

when he recorded quite a lot of popular songs, much of them under the pseudonym Erik Odde—recordings that are due for release on Naxos, at least in Sweden. Whether they can be of general interest for an international public, sung in Swedish, is another matter. The recording is very acceptable, while the Hollywood Bowl recordings are more distant. He sings however a finely nuanced “Che gelida manina” with a brilliant high C and a lovely pianissimo ending. In the love duet he is partnered by his wife Anna-Lisa, who was a good singer too, which can be heard here, but she chose to have a very limited career of her own and instead take care of the children. Her Mimi is very well sung and she also takes part (uncredited) in the Madrigal from *Roméo et Juliette*, which is announced by Jussi.

The remaining items, recorded in a studio with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra in October 1952 and broadcast on Boxing Day the same year, offer much better sound. “Una furtiva lagrima” is better sung than either of his official recordings and the aria from *Cavalleria rusticana* shows him deeply involved with tremendous intensity. “Cool” singer? Båd actor? Just listen to this track and you’ll be converted. His singing “In fernem Land” from *Lohengrin* may come as a surprise to many listeners, but Björling would certainly have been a wonderful Lohengrin on stage and on records. Among the many plans for further recording projects that never came to being, was actually Lohengrin. The aria is sung here in Swedish, sensitively, authoritatively with refulgent tone and excellent diction. He sang this aria at his very last concert, just weeks before his untimely death, luckily recorded and later issued by RCA. At the same concert he also sang two of the three Sibelius



songs recorded here, “Svarta rosor” and “Säv, säv, susa,” two favourite songs of his, recorded several times. They are on the recently issued song recital on Naxos. The first of them, “Var det en dröm?,” suddenly finds him more recessed, almost as if he were singing from behind the orchestra while the harp is centre-stage. In “Svarta rosor” (Black roses) the harp is still prominent but Björling is closer to the microphone. This balance problem apart he sings wonderfully with Sten Frykberg providing fine accompaniments.

This appendix alone is worth the price of the whole set. And since the opera has so much to offer you won’t regret the purchase. You don’t get a libretto but Keith Anderson’s detailed synopsis is a good substitute and Malcolm Walker gives interesting information about the opera and the singers. Buy it!

## Farkas delivers Congress keynote



Andrew Farkas speaks to Congress participants at the Royal Swedish Opera’s Gold Foyer, September 9, 2004.

**B**jörling family members, distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen: It is a great pleasure to be here with you at the opening of The Fourth Jussi Björling Congress, in this beautiful city and in this beautiful hall, so generously placed at our disposal.

It is also a particular honor to address you this morning, on the occasion of an important anniversary. I invite you to remember this day, September 9, forty-four years ago. The sun rose over Siarö and Jussi Björling’s voice was silenced forever. But he lives on in the memory and hearts of those who knew and heard him, and those who got to know him through the countless audio and video documents he left behind. As

long as he is remembered with affection and admiration, we can say that within our human context he has achieved immortality.

This, our first congress jointly organized by the American, Scandinavian, and British Jussi Björling societies is not aimed at mourning his loss, but to exalt his memory and to celebrate his legacy. We will devote the days ahead to the exploration, appreciation, and enjoyment of the art of Jussi Björling, one of the truly great singers of the 20th century.

As I was preparing for this presentation, I didn't quite know how to begin. I could only think of standard phrases, overused formulae, none of them quite appropriate. Then, purely by chance, I stumbled across a piece of paper that is as good a point of departure as any.

But, to lead up to it, I must go back to the beginning.

The book *Jussi* was published in the fall of 1996. At the initiative of Anders Björling, the administration of Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, invited me to give a presentation to coincide with the publication. The program took place—most appropriately—in the Jussi Björling Recital Hall of the College and, after the event, I was asked to sign copies of the book.

One gentleman in the queue identified himself as a university professor from neighboring Wisconsin and said that he and a few friends were talking about the possibility of establishing a Jussi Björling Society in the United States, modeled on the Scandinavian and British societies.

"Now that the book is out, we would have a focus to attract members," said the distinguished looking professor—would I be willing to participate? "Certainly," said I, fairly skept-

tical about this ambitious idea ever coming to fruition. But one never knows... so I added: "Please give me your name and address and we'll be in touch."

The professor jotted it down on a piece of paper—and ladies and gentleman: here it is! [AF holding up the original note] It says: "Dan Shea, Madison..."

Well, it seems that the rest is history, or at least history in the making. Dan turned out to be a doer, not a talker.

As I found out later, the idea of the Jussi Björling Society-USA was suggested to him by Harald Henrysson and Bertil Bengtsson during Dan's first visit to the Björling Museum in May 1996. In 1997, Dan engaged the active and constructive help of other Björling fans: Mickey Dove, Andy Binns, and Tom Hines. Soon after, an advisory group was assembled and JBS-USA was incorporated in 1998.

