

A Björling-Happening in Kansas City, December 20, 2005

By Dan Shea and Terry Williams

As Dan and Gail Shea prepared for their pre-holiday drive from Wisconsin to California, it occurred to Dan that Kansas City is something of a hotbed of true Jussicologists—maybe we could all get together? So Dan called Pat Darrow and emailed Terry Williams and Ed Walter, and then Terry called Don Quinn and local opera broadcaster Jim Seaver and singers Gustavo and Sarah Halley. Everyone wanted to meet, including some spouses, so a room for 12 was arranged at a local restaurant and a talk-fest broke out. So many fine folks with amusing stories about Jussi and other operatic greats!

But surely the best single story

belongs to Pat Darrow, who spent an entire day with Jussi. The whole story has been told in vol. 7 of this *Journal*, but here we just quote a few lines from that source:

"In February 1950 at the age of 18, I had the experience of my life up to that date. I met Jussi Björling, who was in Kansas City to sing a concert that night [Feb. 27]. For the previous ten years [sic!] I had been an admirer of Jussi, but it never occurred to me that I would ever meet him."

Pat went on to relay how he'd learned to sing songs and arias since age 12 thanks in part to Met Opera broadcasts, and already had seen a concert by Jussi in Kansas City, in Nov. 1948. On this February day, he was standing at 11th and Walnut, waiting for a street car and whistling "Questa o quella" [a teenager openly whistling opera! Sigh], when he was approached by a man asking for directions to the Plaza movie theater.

"He spoke with a Swedish accent." Yes, it was Jussi, and from that point they spent the day together "talking about singers and their techniques ... I learned more about singing in the few hours that I spent with Mr. Björling than from any voice teacher I've ever known."

Before they parted in late afternoon, Jussi told him "You may have success or you may not [with your singing], but if you never have anything but the pleasure of your own singing that will be enough."

Jussi wanted Pat to take him shooting (Pat was on his high school rifle team) and "he said in a bravado way, 'I might

be able to beat you!' He really wanted to go and try it. Needless to say, that night I took a lot of friends with me to hear him sing his beautiful concert at Municipal Auditorium. Everyone was impressed, and we all went backstage afterward and got our programs autographed. He smiled and said that he still wanted to go shooting."

Pat also describes in interesting detail his singing lesson, based on the arias "M'appari" and "Amor ti vieta" and the song "Because," with Jussi accompanying him on the piano and singing those arias himself as well as some vocal exercises for practice.

The whole story needs to be available and we will try to republish it on our JBS website www.jussibjorlingsociety.com.

Don Quinn brought some interesting photographs and stories of Björling family history. He spoke of his friend Marianne Flack-Turnbull who translated Jussi's autobiography for him [Don makes that available to others, see a link on the JBS website]. As it turns out, Marianne's sister is Countess Cecilia Wachtmeister, "Cissy," whose daughter Adrienne married Ann-Charlotte Björling's son Tomas Martin-Löf in July 1999. They now have two beautiful girls, as we could see from photographs that Don showed us. There's much more to that story, too, but we'll just mention that Cissy's mother-in-law had a sister who was the wife of Nils Grevillius, Jussi's favorite conductor in Sweden! Such intersections are not so unusual in the tightly knit fabric of Swedish society.

We'd like to encourage more such spontaneous eruptions of Jussicology and that's indeed one of the aims of our JBS. We maintain a database of members and can help in getting folks together, if they check with Dan or Membership Secretary Laura Homonnay-Demilio.

Birgit Nilsson remembers her first performance with Jussi Björling.

"The first time I sang with Jussi [*Tosca*, 1953 in Stockholm], I was very tense and nervous. But my fears proved completely groundless. He was the most considerate and unaffected partner one could have imagined. Then when he opened his mouth, pouting his lips in that Björlingesque way, and began to sing, I almost forgot what I was supposed to be singing. It was a flow of tones of indescribable beauty. And how easy it all seemed! I dare say that I've sung with the foremost tenors of our time. Perhaps I've sung with some who were more impassioned onstage, but I've never been so overwhelmed by such a sweet sound issuing from a human throat, before or since." [*Jussi Björling, en Minnesbok*, B. Hagman, 1960.]