

JBS-USA Gains Five New Honorary Advisors

By Mickey Dove, Steve Galantiere, Karl and Toby Hekler, Andy Karzas, and Dan Shea

JBS-USA is honored to announce that five great singers have agreed to serve as members of our Board of Honorary Advisors: Birgit Nilsson, Licia Albanese and Robert Merrill were good friends and co-stars of Jussi's, and the two great contemporary tenors Plácido Domingo and Neil Shicoff have eloquently expressed their admiration for Jussi's art in their books and interviews.

In fact, the three tenors Björling, Domingo, Shicoff have some early history in common: For instance, their fathers all were professional singers; they themselves each were singing semi-professionally by the age of 8; they each had debuted in a major tenor role by the age of 19; and they each made their Metropolitan Opera debuts at age 27. Further, all three tenors specialized for much of their careers in many of the same core operas of Puccini, Verdi, and Gounod—although there are of course important differences in the three career paths.

For completeness, we present short biographical sketches of these new Honorary Advisors.

Birgit Nilsson

Birgit Nilsson, one of the supreme dramatic sopranos of the twentieth century, was born on May 17, 1918,

on a farm in the town of Vastra Karup in southern Sweden.

She made her operatic debut on October 9, 1946, as Agathe in *Der Freischütz*, with only 3 days notice. The following year she made a notable debut at the Stockholm Royal Opera as Lady Macbeth. In 1951 she excited the Glyndebourne Festival as Elettra in Mozart's *Idomeneo*.

It was in Munich during the 1954-55 season that she first sang the Ring Brünnhildes, and during the same season she sang her first Salome. During the next two decades, she sang Elsa, Sieglinde, Elisabeth, Isolde, and Senta, as well as Aida, Turandot, and Leonore in Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

Ms. Nilsson was highly regarded for her interpretations of Elektra and Barak's Wife in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Her important Italian roles included Tosca and Amelia in *Un ballo in maschera* as well as Aida and Turandot. She sang at all of the major opera centers of the world including Bayreuth and New York as well as Tokyo, Paris, Buenos Aires, Chicago, San Francisco, Vienna, and Hamburg. She also sang Turandot in Moscow with the Teatro alla Scala. When she was 62, her performance of Strauss' Elektra was videotaped at the Metropolitan Opera House and broadcast around the world.

In addition to her full schedule of opera performances, Ms. Nilsson also gave recitals at the major music centers of Europe and North America, as well as tours of Australia and Japan. Her recital programs concentrated on German and Scandinavian songs, and often included light favorites such as "I Could Have Danced All Night" as encores.

In 1954 Ms. Nilsson was named "Hofsängerin" (Swedish Royal Court Singer), and in 1960 was made a Life Member of the Swedish Music Academy. In 1981, she was the first woman in more than 200 years to be awarded the Medal "Illis quorum meruere labores" by the Swedish government. Ms. Nilsson married Dr. Bertil Niklasson in 1948.

It has been noted that the voice of Birgit Nilsson was brilliant, "like a laser beam that cut through the orchestra." Certainly, as long as the operas of Wagner are performed, the voice of Birgit Nilsson will be remembered and cherished. Happily all of her important roles have been preserved on recordings, including two versions of her Turandot, with Björling and Corelli as her Calafs, for RCA and EMI.

Licia Albanese

One of the most beloved artists of her time, soprano Licia Albanese reigned over the lyric soprano repertory at the Metropolitan Opera for 26 seasons, setting new standards for some of the most popular works in the operatic repertory. Arturo Toscanini acknowledged her pre-eminence as Mimì and Violetta when he chose her for nationally broadcast NBC Symphony Orchestra performances of *La bohème* and *La traviata*. The

Metropolitan Opera assigned her 42 national broadcasts, including ten Violettas; with the Met alone she sang she sang 87 performances of Violetta, still a house record.

