

Ballo Revisited

by Andrew Farkas

An inexhaustible source of frustration for writers about the past, people and events, is the ongoing discovery of relevant materials. As time passes, documents and artifacts come to light sometimes through further search, sometimes by serendipity. Every time that happens, the writer and researcher can just grit his teeth, and either ignore the fickle hand of fate that slipped him some useful material too late, or continue to expand on his chosen subject and append a small piece of writing to his published research.

In this instance I take the liberty to do both. While I grit my teeth, I want to share with the readers of the *JBS Journal* a couple of interesting freshly found facts that have come my way. They concern the doings and undoing of our beloved Jussi Björling.

At the time of researching *Jussi*, I was able to spend a pre-determined brief time with Maestro George Solti in December 1993. I managed to break down his resistance to the idea of an interview with the one and only psychologically valid argument, that he would not want to have the *Ballo* incident in Rome recounted without his recollection of what had occurred, based exclusively on the memory of others and without his input. The brevity of time he allowed for the interview compelled me to focus on this single theme, and even reference to his collaboration with Björling in Chicago merely touched on the subject. During that season in 1957, Solti conducted two performances of *Un ballo in maschera* and his work with Björling,

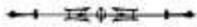
according to his memory, was harmonious and without incident. Unaware then of the persistent wide-spread interest in Jussi's stubborn refusal to sing the third act aria, "Ma se m'è forza perderti" I didn't even raise the subject. In retrospect perhaps I should have, as it is puzzling that Solti of all people would have agreed to this significant cut. Yet even if I did and pressed him for details, I am convinced Solti would have told me that he didn't remember. Our conversation suggested that in the course of his abnormally rich and eventful life such details were just unmemorable trivia.

He would not have been alone. In 2000, rising to the challenge, I published an article on this subject in *The Opera Quarterly* (vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 190-203). Pursuing all possible leads, I spoke (via telephone) to musicians, co-performers Anita Cerquetti and Andrew Foldi, Chicago radio personalities, even Chicago Lyric General Manager William Mason, then a boy soprano singing the Shepherd in *Tosca*. Not one of them could recall, even vaguely, whether Björling sang the aria or not.

As I was to discover only recently, the totally reliable source to answer that puzzling question was within my reach all along. I have a dear old friend in San Francisco, Stan Golding, a man whose memory of the hundreds of operas he had seen in Chicago where he was born and raised go back to 1931, to performances with Rosa Raisa and Claudia Muzio. The roster of the opera company of Chicago in his youth reads like a record collector's who's who and Stan heard them all, Gigli's Radames, Tib-

bett's Rigoletto, even Ezio Pinza's only North American Mefistofele in 1935. Although Stan settled in San Francisco after the war, he often returned to his home town for family visits and opera, along with operatic travels elsewhere in the U.S. and abroad. During the last of my periodic visits to San Francisco in September 2006, sitting around the breakfast table our operatic conversation turned to Björling. "You know," said Stan, "I could never figure out why he skipped the third act aria in *Ballo*." "You were there?!" I jumped. "Of course I was there. It was uncanny. He just sang the recitative leading up to the aria and then moved directly to the ballroom scene."

This, then, settles the question in regard to Chicago. It ought to be mentioned that Stan is a trained musician, a competent pianist and an amateur composer. In addition to an immense record (78 rpm and LP), tape, cassette, CD, and book collection he has several hundred operatic scores, many of them first editions, along with rare and unusual items of which hardly any are known to exist in private hands. He refers to those scores often, thus he has not merely a listener's but a musician's in-depth familiarity with several hundred operas. Although now in his 88th year, Stan's prodigious memory of his rich experiences is still reliable enough for even more elusive details than the inclusion or omission of an aria. For instance, he attended the first of the two Björling-Callas *Trovatores* in Chicago. Over the years I heard him say many times that the greatest voice and best singing that night came from the veteran mezzo-soprano, Ebe Stignani. On the other hand, "the most perfect blending of voices I ever heard was the wedding duettino 'L'onda de' suoni mistici' (between 'Ah sì, ben mio' and 'Di quella pira'). They sang it mezza-voce - it was like an exquisite jewel."



