

Personal study of a master-singer

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

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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.

Jussi sang from 1915, as a four-year-old, until 20 August 1960, when he had three weeks left to live. He burned his life's candle "so that it flashed and flamed around him," and he lived out a particularly idiosyncratic life, the author claims. All the more remarkable that the most important biography, by the American Andrew Farkas [written jointly with Anna-Lisa Björling], does not exist in Swedish. The only previous books in Swedish, before this one, were an early (1945) ghost-written autobiography, wife Anna-Lisa's book about her life with Jussi, Gösta's book about his great brother, and a memory-book of testimonials by friends that appeared shortly after his death.

"Remarkably good"

The father, David Björling, reminds me of Leopold Mozart, who also quickly launched the careers of his wonderchildren Wolfgang and Nannerl. For instance, David arranged for his boys to give over 300 concerts in 17 months of travel across the USA - he was impresario, teacher, and co-star. Jussi has reported a strange picture: every evening the father would massage the boys' throats in order to discourage a change of voice. The boys' mother had died early and when father David died unexpectedly in 1926 it was a catastrophe for them. The brothers had to disperse, but Jussi helped pave the way for Olle and Gösta and their careers, admittedly of a lesser order.

"Remarkably good, a 17-year-old phenomenon, has the ability to be something." So wrote opera chief John Forsell when Jussi finally got to audition for him - an understatement for all time. In 1935 Jussi married Anna-Lisa Berg, one of Stockholm's

wintertime Lucias. That Jussi already has a son and that he fathered a daughter by someone else after the wedding came as shock waves to her. But she adjusts - for star tenors need not hunt women, and you hope they learn to make the right choices.

Stenius' prose is alive, sometimes delightfully ironic, very rarely tired. With exuberant imagination she conjures up the scene where Jussi's one-time betrothed Linnéa boldly comes with son Rolf to his dressing-room to attempt to pressure him:

"Anna-Lisa, stiff with terror, and Linnéa threatening with little Rolf, who was a sort of updated copy of his father, and Jussi decked out in some sweaty stage costume, totally perplexed, and the air thick with jealousy."

Yrsa Stenius follows Jussi closely in the path from his Stockholm debut to his amazing successes on the world's great opera stages. She speculates also about the early signs of his alcohol problem, sometimes perhaps too much so, but also paints the picture of an artist who gave some quota of what was expected of him. The pictures that sometimes were painted of him in the newspapers of the time, when he was forced to cancel, seem libelous today - especially considering the conflict that he must have carried within himself, of papa David's gifted special boy and his own wishes to fly from endless future responsibilities.

Perhaps it was during the years 1955-57 that Jussi's voice reached its finest maturity, or so believes Yrsa Stenius. "Risen from the dead" [after severe vocal problems, see Ch. 22 of the biography *Jussi*], he stands on the stage of Carnegie Hall in New York on September 24, 1955. But in just two more years Jussi Björling's heart began to fail, and it finally gave out in

September 1960. During Jussi's last summer an unpleasant role was played by the conductor-divo Georg Solti who created conflict—during an important recording session—that Björling found shocking and intolerable. According to the author, "everything stopped. Jussi crashes in despair, never to rise again. Solti took papa's life, believes daughter Ann-Charlotte."

Art's Disagreeable Price

Many who have stood on the pinnacles have observed: our need of sympathy is endless. Without the public's love and reinforcement, life is full of emptiness, anguish, and strong self-destructive forces. This is clear in radio phenomenon Pekka Langer's book "Radioaktivt avfall" ("Radioactive fallout"). When the tremendous popularity is over, health fails and teeth fall out, he falls into hopelessness, self-pity, pills, and alcohol. When Stenius paints Jussi's inability to raise himself up from a hopeless bottom, I think of the TV-giant Lennart Hyland, as Tuss Hyland portrayed his life when the searchlights went out. There is so much in common here: A frightened wife, broken promises, decline, alcohol, until the merry-go-round finally stops, then remorse—and yet then comes still another top performance. Perhaps this is what Yrsa Stenius' publisher considers art's somewhat disagreeable price?

Gunnar Olsson, Uppsala Nya Tidning (October 23, 2002).

Translated by Prof. Richard Vowles, Madison, Wisconsin, USA