Born in Bari, Italy, Licia Albanese established herself in major European houses before making her American debut at the Metropolitan in 1940 as Madama Butterfly. She concentrated her performing career in the United States, with only occasional returns to Europe for appearances at La Scala and elsewhere. With the Metropolitan she sang a total of 427 performances in 18 roles; in addition she sang 19 seasons with the San Francisco Opera where she was a great favorite and where sang several roles she never sang elsewhere. For several years she starred in her own weekly radio program, "The Treasure Hour of Song," and her radio fame made her eagerly sought for recitals around America. In 1948 she sang Desdemona in *Otello* for the first opera televised from the Metropolitan. When the Metropolitan Opera gave a gala concert to bid farewell to the historic opera house on 39th and Broadway, after singing an aria Albanese bent over to place a kiss onto the hallowed stage she had so often graced, a moment that was captured by Life Magazine in a now famous photo. In 1985 she stepped into a new musical idiom when she appeared with the New York Philharmonic in a concert performance of Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*.

Following her career as a performer, Licia Albanese directed opera performances and offered master classes in operatic interpretation. The Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation, which she founded in 1974 with her husband Joseph A. Gimma, continues to this day as a

thriving organization providing scholarship grants, guidance and performing experience to some of the most talented young singers and musicians from around the world.

Throughout a lifetime of service to music, Licia Albanese has continued to give generously of her art and experience. An earlier generation thrilled to her performances on stage; today she works tirelessly to assure that opera will continue as a vigorous art form in the future.

Robert Merrill

Acclaimed by critics as "one of the great natural baritones of the century," Robert Merrill has truly become a legend in his own time. From the grand stages of the world's great opera houses, to Broadway, television and recordings, he has set a high standard for musical excellence.

Born in Brooklyn in 1917, Mr. Merrill has performed for visiting heads of state at the invitations of every U.S. President from Truman to Reagan, and President Clinton bestowed the National Medal of the Arts on him in 1993. He is also the recipient of the Handel Medallion, New York's highest cultural award, as well as an Honorary Doctorate of Music degree from Gustavus Adolphus College. He holds a place of honor in Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts Hall of Fame for Great American Opera Singers, and the Metropolitan Opera recognized his record-setting 787 performances for that company by hanging his portrait in the Met's own Hall of Fame.

Mr. Merrill made his Met debut in 1945 as the elder Germont in Verdi's *La Traviata*, and shortly thereafter Arturo Toscanini invited him to perform this role in his historic broad-

cast with the NBC Symphony. Toscanini also invited him to perform in his final opera broadcast, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, in 1954. His annual coast-to-coast recital tours included performances at the Hollywood Bowl, Wolf Trap, and participation in a 1985 memorial concert for Jussi Björling at the Stockholm Opera. He also sang Bloch's *Sacred Service* in Hebrew at St. Patrick's Cathedral, and performed at ceremonies marking the Statue of Liberty Centennial.

In addition to opera, Mr. Merrill has recorded music of the Broadway stage, including *Porgy and Bess*, *Show Boat*, *Carousel*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. He has authored three books, "Between Acts," "Divas," and an autobiography written in collaboration with Sanford Dody.

Bob Merrill's enthusiasm for baseball is well known, and for a period he pitched for a semi-pro team to help pay for singing lessons. His recent recording of "God Bless America" is regularly played at home games of the New York Yankees, and he sang the national anthem live at the Yankee's opening game for some thirty years. A special thrill for Bob was performing William Schuman's "Casey at the Bat" with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington.

Mr. Merrill is married to the former Marion Machno, a concert pianist and Juilliard graduate who frequently accompanied him in recital. They have two children, David and Lizanne, who appeared with Bob on television when he was named National "Father of the Year" in 1983.

Plácido Domingo

Mr. Domingo sings in every important opera house in the world and has made well over 100 recordings of which 97 are full-length operas, often recording the same role more than once, and for which he has earned nine Grammy's and two Grammy's in the newly established Latin Division. He has made more than 50 videos and 3 theatrically released films which are Zeffirelli's *La Traviata* and *Otello*, and Rosi's *Carmen*. Mr. Domingo is now General Director of both the Washington Opera and the Los Angeles Opera

When he opened the 1999-2000 Metropolitan Opera Season with *Pagliacci*, he sang his 18th opening night of a season and, as the *New York Times* reported on its front-page, therewith surpassed the old Caruso record of 17 opening nights.

