

On Wings of Song

Bertil Bokstedt

To have had the pleasure of being Jussi's regular accompanist over many years is what one can truly call a journey on wings of song. The first such occasion was at Gröna Lund in summer 1951, a concert which was preceded by rehearsals on Siarö in a specially equipped studio which looks out on blue firths and an idyllic little fishing cottage. Notwithstanding all the wonderful concerts at which I accompanied him, it was there in that studio that I experienced Jussi's most beautiful tones; there he was himself; there, even during the later years, he gave his high C free expression with an exhilaration and a joy which were absolutely incomparable. On Siarö we also rehearsed the opera roles which he would later record, and I learned much from his beautiful phrasing and his great musicality.

I always had to spend the day before a concert at home rehearsing the difficult piano passages, because Jussi did not always sing to a predetermined programme. He preferred to decide, as he stood on the concert platform, what he would sing a few moments later. Therefore I always had to be ready to find immediately and play any of the seventy or so arias and songs which Jussi could choose from his repertoire. At our last concert in Copenhagen in October 1959 this turned out to be especially troublesome. As usual I had taken along with me to Copenhagen the large briefcase containing Jussi's music, but a

few songs were still lying on the piano at Jussi's home. Anna-Lisa had promised to bring them along, but forgot to do so. Jussi was not, on that day, in the best of moods, so we decided not to tell him about the missing music. The concert took place at the Falconer Centre, and it was, incidentally, the first time that this venue had been used for a concert. Jussi sang brilliantly, but left the platform after every number to cool off. The closer we got to the encores the more jittery my nerves became at the thought that Jussi would choose a song whose music was still lying on top of the piano at home in Karlavägen. And I had good reason to worry!

"Now we'll do 'Adelaide,'" said Jussi.

"We can't," I replied, "it's not here."

Jussi's face clouded over, but after a moment's thought he said: "Brahms's 'Ständchen.'"

Disaster, I thought - it was back at the apartment too. I whispered carefully: "That's not here either." Jussi gave me a murderous look and hurried off the platform. I could do nothing but follow him. There were no pleasant words said out there in the ante-room, and there were no encores at that concert; nor did we have the customary enjoyable time together afterwards.

But otherwise it was seldom that Jussi raised his voice in that way. He was a very good and loyal friend, and when we were rehearsing he would break off from time to time and want to put his personal stamp on the accompaniment. He would say, for example: "Bertil, when we come to that piano interlude, let the phrase flow in the same spirit as I have sung, let it ring out; don't be slow, feel the music intensely."

Accompanying Jussi Björling was not difficult. He never sang a wrong note, his phrasing was music itself, and there were many memorable high points. Our last concert together at Skansen on the 20th August 1960, Jussi's swansong, was not only for me, but for the many thousands in the audience, an evening never to be forgotten.

Ed. note: Bertil Bokstedt was an accompanist, conductor, and manager (1971-1978) of the Royal Opera.

The Voice of Silver that Conquered the Storm

Marguerite Wenner-Gren

Recounting the memories of our years of friendship with Jussi is like trying to describe a richly faceted diamond.

Goethe says in the prelude to Faust: "Go straight at all the stir and strife, That agitate our human life; All have it, but not many know it. Get hold of it, where'er you will, In all its motley mixture show it, And it is interesting still."

So it is with recollections of a life with such a human jewel as Jussi. Let me try to draw forth some of the treasures of memory from Gretchen's jewel-case!

First, a happy evening at Håringe where Jussi's great sense of humour took full flight. He was, as we all were, in a wonderful mood. We had read somewhere that every tenth or twelfth Swede was more or less mad. I suggested that we form a "crazies" club