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## Breaking Hearts in Budapest

By Alfred Gardner

Following Jussi Björling's first tremendous successes in Vienna and Prague (March 12-19, 1936), he was quickly engaged for a return visit as soon as his responsibilities with the Stockholm Royal Opera's spring season ended. He returned to Czechoslovakia two months later and travelled on to Vienna for performances of *Aïda*, *Trovatore*, and *Bohème*, all to great acclaim. With his reputation there firmly established, Jussi was invited to return in 1937 for a longer period (see *Jussi*, pp. 90-99, for reviews and more detail).

In fact, 1937 would be the most important year yet in Jussi's burgeoning career. During the next twelve months audiences in Berlin, Dresden, Hamburg, Vienna, Budapest, Paris, London, New York, and Chicago would be able to hear and see the "new Caruso" from Sweden. Between February 14 and

March 22, 1937, Jussi sang 11 performances of eight operas in Vienna. In between these engagements he left Austria on two occasions for Budapest: On February 27, he sang Radamès in a Royal Hungarian Opera production of *Aïda* with the soprano Mária Németh. Ten days later he returned to Budapest to delight his audience once more with a recital at the Vigadó, one of the popular concert venues of the Hungarian capital.

Björling's Radamès was a huge success with the public and critics alike. One reviewer described his voice as "having a special radiance and concentrated sunshine that scans the audience." Another wrote that "His art shows best in the Nile Scene where he was a master of pianissimo and lyrical refinement." The same critic added that the audience was so overwhelmed by Jussi's singing that after the Act 3 curtain fell, they continued to applaud throughout the entire intermission!

At the March 9th recital at the Vigadó, Jussi's success was if anything even more complete. One can only imagine the excitement and anticipation felt by the Vigadó's audience, knowing that in a few moments the young Swedish tenor with the "God-given voice" would appear on stage. That evening he would not only sing a selection of operatic arias but also lieder and Swedish songs. As expected, the young artiste rose to the occasion magnificently, as we learn from this review in the newspaper *Pester Lloyd*:

#### The Tenor Jussi Björling

*He not only has the voice itself, one of the most beautiful tenor voices one could imagine. He also has refinement—vocal and musical—so it is not strange that he is successful on the concert stage: today's recital of lieder and opera arias at the Vigadó was in no way less (and if possible, even more) successful than his Radamès recently on our opera stage.*

*A good opera singer may not be a good concert singer. But Jussi Björling does a fine job also in lieder singing. The voice was chaste, pure, noble in rendering some Schubert lieder and Swedish folk songs: all natural, simple, coming directly from the heart. No wallowing in emotion, no sentimentalization, no flaunting of volume. This voice, powerful in the upper octave, also has at its command the fine head tones demanded in lied-singing, which it is able to reach with astonishingly nuanced transitions from the chest register. Along with this registral control, the voice also shows ability to control phrasing with expansion and diminution of tones reminiscent of the best bel canto art.*

*This evening we were offered—the*

*encores not included—arias by Mozart, Ponchielli, Tschaikovsky, Bizet, and Meyerbeer. Again we can only repeat what we've written about Björling's interpretation of Radamès: This singing is a quite instinctive, spontaneous, and apparently unrestrained pleasure, not at all obscured by excessive intellectualization or calculation, presenting a voice which is pure, exquisitely youthful, sonorous, comparable to a fresh trumpet tone. It is a slender shaft of tone, whose upper regions always are radiant with the brightest sunshine. It is an extreme rarity, a tenor without any trace of strain. And everything works so well: Breathing (almost frighteningly powerful), resonance, diaphragm and lip support, legato, coloratura. Nothing is more characteristic of his singing technique than the fact that Björling's face never shows any sign of strain, even during the highest, loudest, and longest-held notes.*

*Is it any wonder then, if everyone loses his heart at once to such a tenor? The thunderous applause, however, was partly directed to the excellent accompanist, Dr. Otto Herz. —P.S.*

After he returned to Stockholm, Jussi was interviewed by the local press on 27th March, 1937, and spoke enthusiastically about his successful tour of Central Europe: "I gave three large recitals in Vienna, Prague, and Budapest—seven encores in Budapest, for example, but the audience refused to leave and kept shouting for more. I sang an international program including many Swedish songs, and in Budapest I had a nice surprise when I entered the artist's vestibule after the recital at the Vigadó: the Swedish Consul, General Dezső Bayer Krucsay, had gathered all the

Swedes together and greeted me with a real fourfold Swedish Hurrah!"

