



Swedish-Finnish journalist Yrsa Stenius has written an unusual appreciation of Jussi Björling, combining intense memories of her theatrical mother's love of the tenor's singing, her own fascination with Jussi's voice and career, and her personal reflections on the stresses of a public life—where one's reputation is always at risk. She boldly interprets known facts about Jussi's public and personal life to fit her theories of the artist's creative angst, and it seems that for many readers she has put together a plausible picture. Indeed most reviews of the book have been positive, but some have been strongly negative. What are we to think, who are not Swedish and unable to read this book ourselves?

We have assembled a collection of the more influential articles and reviews, positive and negative, on this book—and found translations of these articles, thanks to the generous efforts of Anders and Janet Björling, Ben Swahn, and Richard Vowles. Thus we hope to be able to help you understand the controversy created by this book in Sweden and Finland (where it has been translated and republished).

What follows are two opposing reviews, along with some included discussion from a reader's reaction to one review, and the reviewer's response to the reader.

A DISCUSSION:

Yrsa Stenius' controversial book *Tills vingen brister*

The following is a translation of a review, by Lena von Bondsdorff, of Yrsa Stenius' book *Till the Wing Breaks*. It appeared on October 23, 2002 in *Hufvudstadsbladet*, the leading newspaper in Miss Stenius' home country, Finland.

"Masculine, soft, intimate and potent"

"I have loved Jussi Björling's singing as long as I can remember." Yrsa Stenius' declaration of love in the book *Till the Wing Breaks* is unreserved and the confession without doubt awakens some curiosity. Until now, in her "sensual fantasies about famous men" such as Mauno Koivisto [a former President of Finland] and Albert Speer, Yrsa Stenius wisely has stayed within the political sphere. What could have brought her suddenly to jump into a subject verbally so elusive as music, to write her own Jussi story—fifteen years after the widow Anna-Lisa Björling's comprehensive memoirs *My Life with Jussi* was published?

Jussi-Orgies with Mother

Has Yrsa Stenius written a nostalgia trip? In the beginning her personal child and youth impressions are predominant: "Jussi Björling is closely connected with the memory of my mother. Mother would treat herself to veritable Jussi Björling orgies at the record player, and I often kept her company."

Yrsa Stenius's mother was a stage actress, and life with her was maybe not always so easy. They were so different, explains the daughter. "Perhaps Jussi Björling's song was one of the few things I passionately shared with my mother."

Mother and daughter by the record player let their tears flow. The mood is sensual and erotic, Björling's song "masculine, soft, intimate and potent." Unfortunately, Yrsa Stenius early on abandons her "I"-perspective in order to identify herself with the idealized singer. She wants to "make Jussi the subject in her own story."

How is then Yrsa intending to tackle the reality of Jussi Björling and the vocabulary of the music world?

In the very beginning the author states that "it is just about as easy to describe music in words as it is to understand love with the help of the theory of cognition." Then she claims that "the words the experts end up with when they try to define the phenomenon Jussi Björling are *purity* and *precision*." Accordingly Stenius is now ready to explain, in her own (?) words, what she already has oversimplified and compressed into the two words. The aim is to understand what they mean.

"What carries Jussi Björling, lifts him beyond his own time and his own century with its changing fads and musical cycles, is the noble simplicity in his song, the lack of all affectation," the author suggests.

Musical Misses

But one only needs to listen to the CD which is included with the book, to realize that this is pure nonsense. Björling's singing is, esthetically, not really timeless. He gladly indulges in lengthy high notes and glissandos. "Svarta Rosor" e.g. is far from "classically pure in its execution." Jussi Björling may have said "if it says a sixteenth, I will sing a sixteenth," but when it comes down to it, he gives way to the same tenor manners as his colleagues. But of course Jussi Björling's singing still impresses us. His vocal technique is overwhelming. Yrsa Stenius explains it by stating that his voice simply is beautiful—a not totally uncomplicated concept. In her continuing descriptions, the *timbre* and *scope* of his voice are mystified, while the fundamental skills are sidestepped. Concepts from vocal pedagogy such as forming a tone, and attacking a phrase, are confused. The discussion about perfect pitch does not hold.

I do not doubt that Yrsa Stenius has worked hard to comprehend the subject as far as it has been possible for her. Certainly the book includes many engaging and stimulating elaborations concerning musical phenomena. But they are diminished by the multitude of minor misses. Yrsa Stenius nonchalantly dismisses David Björling's vocal theories as "almost comically uncomplicated instructions," while at the same time she indulges herself with apparently simplistic terminology in a way that feels wholly inaccurate to readers knowledgeable in vocal pedagogy.

No, Yrsa Stenius' new book does not present a credible picture of the singer and musician Jussi Björling. If one would like to have some light shed on the musical perspective, it is rewarding to turn to a more reliable

source. Anna-Lisa Björling's memoirs—an honestly subjective account—comments in detail on both vocal and musical challenges during his career with the confident opinion of a musically knowledgeable and well educated person. Jussi's wife had received the same vocal education at the Music Academy as Jussi himself. Later they were to perform together not only on the concert stage but on a few occasions on the opera stage as well. Perhaps she did not seriously polish her knowledge through an independent career. She made other choices, and she accepted the consequences.

