuable natural talent. A high technical culture assures the singer's rounded, matchless evenness of timbre, which does not show any strain even in the highest registers or when the volume of the voice is increased. From a dramatic point of view, Björling expressed the passionate bloodthirstiness of the village comedian with a notable northern reserve.”

In Vienna a few weeks later, *Pagliacci* was matched with *Cavalleria*, but Jussi did not take on both roles in the same evening as he did in Stockholm. (He would not sing Turiddu outside Sweden until 1947, and then in Italian at the Met.) In both performances, Nedda was sung by Margit Bokor and Tonio by Alexander Svéd, who would several times sing with Jussi at the Met. The *Pagliacci* performance on 23 February 1937 was reviewed in *Neues Wiener Journal* (of Jussi's second Vienna performance on 12 March, there is no review, but key excerpts have been recorded). The Austrian reviewer compared Jussi's Canio with his Rodolfo. “Yesterday, at the State Opera, Jussi Björling was able to confirm and perhaps even surpass the success he had as Rodolfo. What this beautiful and at the same time warm voice lacks in penetrating power, it is compensated for by the rare equalization, by the elegant lightness and by the balance in the coloring of the voice. Where the fervour of the spontaneous gesture is missing, the wisely treated musical phrase comes to the rescue, rendered in a way which easily makes one forget the acting.”

Jussi Björling's first *Pagliacci* after his return to Stockholm, on 15 August 1937, was given some attention by Moses Pergament in *Svenska Dagbladet*: “Dramatically, Jussi Björling's Canio is getting better and better. And

as far as the singing is concerned, it could hardly be better.”

Though Jussi's *Canio* had thus received much praise during the first two years he had the role in his repertoire, both in Sweden and abroad, he soon began to sing it less frequently. In 1938-44, he made only six *Pagliacci* appearances. A single testimony can be quoted from 30 April 1941, when Teddy Nyblom in *Aftonbladet* was rather critical of the performance as a whole, but thought that with Jussi Björling as a guest, it was still of interest: “A full audience was carried away not only by his beautiful singing but also by his acting, which was full of temperament and employed an appealing melancholy in his expression....”

On the next occasions when Jussi Björling appeared in *Pagliacci* in Stockholm, on 18 and 25 April 1944, he sang again *Cavalleria* on the same evening, for the first time since 1938. This was the premiere of a new production of *Cavalleria*, and it was also the first time Jussi could be heard in Sven d'Ailly's *Pagliacci* production, conducted by Sixten Ehrling. The public interest was so great that newspapers reported an absolute record in demand for tickets for Jussi's opera performances in Stockholm.

The reviewers devoted most of their interest to the new *Cavalleria* (on this and some earlier occasions given after *Pagliacci*; thereafter in Jussi's double bills *Pagliacci* was given last), but in passing, there was much praise for Jussi's Canio. “Both dramatically and vocally, he gave an extra lustre to the action,” wrote Teddy Nyblom in *Aftonbladet*. The general impression was, however, that Jussi Björling was still more successful in Mascagni's opera.

Jussi was then not heard in *Cav/Pag* until 24 September 1948, a single per-

formance. Then the reviewer Kajsa Rootzén in *Svenska Dagbladet* found reason to emphasize his *Canio*: “...the unhappy Canio is of so much better quality dramatically, and in this part the singer expressed this drama and developed not only an enchantingly beautiful sound but also as much fervour in delivery and portrayal as one could ever wish.”

Six years passed before Jussi Björling appeared again on the stage in *Cavalleria/Pagliacci*. On 1 and 8 December 1954 and 9 May 1955, he gave his last three performances of these operas in Stockholm, now preferring for the first time to sing *Cavalleria* in Italian in Stockholm—as he had done at the Met since 1947—but not *Pagliacci*, although he had recorded that opera in the original language the year before. Director Bengt Peterson's *Pagliacci* production, new that year, was the third since Jussi took on the role in Stockholm. The first of these

Dorothy Caruso declares Jussi “the only one worthy to wear Enrico's mantle,” on the NBC TV program *We the People*, February 1951.





Stockholm, December 1954.



Jussi with Dorothy Caruso, costumed as Canio for the February 1951 TV broadcast where he sang "Vesti la giubba"

three evenings was reviewed; the second one was recorded and has been issued on CD (available on Bluebell ABCD 085). It is discussed in detail in Stephen Hastings's review elsewhere in this issue. It may be of interest to note that the cast in the recorded performance was different from the two others, where Hjördis Schymberg sang Nedda, something she had not done opposite Jussi since 1937, and Hugo Hasslo was Tonio. While Gardelli conducted both the first and the second performance, Kurt Bendix took charge of the third (the only time he conducted this opera with Jussi Björling).

Teddy Nyblom in *Aftonbladet*, one of those who most closely followed Jussi Björling's career, found reason to express his admiration more strongly than ever. If he had earlier praised

Jussi's brilliant singing and described him as a great tenor, now he wanted to stress that he was indeed a great artist. "He sang Turiddu and especially Canio as he had never done before, with an underlying dignified heat and genuine emotion as an extra glow over his truly musical delivery, almost perfect acting and fantastic poise." Other reviewers confirmed that Jussi could now "project the impression of truly suffering, both with his voice and his appearance" and that he "was at the top of his powers both vocally and histrionically." Yngve Flyckt in *Expressen* was glad to hear Jussi in uncommon roles, even if he thought "veristic works like *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* ... too hot to handle for his lyric nature" and criticized the opera management for "not letting this

matchless voice and nowadays exquisitely refined art of singing serve higher artistic purposes, i.e. in roles of real significance."



It seems fitting to finish this survey of reviews by quoting the person who saw a wider variety of Jussi's performances than anybody else, his wife Anna-Lisa. In *Jussi*, she wrote:

"Although he sang Canio only 20 times in his entire career, it was the role I came to love most. His was a deeply moving interpretation, very human and dramatically overwhelming in the climactic moments."