

Recalling Longtime Member Robert Tweed, and His Memories of Jussi

By Dan Shea



Robert Tweed

We learned recently of the death last year of Robert Tweed, and recalled an article about him written by Mickey Dove in 2000 for issue #10 of this Newsletter. As an English teacher at West Leyden High School in Northlake IL and at nearby Elmhurst College, he was once asked to provide a model memoir of someone important to him. Here are some excerpts from that memoir, which expresses ideas that many of us will find eloquent and personally meaningful.

“Guldstrupen” – Golden Throat

by Robert Tweed

When I was asked to write a memoir, I immediately began to think of loved ones: my remarkable mother, my exceptional wife, or a close friend, as subjects. All of these people are most important to me, but I have chosen someone else, now deceased but in his lifetime a world-

famous man. I never met him personally, but I feel that I know him very well: I have his visage clearly in mind. More importantly, I am able to hear his voice every day from among the many recordings I own.

I did hear him sing on six occasions, four times in Chicago in the Civic Opera House and twice on television. He was rather short and stocky with the typically Nordic light blue eyes and light colored hair. His smile was amiable and his manner courtly. He was not the colorful Pavarotti type of tenor, not flamboyant

and gregarious, or emotionally overpowering in his effect on people. In fact, physically he was not at all imposing, and as an actor he was barely adequate. But when he began to sing – well, from that moment on the beauty of his voice enthralled his audience. I have never heard a voice as uniquely beautiful as this one.

Whether he was singing in grand opera or whether it was a Swedish folk song, the result was the same, an outpouring of golden melody. As John W. Freeman of the Metropolitan Opera wrote, ‘There was sunshine in his voice, bringing light and warmth that celebrate his memory.’ He could mesmerize the listener in the aria “Donna non vidi mai,” a declaration of love at first sight, or in “Di quella pira,” Manrico’s heroic call to arms from *Il trovatore*. He had range and power to sing anything from Mozart to Wagner, although not always on the operatic stage.

I refer to *Manon Lescaut* and *Il trovatore* particularly, because I heard this man sing in these operas here in Chicago. His other roles here which I heard were in *Rigoletto* and *Aida*. On two successive weekends in November

1955, I drove 350 miles from Iowa to hear him sing *Il trovatore* and *Rigoletto*, the former with Maria Callas. The last role I heard him sing was Radames in *Aida*. This was in 1958, and, only two years later, he was dead of a heart attack at the age of 49.

This man has been important to me since I was a very young man, because from hearing his voice on records, I first learned to appreciate and love good music. I was captivated then by the beauty of his voice, and have been ever since. It has been said that “Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast” and so it is for me when I hear the voice of the immortal Swedish tenor, Jussi Björling.



Dan Shea

Bob Tweed was one of the original members of JBS-USA, a gentle soul who I spoke with on a few occasions, especially when JBS-USA had located some new Björling recordings. He had heard some of Jussi’s most famous operatic performances in Chicago and had retained vivid memories of those, which he considered glorious. Born in 1926, Bob served in the U.S. Army during World War II and also served as a minister of care at St. Raymond de Peñafort Church. He is survived by his wife of 41 years, Rosemary Tweed, two daughters, and six sisters.

At the family’s memorial service held in Wisconsin a few weeks after his death, Bob had arranged that a recording be played and dedicated to Rosemary, of Jussi singing “If I could tell you, of my devotion.” A wonderful last gesture, and surely a powerful moment recalling also Bob’s admiration for “this awesome tenor,” as daughter Carmen remembered. ■