His repertoire—119 different roles, and counting—includes almost all important roles in Italian and French operas. Being constantly challenged by new roles, his ever expanding foray into the German repertoire consists of Wagner's *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin*, and *Siegfried* in *Die Walküre*, in addition to recorded performances of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der fliegende Holländer*, along with performances of Richard Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, Weber's *Oberon*, and Beethoven's *Fidelio*. Within the past three years, he added to his stage performances his first role in Russian, German in Tchaikovsky's *Pikovaya dama* (*Queen of Spades*), the Spanish opera *Margarita la Tornera* by Ruperto Chapí and Verdi's *La Battaglia di Legnano* and Wolf-Ferrari's *Sly*.

Plácido Domingo was born with an unusually flexible voice, and he learned to use it properly. He has been blessed with very good health and stamina, which has allowed him to be on the go all the time. The greatest pleasure for him has always been, and still is, to make use of these gifts and advantages to give pleasure to others.

Born in Madrid in 1941 to parents who were Zarzuela performers, Plácido Domingo moved to Mexico at the age of eight. He went to the Mexico City Conservatory to study piano and conducting, but eventually was sidetracked into vocal training after his voice was discovered. He made his debut as a tenor in the zarzuela *Luisa Fernanda* (when the scheduled tenor became ill; at that point Domingo usually had sung baritone roles), and then in 1961 he made his operatic debut at Monterrey as Alfredo in *La Traviata*.

His Metropolitan Opera debut came in 1968, as Maurizio in *Adriana Lecouvreur*. He has subsequently appeared there in more than 400 performances of 41 different roles and is now in his 34th consecutive season with the company (2002-2003).

Mr. Domingo's interest in helping young singers has led to his yearly competition *Operalia*, which so far has taken place in Paris, Mexico City, Madrid, Bordeaux, Tokyo, Hamburg, Puerto Rico, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. It is the biggest competition on the international scene with annual prizes amounting to \$150,000. *Operalia* has launched many singers to international recognition, not only through its prizes, but because of Domingo's continued interest in furthering their careers.

Plácido Domingo has raised millions of dollars through special benefit concerts in order to help such causes as the victims of the 1985 Mexican earthquake, AIDS and the victims of such other disasters as the Armenian earthquake and the mudslides of Acapulco, etc. He is one of the most decorated and honored artists before the public today, most recently being named one of the Kennedy Center Honorees (December 2000) and, in 2002, the recipient of France's Legion of Honor, a decorating given very rarely to a non-French citizen, one of the highest decorations in The United States, The Medal of Freedom, from Spain the Gran Cruz de la Orden del Mérito Civil, and Knight Commander of the British Empire. The accolades most often associated with him are "King of Opera," which was originally the banner headline on the cover of *Newsweek Magazine*, and "a true renaissance man in music," which was first printed in Italy's newspaper *Corriere della Sera*.

Neil Shicoff

Neil Shicoff has appeared at all of the world's leading opera houses including the Metropolitan Opera, Vienna State Opera, La Scala, Paris Opera, Royal Opera House-London, Berlin's Deutsche Oper, Bavarian State Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, San Francisco Opera, and many others. Known for his intensely passionate portrayals, he has appeared in notable productions by Franco Zeffirelli, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Elijah Moshinsky, Götz Friedrich, Robert Carsen, Andrei Serban, Pier Luigi Pizzi, Werner Schröter, Lina Wertmüller, and

Harold Prince among others.

Mr. Shicoff was born in 1949 in Brooklyn, New York. He studied at the Juilliard School of Music and with his father, the celebrated cantor Sidney Shicoff. His debut as a principal was in 1975 at the Cincinnati May Festival; James Levine called him in to replace Richard Tucker as Verdi's Ernani after Tucker's untimely death. In the same year, he won the George London Foundation Competition.

