



Enrico Caruso

the view that “he was an excellent musician . . . and had a ringing middle and upper voice that often reminded one of Jussi Björling’s.” It did, though, come as a bit of a surprise when Ponselle wrote that Pavarotti’s voice at the beginning of his career had a “sparkling silvery timbre . . . reminiscent of Björling’s.” Ponselle explains that “Pavarotti was inspired both by Jussi Björling and Giuseppe di Stefano. He wanted to strive for Björling’s flawless vocalism and style and di Stefano’s ability to communicate with an audience.” (Ponselle: *A Singer’s Life*, p.198)

Ponselle ended her comments about Björling with the following. “Though his life, like Caruso’s, was much too brief, he kept his magnificent voice and technique till the very end.” (Ponselle: *A Singer’s Life*, p.198).

Life is always too short. (*Ars longa, Vita brevis*). Still, even if it should be that the lives of the artistically blessed are sometimes the briefest, they are still the best remembered.

Lee Alperin (FinnLee@verizon.net) is a retired NYC high school English teacher who writes articles on Education issues, Finnish history, and classical music. His article on Arturo Toscanini, *Maestro Furioso*, can be found on the JBS-USA website at <http://www.jussibjorlingsociety.org/maestro-furioso.html>.

A Jussi-Inspired Poem

Francis Charles Webb-Wagg (1925 –1973) was an Australian poet who published under the name Francis Webb. Diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia, he spent most of his adult life in and out of psychiatric hospitals. His output was prolific and his work has often been published in anthologies.

Francis Webb was born in Adelaide, South Australia. His father was a musician and Director of the North Sydney Academy of Music before moving to Adelaide where he became the owner of a piano importing business. Webb entered Sydney University on a full scholarship, but left within the first year. From 1943–45 he served in the Royal Australian Air Force, moving to Canada in 1946. His first published poems came in 1948, and then he was off to England where he was first admitted to a mental asylum. He continued to write, alternating his time between Australia and England. Francis Webb died on 27 November 1973 in Sydney’s Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital.



Francis Webb

Sir Herbert Read (the leading British critic in his day) compared Webb’s work with that of Boris Pasternak, Rainer Maria Rilke and T. S. Eliot. He considered Webb “one of the greatest poets of our time, and one of the most unjustly neglected poets of the century.”

Here is his poem in memory of Jussi Björling.

Nessun Dorma by Francis Webb
(In memory of Jussi Björling)

Past six o’clock. I have prayed. No one is sleeping.
I have wandered past the old maternity home’s
Red stone fermented by centuries; and there comes
New light, new light; and the cries of the rooks sweeping
To their great nests are guerilla light in a fusion
—Murmurs, echoes, plainsong; and the night
Will be all an abyss and depth of light between
Two shorelines in labour: birth and death. O passion
(One light in the hospital window) of quickening light,
O foetus quaking towards light, sound the gaunt green,
Trawl Norfolk, and make shiver the window-blind,
Harass nebulae for Björling. Find him, find.

And now the bar, the feeble light, glissade
Of tables and glasses, and the mantel-set
Intoning his death. Broad tender sunlights fret
Our twilight, his remembered voice has laid
Cock-crow and noon upon harrowed palms of the sill.
O broad light and tender, lucent aria,
Lacerate my paling cheeklines with the steep
Bequest of light and tears, flood me until
The man is the dawning child; be anathema
To man-made darkness. No one, no one shall sleep
Till the cry of the infant emergent, lame and white,
Is the cry of a soul gone towering towards the Light.

—from *Collected Poems* by Francis Webb, edited and introduced by Toby Davidson