

## 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

called “one against twelve”. Each of those present would have to demonstrate something that qualified him or her for membership. Jussi was fired up by the idea. Many fell by the way-side, among others, Axel [Wenner-Gren] who, at least for the time being, was judged to be far too normal; but both Jussi and I were considered highly qualified. It was decided that all members would pledge themselves to doing certain crazy things when we met each other in public—for example, we would speak inarticulately, or sound out our words like modern pre-school children. Jussi’s membership test was superb—it turned out that he was also a brilliant mimic and “crazy artist” who would have created a *fuore* on the variety stage. He impersonated and mercilessly parodied a whole series of opera singers, librettists and conductors. Finally I mentioned Tetrzzini, the world-famous soprano whom I had seen in my childhood, she of the gigantic girth and enormous string of pearls, who, as she sang her show-stopping arias, would fling her pearls about.

Jussi leapt up: “I can do that too!” whereupon he produced a fantastic send-up with all Tetrzzini’s gestures, mannerisms and juggling of pearls. His humour glittered and shone like fireworks, and he finished his performance on a captivating, melting *pianissimo* with the words: “Just look, I can fling my pearls too.”

And so a quick jump over to the Bahamas. We were in Mexico and were just about to leave for Nassau when we got a telephone call from Anna-Lisa. Jussi had become hoarse; he thought he had lost his voice. “May we come to you tomorrow?”

“We’re just leaving for Nassau,” I replied, “but you’ll be very welcome there.”

They arrived half an hour after me.

I had not even had time to take off my hat or powder my nose. Jussi was utterly dejected. He had lost his voice, he said. He could barely whisper “Shangri La”. He had had to forfeit splendid engagements and honours. They stayed for a week. Jussi wandered along the beach like Diogenes and practised with pebbles in his mouth, full of concern for his voice.

Then suddenly one morning—a storm was raging, waves were crashing onto the shore—a tone like a silver trumpet! Its silver conquered the storm and burst like a beam of light against the sky. Jussi’s voice had returned. He was on top of the world again—all was bright and joyous once more.

In all our memories of Jussi there is interwoven a golden thread which glistened through and bound together his whole life - Anna-Lisa! Anna-Lisa, ever-faithful, ever-present, always supportive when life’s vicissitudes struck. She was Jussi’s inspiration, his guardian angel, his reason for being.

Jussi’s death has brought Anna-Lisa and us even closer together. If all Jussi’s admirers the world over knew what she meant to him, his name would never be mentioned without hers.

I started by speaking of a diamond. These recollections of mine are but small glimpses of its richness. I would have liked to have said so much more, especially something to recall his big, warm, open-to-all heart, but what I finally most wish to express are my sincere, my heart-felt thanks for having been able to consider him as a member of our family, as a friend to rely upon, as the artist who became a golden gift to his country and to the world—a prince of artists whose very memory, in all its brightness, makes the stones along the paths of our everyday life shimmer like jewels.

*Ed. Note: Marguerite Wenner-Gren was an American soprano who married*

*Axel Wenner-Gren, Electolux tycoon. She was a good friend of the Björlings, who visited the Wenner-Grens in the Bahamas. She became a close friend of Anna-Lisa after JB’s death.*

## A Sovereign Artistry

*Holger Löwenadler*

Jussi Björling! I remember all the times I heard the young tenor in the 1930s: he was the impecunious, enamoured Rodolfo in *La bohème*; the cynical Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto*; Cavaradossi, the fighter for liberty in *Tosca*; Manon Lescaut’s noble des Grieux; the lyrical Roméo or Faust; the despairing Canio. The voice was always the same—warm, healthy, beautiful.

Dramatically speaking, there was not all that much difference between the various characters. It was the young Jussi, unaffected, a little awkward, not strikingly gifted as an actor. But he made his way out into the world and returned. I went to hear him again—the same golden voice, a little darker and more expansive with the years, the same sovereign artistry in which everything sounded so easy; but dramatically, the performance was each time more free, more nuanced, more smilingly assured—though never cocksure. It was an impressive, interesting development which demonstrated what success, properly used, can deliver from a latent talent. His last performances at the Stockholm Opera—I’m thinking here chiefly of Rodolfo and des Grieux—were unforgettable. In these the beautiful voice of the early years was joined by the depth and warmth of mature experience.