The Art of Reading from the Book

Anna-Lisa Björling's book is dismissed by Yrsa Stenius as merely "rather trivial name dropping". She maintains that is due to "some kind of a cultural affectation" and goes as far as writing that "Anna-Lisa Björling, with her shallow rhapsodic story telling, captures a lot of the atmosphere of the world of the mega stars."

It is then quite remarkable that Yrsa Stenius instead refers to the English language biography, which she regards as "really detailed and ambitious." Has it escaped her that the book, which she refers to as Andrew Farkas' biography, is in essence an expanded version of Anna-Lisa Björling's so despised book? The material has been revised for an international audience. Quotes from complementing interviews have been inserted. But fundamentally the story is the same. The biggest change is that the book has been provided with footnotes and a bibliography at the end, and that the director of the Björling Museum in Borlänge, Harald Henrysson, has compiled a detailed chronological list of Jussi's performances.

Is the idea of effacing Anna-Lisa

Björling's contribution deliberate, rather just a way to build up the thriller—the hunt for the villain in the drama—which Yrsa Stenius has decided to write? The book *Till the Wing Breaks* more and more appears to be Yrsa Stenius' way to wrestle with problems she has encountered herself. But not in an openly documented form, neither as an anonymous fiction, but via a dissection of the relationship between Anna-Lisa and Jussi Björling, an analysis of what the author describes as "the mad waltz 'pas-de-deux' between a married couple."

Yrsa Stenius assumes the role of the psychoanalyst. She presents theories which she feels she can discover with the help of her trained(?) ability to read between the lines. But she must certainly be aware that the same method can be applied to her own book.

The Great Evasion

Linguistically Stenius shifts between journalistically elegant jabs, a distant assertive tone and emotional vividly decked out fantasies. All comments about Jussi are written with a Nietzschean belief in the *Übermensch*, the genius, the great artist. From this naturally follows that the less talented must adapt to the whims of the genius, that all shortcomings must be smoothed over. In the case of Jussi Björling it is especially the alcoholism which must be understood thoroughly. To call the behavior by its correct name, as Anna-Lisa Björling has done, is condemned by Yrsa Stenius. Alcoholism is just the natural(!) dark side of great artistry.

Naturally it is correct that the sensitivity, which is a prerequisite for creativity, demands its tribute in the form of overreactions. But by embellishing selfdestructive expressions of

the emptiness, which is the dark side of creativity, only makes evil worse. And to place oneself as judge over a family who tries to live with these dark sides of creativity is pure arrogance.

It does not help that Yrsa Stenius soberly tries to emphasize that she does not want to designate anybody as guilty. Her choice of language exposes her. The strong emotional tone she uses when defending Jussi's drinking and sexual escapades is striking. Jussi Björling's relationship with Linnea Hellström, with whom at the age of sixteen he fathered their son Rolf, engages Yrsa Stenius to the degree that she gets lost in strange speculations. "Poor Jussi!" exclaims Yrsa Stenius. "Perhaps he is wondering, there in his growing gloominess, why in heaven's name he did what he did those years in the 1930s when he let go of Linnea, who had been his happiness for so long, and was blinded by the charming Miss Berg and her crown of candles."

Lucia Neurosis

A part of Jussi Björling's history is that his wife-to-be, Anna-Lisa Berg, was elected Stockholm's Lucia in 1933, and this seems to be an irritating stone in Yrsa Stenius' shoe. For her this appointment embodies everything that is respectability and conventionalism to such a degree that she refuses to thoroughly consider the role of women during those times. In a male way she disparages women's expressions of anger.

Stenius sees "two sharp women" meet when a deeply hurt Linnea suddenly shows up with her son Rolf in Jussi's dressing room after a performance. Linnea's courage to protest, after she has been deserted, arouses Stenius' admiration. The author at this point is clear-sighted enough to identify with her own hurt feelings, as the

betrayed lover. But she maintains the blind spot, the unforgiving accusation against the wife.

The woman who shares every day with a man evidently receives too much as a gift, according to Yrsa Stenius. As in the male and upper class worlds, she regards the family as the man's accomplishment. Jussi provides Anna-Lisa with "the adventure." Therefore Anna-Lisa is ready to "sacrifice Jussi," to force him to work, although he at times likes to avoid his professional responsibilities.

Audacious Balloons

Yrsa Stenius allows herself audacious fantasies. She describes Jussi Björling himself as Anna-Lisa's "humble husband," who at heart wants to direct his anger towards the overprotective wife, when she tries to prevent his self-destructive drinking. Stenius imagines the following statement, which she attaches like a balloon to Jussi's resolute silent face: "Who in hell do you think provides the money in this house," he seems to me to be saying! "Thanks to whom do you have Siarö, and your rich friends on Ingarö or at Haringe Castle, or wherever they hang out, these people who demand gilded calling cards, and who happen to accept my song as one."