It is interesting to observe that within so few years, we actually have a history. Quarterly *Newsletters* began to show up in the mailboxes of prospective members, and with characteristic enthusiasm, determination, unfounded optimism, hard work, and perennial good humor, Dan and his colleagues managed to bring the Jussi Björling Society to life. Soon after, the *Newsletters* were partially supplanted by the *JBS Journal*, a truly interesting little magazine devoted to all things Jussian. The contributors have been many, the articles and topics varied, the components informative, and the feedback all positive.

Dan and his team, with the help of several additional people—too numerous to list them all—took the next logical step: in 1999 they organized the first Jussi Björling Society conference in Washington, D.C. It brought together the membership and foreign visitors for the first time.

Encouraged by the enthusiastic comments and overall success, a second conference followed a year later, this time in St. Peter, Minnesota. Hosted by Gustavus Adolphus College, it was a nearly bucolic family affair, locally coordinated by Anders Björling and, coincidentally, attended by his children and grandchildren. The most recent conference, the one in New York City in October 2002, was perhaps the best—until now.

Aware of the individual and group efforts that went into the organization of the present congress at a truly international scale, I have no doubt that all of us fortunate and determined enough to participate in this one, our Fourth, will look back on it as an outstanding and memorable high point in the history of our respective societies. It could not have happened without the dedicated and vigorous support of the Scandinavian and British Societies, and I think we should applaud all the organizers for what they have jointly accomplished.

Our presence here, our new or continuing friendships—and even stronger ties—are like posthumous gifts of the man we all admire and came to celebrate: Jussi Björling. Yet, it is not us but Björling himself who keeps his memory alive. We are only united in our common interest in his musical legacy, and the life and career of this simple yet very great man.

As our activities show, our objectives are sincere and praiseworthy: we want to bring together, share and preserve the body of knowledge about him, and pass it on to generations that will come after us. Gathering elusive information, identifying and retrieving "lost" recordings, enriching the literature with original articles and translations, recounting personal experiences with Björling on and off-stage, these are activities aimed at a

single objective: to bring him more alive and to render him more plastic for all of us in order to appreciate him better.

Several articles in the *JBS Journal* extolled the merits of Björling's art, brought together fresh mention of him in the musical literature, reviewed new CD releases, and dealt with heretofore unknown or inaccessible information. In the latter category an especially welcome feature was Gail Campain's labor of love, the English translation in installments of Bertil Hagman's *En Minnesbok*.

In addition to what lies hidden in individual memories, some of our very determined members tried to locate forgotten treasures in private and public collections, archives, and libraries. In this area, our persistent and indefatigable Don Goldberg is responsible for more than one Jussi Björling release on compact disc, and it was Don and Harald who tracked down and made arrangements for the limited access of the off-the-air recordings by the Voice of Firestone, The Telephone Hour, and the Ford Sunday Evening Hour concerts. These recordings lay locked away forgotten at the Library of Congress in Washington. We were allowed to play some of those at the Third Jussi Björling Society Conference in New York, and we hope that at some later date the legal obstacles will be cleared to release these hidden treasures to the public.

In the July 2004 issue of *Opera News* Steven Blier's article entitled: "Zinka Milanov? Who's he?" bemoans the fact that Blier's young singers have never heard of—much less heard the voice of—Leonie Rysanek, Sena Jurinac, Margaret Price, Renato Bruson, or Galina Vishnevskaja, to name a few. These aspiring singers clearly expect to invent themselves without any understanding of how

they fit into a musical ensemble, presenting and representing a musical style and a musical tradition.

A singer who knows nothing of performance history and the historical context of a composition will be a hack performer who cannot distinguish between Mozart and Richard Strauss, Donizetti and Richard Wagner. I can think of many such singers active today and I am sure so can you.

What has that to do with Jussi Björling? A great deal, and it is this realization I would like to briefly discuss.

We all know that Björling was born with a unique voice, a musical personality, the ability to learn, and a capacity for work. But I would suggest that if there was one key attribute that enabled him to excel, it was his respect for tradition: technical and interpretive.

Tradition for a performer should also mean familiarity with the work of other outstanding creative artists who came before him or her, the knowledge how they performed a given piece, what made their interpretation of a given composition as good as, or better than, the rest. A singer should not copy or imitate but build on this information, assimilate and add onto it what is unique in him (or her), what makes him special, what sets him apart from the other performers delivering the same music year after year.

Jussi Björling's voice production was steeped in the tradition of singing. He received a solid foundation from his father David, and his singing technique was enhanced and consolidated by John Forsell and Joseph Hislop—all three traditionalists in the best sense of the term. Jussi himself said that if you can sing Mozart you can sing anything—a notion that was clearly put into his head by John Forsell.

Björling also respected the tradition of stage deportment. Though not a born actor, he tried to assimilate and project the persona of Canio, the Duke of Mantua, Rodolfo, and the rest. I single out these because video documentation from these roles show how he tried to delineate and distinguish between the parts. In spite of the brevity of the excerpts and the confinements of the studio, it is quite clear that he would change operatic personalities, not merely costumes. His Rodolfo with Tebaldi doesn't even resemble his ardent and impetuous Duke opposite Hilde Gueden, and they are both a great distance in concept and delivery from his scena of "Vesti la giubba." Without discarding the original concepts, Björling chose to remain Verdi's Duke, Leoncavallo's Canio, and Puccini's Rodolfo.

