

an unaffected disposition and was popular wherever he went. The radio and the gramophone had made him known in virtually every Swedish household, even to those who could not travel to Stockholm to hear him at the Royal Opera. I seem to recall that one year he easily won a radio poll to determine the country's most popular voice. He hated large social gatherings, especially those where he was required to be the focus of attention. He never sought out people of birth, position or wealth; instead, it was they who sought out him.

What one admired him for, above all, apart from the rare beauty and warmth of his voice, was his unflinching musicality and memory, even during his difficult times when such a way of life would normally have affected the voice and stage performance. On the stage and concert platform he never lost his self-control but always knew precisely how to behave and perform.

Jussi Björling was in many ways a remarkable person. In essence there was no difference between the teenage tenor, the great talent of the 1930s and the mature international star. Success never went to his head—he was always the same dalmás with both feet planted firmly on the ground. His passing is an irreplaceable loss for Sweden. It is no exaggeration to say, as one newspaper expressed it after his death, that the whole of Sweden was in mourning.

**Bright ideas from member  
Bob Gelfand, Pittsburgh**

- Tell a friend about J.B.S., today!
- Call your local classical radio program, request an aria or duet with Jussi and ask them to mention [www.jussibjorlingsociety.com](http://www.jussibjorlingsociety.com)

## Jussi Björling in London

*Harold Rosenthal*

**W**e first heard Jussi Björling in the autumn of 1937, but we had certainly heard of him before that. His first gramophone recordings, arias from *Tosca*, *La fanciulla del West*, *La bohème*, *Aida* and *Rigoletto* had already been issued, and the advance publicity had spoken of "a new Caruso", a claim which led the great English critic, Ernest Newman, to comment: "Here lies as usual a press-agent". (This is said to be the wording of a famous inscription on a gravestone somewhere in the U.S.A.)

The 1937 autumn season had begun with concerts given by Lawrence Tibbett, Marian Anderson and Gigli. I have consulted my books of clippings and old programmes to refresh my memory. On 31st October I attended the Royal Albert Hall to hear Gigli (who gave nine encores on this occasion). In the programme there was a notice about the world-famous Swedish tenor Jussi Björling who was to appear for the first time in England on 16th November at Queen's Hall. At that time I was still a student, but I searched through my pockets and finding I had sufficient money, I immediately bought a ticket.

On the programme for this concert were opera arias, Lieder and Scandinavian songs, and Björling sang four encores. The audience was not large—it did not fill the hall—but its enthusiasm was immense and the reviews were very good.

In 1939 Björling came to Covent Garden to sing Manrico in *Il trovatore* in Italian alongside Gina Cigna as

Leonora, Gertrud Pålson-Wettergren as Azucena—at one performance Ebe Stignani sang this role—and Borgioli as Count di Luna, with Vittorio Gui conducting. At the performance I attended Toscanini was in the audience and, along with the rest of us, applauded Björling after "Di quella pira". One London critic, however, took the Swedish tenor to task. He asked: "What did Toscanini think of the tenor's addition (complete with high C) to Verdi's chorus after the stretta?"

That was Björling's last opera performance in London until last winter when he returned to Covent Garden to sing Rodolfo in *La bohème*. Naturally, in the intervening period he had given many concerts in London and he was very popular.

In the magazine "Opera", which I edit, Björling's name has been in evidence time after time during the last ten years. The reports of his performances in America have been full of superlatives. I myself have often reviewed his gramophone records, in particular the complete opera recordings, and I have often spoken about him on the BBC. I have always considered him to be an irreproachably musicianly singer. It was not only that he understood how to use his voice so that it always sounded so perfectly beautiful, but also that his artistry and good taste have been doubly welcome during a time when many Italian operatic tenors think only of singing loudly and of how long they can hold their high notes.

The way opera is sung these days, we have suffered an especially deep misfortune in losing this great tenor.

*Ed. Note: Harold Rosenthal was editor of Opera magazine.*