There is an abundance of prejudices which Yrsa Stenius ventilates in this book, which supposedly is about Jussi Björling. Maybe her projections will amuse some, well formulated as they are, but with me they leave a depressing impression. Especially as Anna-Lisa Björling's own book is refreshingly free from any tendency to dump on others the responsibility of her own life-choices and possible personal shortcomings.

Translated by Anders & Janet Björling.

SOME READER RESPONSE TO LENA VON BONDSORFF'S REVIEW:

Misleading Review:

By Maria Edgren

After having read Lena von Bondsdorff's review of Stenius's book about Jussi Björling, I was somewhat interested in reading the book. It seemed to be partly an analysis of Jussi's singing and his alcoholism, where the first part was unreliable and the latter was blamed on his wife Anna-Lisa....

I was therefore reluctant to open up the first page of the book, having very low expectations.

Myself, I am not particularly musical and have no concept of musical theory or vocal technique. I would rather listen to other music than opera and I would hardly recognize many of the famous Björling songs that are recorded on the CD enclosed with the book.

On reading the Foreword of the book, I began wondering why a music critic (von Bondsdorff) was chosen to review the book, and not a literary critic. Yrsa Stenius begins by explaining right up front, that the book is not first or even second about music, that she herself is not musically educated, and that her knowledge of music is really only very ordinary. She goes on to explain that the perceptions expressed are purely her own and that she writes as a human being who was deeply touched by Jussi Björling's singing.

We all have our idols. Some of us have experienced great times with them, that we may find difficult to express and share with others. But we certainly can recognize when Yrsa Stenius generously shares her personal experience and her passion close to

bordering on obsession, for Björling and his music. She describes the background of her own involvement. She tells us about JB's life, his fame, and his alcoholism with a heart-rending and self-effacing engagement. She tries to analyze causal connections, but it is made clear to the reader that she does not claim to be an expert in this area either. To say that Yrsa Stenius blames the wife of Jussi or anyone else for that matter for the tragic part of his life: his dependency on alcohol, is very unfair. Jussi and all the people he socialized with are described with great love and affection, in an easy flowing language and with a warm sense of humor.

This is a book for ordinary people. For me it was a page-turner, and afterwards I wanted to stay with those ideas for a long time.

Thank you, Yrsa Stenius!

Response:

By Lena von Bondsdorff

It does not surprise me that Yrsa Stenius's book on Jussi Björling offers a profound reading experience. It is well formulated and engaging in the parts where she expresses her own personal perceptions and feelings about Jussi's singing. The problem occurs when Stenius embarks into personally charged psychoanalytic writing. In 1987 Anna-Lisa Björling published the book *Mitt liv med Jussi* (*My life with Jussi*), which tells the story about Björling's life and artistry from the perspective of the wife, a biography in the same sense as the one by Yrsa Stenius. Could it be considered to be a neutrally subjective conclusion that Yrsa Stenius in her book belittles the role the wife played

continued at right

Personal study of a master-singer

Today's book, *Until the wing breaks—a book about Jussi Björling*, is no ordinary biography. Yrsa Stenius makes an admirable attempt to map what happens with the man Jussi Björling during his short life. In the book one is tossed between hope and despair, and one puts it aside with a lump in the throat—the price of art can be terribly high, the author demonstrates.

A New Book

Yrsa Stenius: *Until the wing breaks—a book about Jussi Björling* (Brombergs Publisher, SEK 310, accompanied by a CD with six cuts).

This is no ordinary biography. First of all, it is an admirable attempt to portray what happens with the man Jussi Björling in his short life. The reader is tossed between hope and despair, until the curtain goes down for all time. The title is unusually apt: the wings literally break for Jussi Björling, not yet 50 when his heart failed him in 1960, so he crashes like Icarus, wounded from the bright sun

of his high trajectory. After the last page I put the book aside with a lump in my throat. Stenius grips you and makes painfully clear the price that art can cost at the heights where Jussi Björling's wings bore him for several decades.

“Pavarotti, Domingo, Gedda, Winbergh—tenors come and go. But no one else can ‘hit life’s solar plexus like Jussi!’”

Perhaps it will surprise that Yrsa Stenius, Finnish-Swedish and earlier chief political editor at Aftonbladet, devoted three years to writing this Jussi book. But she herself writes that it coincides with strong personal reactions to his voice. She is “an entirely ordinary human being moved to the depths of her soul precisely by Jussi Björling's song.” She has loved that song as long as she can remember, from “Björling-orgies” in her childhood home with her mamma and a newly bought record player. Pavarotti, Domingo, Gedda, Winbergh—tenors come and go. But no one else can “hit life's solar plexus like Jussi,” she feels.

as a story-teller. And that the publisher of Stenius' book supports the same notion by promoting the book as the first complete Swedish biography of the phenomenal Björling. I perceive that as manipulating the truth.

Then it is interesting that Maria Edgren regards me as unqualified for reviewing Stenius's book, as I obviously can be regarded as one of

the so-called musical experts. A part of the problem here is the mystique surrounding musicians and also the question of how the obsession of fans impact on the musician and his audience. This sort of fan-obsession is a main theme throughout Yrsa Stenius's book.

Translated by Ben Swahn.