If I had inadvertently missed Stan's recollections of the Chicago *Ballo*, I am entirely blameless in the belated discovery of an important document concerning the abruptly terminated recording sessions of the same opera in Rome. As most of you are aware, Anna-Lisa Björling left us in November 2006. Subsequently, the family decided to dismantle and dispose of her apartment. All memorabilia and documentary material found in the various drawers and closets were given to Harald Henrysson to be incorporated in the Björling Museum's rich holdings. Among these Harald found a document relating to the notorious Rome incident in 1960, when the disagreement between Björling and Solti led to the cancellation of the Decca/London recording of *Un ballo in maschera* in the middle of the second recording session.

It will be remembered (*Jussi*, Ch. 30) that during the days in Rome, producer John Culshaw was the go-between for Solti and cast: he carried news, messages, and impressions from the Björlings to Solti and back. It was his role to ensure a good and productive working relationship between singer and conductor and at the very least not to misrepresent either party to the other. It would appear that Jussi kept his physical discomfort and heart troubles to himself, thus Culshaw stamped his own interpretation on his reluctance to rehearse. What he conveyed to Solti, the Hungarian conductor with the unbending rigidity of a Prussian, led him to believe that Jussi was uncooperative and hitting the bottle again. Solti's unwillingness to negotiate over musical matters with a stubborn drunk, as he was allowed to believe, set the stage for the blow-up that resulted in the stoppage and cancellation of the sessions.

Among the memorabilia just received by the museum from Anna-Lisa's apartment there is a note, presumably in Jussi's own hand on Grand Hotel, Roma, stationery. This curious document enables us to gain a glimpse into Björling's mindset of the moment. It is as if we were hearing his posthumous comment on what happened. The text reads in all capital letters:

MORRIS ROSENGARTEN
SAVOY HOTEL LONDON, ENGLAND
LEAVING ROME JULY 15 STILL
WILLING RECORD OPERA
WITHOUT SIGNED AGREEMENT
FOR FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.
REGRET CULSHAW'S ATTITUDE
AND DISBELIEF IN ME.
REGARDS.
BJOERLING

The style and the all "caps" suggest only one thing: Jussi handed this piece of paper to somebody in the family or to the hotel concierge to send a telegram to Rosengarten, apparently in London at the moment. Considering that the message was to go from Rome and presumably dictated to an Italian - even if bilingual - telegraph operator, it had to be clear what letters were to be spelled. There can be no doubt that the telegram was sent and received. Was there a response from Rosengarten? If so, any such documentation is yet to be found. What is particularly revealing about the note however, is the fact the Jussi lays the blame not on Solti but on Culshaw. The family members' recollection (Anna-Lisa and Ann-Charlotte in particular) was that the Decca team decided "it was too late" to resume, in spite of Jussi's willingness to cooperate and accede to all demands. In the distance of nearly five decades, it is only Jussi's telegram that tells us that the human turning point had to be Culshaw.

John Culshaw, in charge of the sessions and responsible for all that transpired in Rome, then and later claimed in print - article and book, in some respects contradictory - that Björling was drunk. It was a face-saving lie that has been since uniformly recognized as such by several of those present: family, recording personnel, and colleagues. Although John Culshaw, the author of several very fine books, clearly composed his autobiography with publishing in mind, the book appeared only after his unexpected death. Had he had the time to review and revise his manuscript, would he have changed the narrative of the *Ballo* cancellation? It is not a mere conjecture to say: most unlikely. If he were to admit Björling's innocence in the matter, he would have had to blame Solti or incriminate himself. There was no other alternative. Since Björling was long dead when he recounted the events, he could do so without fear of contradiction. The deceased hardly ever protest. But not so fast, Mr. Culshaw. Oftentimes the living will speak up for the dead.

There are many characters that come and go in his book, but one man, Maurice A. Rosengarten, threads his way through his autobiography like a Leitmotiv. Through his business arrangements with Decca Recordings (Europe), Ltd., based in Zurich, Rosengarten became their distributor in Switzerland. Because he financed the classical recordings he authorized, he collected a handsome royalty on world-wide sales in return. He was a shrewd businessman and, as it turned out, this was a highly lucrative arrangement. It gave him full control and his power and hovering presence was known to all.