Where Björling's creative originality is the most conspicuous—necessarily and inevitably—is in his singing. His interpretations are his own, precisely because he was familiar with tradition. He listened to recordings—many recordings—by Caruso, Gigli and others, but only to receive guidance and to learn; he copied no one.

According to my sources, the great Italian baritone and voice teacher, Giuseppe Danise said on different occasions to his pupils Lorenzo Alvaro and Barry Morrell, and to his wife Bidú Sayão, that the best Italian tenor of the moment was Jussi Björling. With some well-meant exaggeration, Gaetano Merola, founding General Manager of the San Francisco Opera Company went even further. When asked who was the best tenor of the day, Merola said: "There is only one tenor—Jussi Björling."

The person most responsible for that—the missing link, as it were—was Dr. Tullio Voghera, a graduate of the Conservatory of Bologna & the

University of Padua (Ph. D.), and a one-time friend and accompanist to Enrico Caruso.

It was Voghera who taught Jussi his Italian repertory, saturating him with all he knew about Italian opera and the Italian style, explaining how Italians—and Caruso himself—sang a role, an aria, a phrase. Jussi knew Caruso's recording of the principal arias from *Pagliacci* and he must have heard Gigli's *Canio* too in the complete recording made in July 1934. Yet when we listen to Björling's *Canio* from Vienna in 1937, we are already in the presence of a thoroughly Italian yet wholly original interpretation. It is a staggering achievement for a young man of only 26(!) to give so much substance to the role, to make it sound fully idiomatic and, at the same time, entirely his own! His complete live and studio recordings shows the mature artist and a fully developed individualistic and idiomatic concept of the role.

Family members also remember Jussi ordering a special pressing of the love duet from *Madama Butterfly*, again with rival Gigli. He wore out the records preparing for his own complete recording, yet again not to copy, but to hear an interpretation steeped in tradition, handed down from the composer's days in Italy. Still, in Jussi's *Pinkerton* one does not hear the phrasing of Brand X, as it were.

In short, Björling did not hesitate to examine the work of respected colleagues in order to absorb what marked the interpretation of Italian music sung by a native singer. He realized that for a Swedish tenor this was the only way to become an Italian *Rodolfo* or *Pinkerton*, *Radamès* or *Manrico*.

In Jussi's studio at Siarö stood an old wind-up Victrola. Perhaps it is

still there today. When I had the pleasure to first visit the place in 1991, there was an old 78 rpm record on the turntable: Caruso's Red Seal Victor of "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra." I was told that Jussi listened to that record a lot, and I believe it was there on that turntable when Jussi passed away.

That's tradition, too.

It is not my role—and this is not the moment—to delve further and deeper into Björling's art. That is up to the speakers, presenters, and all participants of our Congress. I only wanted to focus on this single aspect because hearing some contemporary performances I often ask myself: Who are these people? Do they know what they are singing about? Could I tell that from their inflection? Jussi Björling always knew what he was singing about—and so did his listeners.

There is no yardstick for greatness—it is an elastic measurement. Therefore it is foolish to insist that among a handful of extraordinary talents which or who is greater.

But whatever constitutes greatness in lyric art, taking into account the attributes of the man and the career as a whole, no one would disagree that Jussi Björling was a great singer. Without insisting on comparisons, let us take and enjoy him for what he was: an exceptional singer blessed with a very beautiful, appealing, well-trained voice, unique timbre, excellent musicianship, sincerity, dedication, and steady work. "He was as great as..." or "...greater than..."—who cares? He was God's gift to mankind and Sweden's gift to the music world.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that adding Borlänge to Stockholm as the venue of this international congress was prompted in part by our desire to invite this international gathering to celebrate the

Tenth Anniversary of the Jussi Björling Museum. It is a wonderful facility and an important cultural resource, overseen and lovingly cared for by its birth father, Harald Henrysson.

The City of Borlänge is to be congratulated for responding to Harald's initiative and taking on the fiscal responsibility for the Museum. It shows their respect for the memory and legacy of their celebrated native son, and in so doing they honor not only an outstanding exponent of Swedish lyric art but an opera singer loved and respected in the entire civilized world. It reflects well on the Swedish national character; by comparison, Naples falls woefully short in this regard. There is no Enrico Caruso Museum in his place of birth and death.

So... Happy Birthday Jussi Björling Museum—may you continue to flourish!

It also deserves mention that in celebrating and maintaining Björling's memory there has been no family initiative—just benevolent support, approval, and endorsement. Our societies and the Museum always received the family's assistance when solicited, and for that we should be collectively grateful. It validates our undertaking and confirms our ambition.

As I told you up front, I didn't quite know how to begin this talk and all I could think of was stock phrases and platitudes. I have the same problem concluding this introduction. So let me resort to some misapplied and twisted commonplace phrases:

Dearly beloved, we have gathered together here not to bury Jussi but to praise him! Let the games begin!