Having impressed Levine at Cincinnati, Shicoff was invited to audition for the Metropolitan Opera in the same year, and he made his debut there in 1976 as Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi*. A critic reviewing that debut praised the tenor's "amazing confidence and focused energy." Shicoff was then engaged by the house to sing the tenor leads in *Rigoletto*, *La Bohème*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Werther*, which was to become one of his signature roles.

Werther provided the vehicle for Shicoff's 1976 debut with the Houston Opera, and he repeated the role subsequently in Zürich, Vienna, and Aix-en-Provence, and at the Met. His European debut—his first Maurizio in *Adriana Lecouvreur* in Munich in 1976, was soon followed by Don Carlo in Amsterdam in the 1976-77 season. In 1978, he made his Royal Opera House/Covent Garden debut as Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly*, returning to the house later that year as Rodolfo in *La Bohème* and Macduff in *Macbeth*, which he also sang for the BBC (subsequent Covent Garden appearances include the Duke in *Rigoletto* in 1988). His Vienna debut followed in 1978 (*Rigoletto*), beginning a long and warm associa-

tion between him and the Wiener Staatsoper audience; he would sing frequently in Vienna over the subsequent years, most often in *Carmen*, *Tosca*, *Onegin*, *Grimes*, and *Lucia*.

Shicoff's close bond with his Viennese audience was officially acknowledged when he was awarded the honorary title of *Kammersänger* by the Wiener Staatsoper's Ioan Holender in 1998. He sang his first Eléazar there, in Halévy's rarely-performed *La Juive* on 23 October 1999, a performance which met with overwhelming critical and audience acclaim.

In 1979 he made his Chicago debut as Rodolfo (*La Bohème*). Also noteworthy that year was his Werther in Aix-en-Provence, for television, with Teresa Berganza as Charlotte, a performance that still resonates powerfully and fondly in his memory, as well as in those of his audience and critics.

He gave the first performance in 1980 of what would soon vie with Werther as his most important signature role: Offenbach's Hoffmann. This he sang to great critical and audience acclaim in Florence (the five-act Oeser edition) under the baton of Jürgen Flimm. Since then, he has sung the role many times, most notably in Florence, Hamburg, London, Barcelona, Paris-Bastille (notably in 1992), and New York. More debuts followed: San Francisco in 1981 as Edgardo (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), and Paris in 1981-82 as Roméo (*Roméo et Juliette*), where he also sang Hoffmann. Also notable: Maurizio in *Adriana Lecouvreur* at the Met in 1986.

1986 saw his first performance, at La Scala, in his third signature role: Lensky in Eugene Onegin. Shicoff's voice, at first essentially lyrical, has

developed and darkened, allowing him to take on heavier roles, including Rodolfo in *Luisa Miller* (which he sang in Amsterdam in 1991) and Don José in *Carmen*, a role he debuted in Seattle in 1987, and sang again in Paris's new Bercy Hall in 1989, and also in Macerata, Madrid, and Nîmes, among other houses. That same year, he sang his first French *Don Carlos* at the Paris Opéra. He made his Barcelona debut in 1990 as Hoffmann, and his first appearance in Stuttgart in the same year, as Cavaradossi.

Another important debut came in 1995 with his first Manrico in *Il Trovatore* in Zürich in 1995. More significant was his first Peter Grimes in Vienna in 1996—his first role in a modern opera, and a major triumph for him.

Mr. Shicoff's recordings include complete performances of *Carmen*, *La Juive*, *Lucia*, *Hoffmann*, *Bohème*, *Tabarro*, *Onegin* (for both Phillips and Deutsche Grammophon), *Aroldo*, *Macbeth*, *Rigoletto*, *Attila*, and *Traviata*.

He is a popular guest on opera-interview broadcasts where he generously shares his long experience as a leading tenor on operatic stages around the world.

The above material was adapted from the artists' biographical articles, books, and websites, especially the official sites www.placidodomingo.com, www.shicoff.com, as well as Anne Lawson's site www.tenorissimo.com and Karen Mercedes' site www.radix.net/~dalila/index.html.