A very upset Cornell MacNeil, the Renato of the aborted *Ballo* and an ethical man, decided not to let what

had transpired slip into oblivion. Soon after the incident, he took it upon himself to take a trip at his own initiative and expense from Rome to Zurich. He wanted Rosengarten to know exactly what happened, and not allow the filtered and sanitized version transmitted by John Culshaw be the last word on the matter. He was also hoping to save the recording and have it resume at a later date with the same cast.

Describing Maurice Rosengarten, the source of all blessings and frustration in his work as record producer, Culshaw wrote in his autobiography: "He was tiny, reserved and as sharp as a cut-throat razor." While acknowledging that "Above all, he was adored by the recording crews," he also notes that "Rosengarten was infuriating and enchanting; mean and generous; hard and tender." In *Ring Resounding* he called him "mercurial."

This was, then, the man Cornell MacNeil went to see in Zurich.

MacNeil held Jussi Björling in the highest possible esteem. Those of us attending the First Jussi Björling Society Conference in Washington D.C., (June 1999) will never forget Mac's sincere and emotional expression of regret over the missed opportunity. He recently wrote to me, confirming what he told us then, "As you know, there was nobody in the entire operatic experience of my life that I would rather have recorded with than Jussi." Contemplating and assessing MacNeil's outstanding contribution to the recording that was finally made a year later, one must deeply regret that such superb collaboration was denied us by the absurd turn of events. MacNeil goes on to recall:

"When the recording sessions came to a halt, I was very upset, not just for myself but for Jussi, and I decided to go to Zurich to see Maurice Rosengarten,

the head of Decca. I went in the hopes that maybe they could come to an agreement with Jussi, and the recording would be made as planned. I did not want to be confrontational, but I wanted to be sure that Rosengarten understood what had really happened in those recording sessions. I've always felt that going to Switzerland was like going to a hospital clinic and that I should be completely sanitized before speaking with anybody. As it turned out, that was basically my reception... polite, considerate, cold and clinical. While Rosengarten listened to what I had to say, as I remember it, he spent most of the time walking around the office with his back to me and looking out the window. His response, as I recall it, was that I was a very fine singer and that they were glad to have me on board, but that I knew nothing about the recording process and that that should be left in the hands of the conductor and the recording director. Thank you, and good-bye. There was no back and forth between us. I made my statement, he made his, and that was the end of it."

The contribution of our much admired baritone and special friend of JBS-USA is vital to our latter day understanding of what went on during the aborted sessions in overheated Rome, and for that he deserves our thanks. What I was able to elicit from Solti seems also to confirm that he was unaware of the exact nature of Björling's attitude and condition, particularly that he was dealing with a stressed and ill tenor rather than a recalcitrant and uncooperative divo high on alcohol. While Solti surely contributed his negativism to the debacle, our prime suspect remains producer Culshaw. The evidence leads me to place the main onus for the failure of the 1960 London/Decca Ballo recording project on him.

I have often described a biographer's reconstructive work as finding innumerable mosaics and building an intricate picture. Well, my friends and colleagues, these are two more little tiles to give detail to the portrait you all know so well.

We thank member Leigh Metcalf for pointing out that in the newly-translated autobiography of Hans Hotter called *Memoirs*, as edited by Donald Arthur, there is on page 179 this comment by the great bass-baritone:

"...And then one of the most glorious tenor voices that ever was: the Swede Jussi Bjoerling, a refreshingly shy, diffident artist. His 'Ingemisco' in the Verdi *Requiem* is one of the most moving renditions of any music I have ever heard from a human voice."

And on page 39 "...Madame Charles Cabier, she appeared in Copenhagen as Azucena in *Il Trovatore* with a young local baritone named Lauritz Melchior, whom she encouraged to become a heroic tenor, helping launch what was arguably the most significant career in that voice category ever."

Hotter talks about many other singers, but these two have special significance for us!