

The JB Sällskapet meets in Voxna, July 16-17, 2005

By Dan Shea

The Scandinavian JB Society put on a marvelous event during the weekend of July 16-17, in Voxna, Sweden, a village situated smack in the very center of Sweden, roughly 80 km directly north of Borlänge.

(For orientation, Stockholm is about 225 km from Borlänge—and not the other way around! We say that because for most of us, Borlänge is “the center of the universe”—being the home of the Björling Museum.)

A key point about this meeting in Voxna is that it was the fifth in a series that will continue next year and beyond, and JBS-USA and JBAS will surely sponsor a trip to join some of these meetings in future years—so read on, to learn more about these events.

A bit of history: As you may recall, Voxna is where Jussi's grandfather Lars Johan Björling was born (see Ch. 2 of the biography *Jussi*), and there are many forebears of Jussi buried in the churchyard there. In July 2001, Lennart Ekman—husband of Jussi's daughter Kickie—organized a trip to Voxna to dedicate a memorial stone at the church there, to mark the fact that some 300 of Jussi's direct ancestors and their close relatives lie there in unmarked graves. Lennart has done yeoman work over many years as the family geneologist: In fact, his reports have been transferred to CD and are available at the Björling Museum.

The concerts at Voxna: At that first 2001 meeting, Lennart organized also a tour of the area and a concert at the church there, and the event was such a big success that a similar program was organized for the following year.

Then Stefan Olmårs took over the organization of this event, especially natural since he lives nearby and has deep roots there in Hälsingland, and the fun has continued.

Here we give a report on this year's weekend, the fifth such to date. A main event was the Saturday afternoon concert at Voxna's church featuring well known bass-baritone Erik Saedén, the Hovsångare (Royal Court Singer) who performed with Jussi several times in Stockholm during the late 1950s, and his student Mats Carlsson, a tenor whose career has been steadily rising in recent years. Also appearing was another tenor, 17-year-old Markus Pettersson from nearby Rengsjö.

Voxna Church was filled to capacity, nearly 400 present with some having to stand. The program began with some words of greeting by Minister

Lars Andersson and Stefan Olmårs, followed by the enthusiastic singing by the whole audience of several Swedish hymns and “Land du välsignade.”

Hovsångare Erik began the formal program with a classic song by Josephson, “Sjung din underbara sång,” singing with complete conviction and tonal security. Then Mats presented two of Jussi's signature songs, Kjörling's “Aftonstämning” and Schrader's “Sommar natt,” singing with fresh sound and—especially in the challenging Schrader song—secure high notes. (This was all the more impressive since our host, Stefan, had announced that Mats would be singing through a nasty summer cold.)

Erik and Mats continued to alternate songs and arias, with Erik espe-

Master singer Erik Saedén together with his pupil, the promising young tenor Mats Carlsson.



cially shining in Adolphson's "Mit eget land," and Mats taking on the Jussian specialties "Tonerna" and "Nessun dorma." There were few dry eyes in the house as Erik sang a sort of valedictory: Schubert's "An die Musik" in Swedish, and then both mastersinger and student finished with the Pearlfishers duet.

Young Markus concluded the concert with the song "Bring him home" from *Les Misérables*, and Bellman's "Twelfth Epistle."

Next we went to a covered pavilion set up outside the local inn there and participated in a sort of chautauqua on the work of Swedish theater and opera director Göran Järvefält (1947-1989), with a searching discussion of his work led by opera singers Saedén and Anita Soldh and director Margareta Söderlind. There was much participation by the audience there.

Of course the discussion was completely in Swedish, but this listener was kept apprised of the main points by kind members of the audience. (And we can be sure that in a future such meeting with a good-sized group of non-Swedish speakers scheduled to

attend, the Swedes will arrange a program in English.)

After the session on Järvefält's work, the whole group returned to the inn for an excellent buffet and more socializing. After the plates were cleared, we had a special listening session, a 'request program' conducted by Harald Henrysson to allow participants to ask for special recordings of interest.

Interestingly, two arias recorded by Jussi in 1944-45 had been requested in advance by Erik Saeden. Hovsångare Saedén explained that he always uses these two recordings of Jussi to illustrate the idea of 'covering' vowels, a basic skill in singing for protecting the vocal apparatus. Erik made clear that Jussi understood the techniques perfectly and was an ideal model for young singers.

Listen for yourself at home, to begin to appreciate the principles involved, by playing the exact recordings that Erik chose.

First, listen to Jussi's 1944 *Pagliacci* "Vesti la giubba" recording, and pay close attention to the way Jussi with his lyric voice sang this dramatic aria.

Especially try to follow the "covered" way he sings the vowel sounds here.

Next, listen to Jussi's commercial recording of "Ah, fuyez douce image" from *Manon*, to see how Jussi adds excitement to the climactic passages in part by the way he chooses the vowel sounds.

Note: for more discussion of these points, by real experts, read Jerome Hines's book *Great Singers on Great Singing* or Leonardo Ciampa's *The Twilight of Belcanto*.

(I'd like to thank Leonardo as well as Michael Mayer and Steve Fischman for their attempts to explain some points of vocal pedagogy to me.)

There were many more recordings played and Harald's "request program" was great fun—but the best part surely came right at the start with Erik's interesting vocal tribute to Jussi's fine belcanto technique.

If this sort of weekend in the Swedish countryside sounds attractive to you, watch for our future plans for JBS-sponsored travel in early July, 2007.

Dan Shea addresses the Voxna participants on behalf of the Björling Societies. Shown in the photo are Pastor Andersson, Lasse Österholm, and Markus Pettersson.[]

The concert-goers are gathering outside the church. The lady in the middle in a folk costume is Irma Järvefält, mother to the late opera director Göran Järvefält, whose work and life was presented later in the evening.