These were great days for the young tenor, barely 26! We give here two samples of his interviews with the Budapest press, one routine and casual and one quite unusual ("Jussi on trial"!):

While staying with his wife Anna-Lisa in an elegant hotel on the banks of the Danube, Jussi was interviewed prior to his performance in *Aida*. Although later in his career he sometimes was impatient with the press, on this occasion he received them cordially and gave the interview in a quick well-practiced style:

"At the age of 19 I was already a member of the Swedish Royal Opera. In general my family are very musical" he added with a smile, "my father was a tenor and my mother was a well known singer; when my two brothers and I were young our father took us on a long tour of America."

When a reporter asked how his career began, Jussi responded that "my father took me to the Opera in Stockholm. The director John Forsell, who in his own time was a first class baritone, started to take an interest in me, and gave me a contract. [At my debut] I was 19 years old, my first role was in *William Tell*, since then I have been a member of the Swedish Opera, but I am allowed three months away from the Opera every year. I do make the most of my time: I have been all over Europe. A year ago [conductor Felix] Weingartner was in Stockholm and he gave me a contract to sing in Vienna for 30 performances."

When asked about his favorite roles, Jussi responded "Radamès in *Aida* and Rodolfo in *La Bohème*. On Saturday I am singing in the first of these, then I shall give a recital at the

Vigadó where I will sing several arias from my favourite operas." Asked about his hobbies, he answered with a smile "singing and sport, especially tennis is my favorite pastime. But there is something else," and he produced some photos of his small son, Anders, explaining to the journalists that "he is twelve months old." Asked where his career would take him next, Jussi answered "I am going back to Vienna and in November I will fulfill my American contracts, I shall also appear at the Metropolitan."

#### "Jussi on trial"!

On February 27, before his performance in *Aida*, Jussi gave an interview to a journalist from *Szinházi Élet* (*Theatrical Life*). One of the regular features of this magazine was a page on which a visiting celebrity is to be regarded as "accused" and seated in a fictitious courthouse dock to be subjected to a fast barrage of questions from a "prosecutor." The article is very interesting and reveals how confident was the "accused" 26-year-old tenor. In addition to the English translation given below, we reprint also the original page with its tiny figure of the "prosecutor" pointing vindictively at Jussi—in prison garb.

#### The Law Court of Theatrical Life

*The accused: Jussi Björling will give evidence only of the plain truth.*

This week we have seated in the Courthouse dock the famous tenor from the north, Jussi Björling. The charge brought against him is that immediately after his first public appearance in Budapest, he captured the public's imagination and repeatedly has broken their hearts. We have registered the following authentic

record of evidence at the trial:

**Your name?** "Jussi Björling"

**Your age?** "26 years"

**Occupation?** "Tenor"

**Permanent address?** "Stockholm"

**How long have you been singing?**

"For ten years"

**Who is your ideal?** "Caruso"

**How many roles have you been singing?** "Forty"

**Favourite partner?** "My wife"

**Do you smoke?** "No"

**What is your ruling passion?**

"Fishing"

**Who is your favorite writer?**

"Selma Lagerlöf"

**Favorite composer?** "Mozart"

**What was your greatest success?** "My debut at the Vienna Opera House"

**Greatest failure?** "Thank God, I have not failed yet"

**What would you like to be if you were not a singer?** "Only a fisherman"

**Have you ever written a poem?**

"Quite a few"

**Have you ever been in love?**

"What an indiscreet question! It is not polite to ask a married man something like this"

**What is your greatest wish?**

"To resemble Caruso a little"

**Do you like your critics?** "I love them"

**Do you dream?** "That is too much excitement for a singer"

**Do you do any sports?** "My doctor advised me to do a lot of movement so I play tennis and ski, and I go fishing"

**Do you like children?** "I can only answer this that I have a one year old son"

**Favourite food?** "Chicken Paprikash"

**Favourite drink?** "Beer"

**What is your opinion about a slimming diet?** "Let others lose weight"

**Do you like to sing on the radio?**

"I don't because I don't like the

mechanised voices, that's why I made some recordings recently."

**What can you plead in your defence?**

"I am still too young"

**Authenticate your confession?**

"You have heard it yourself"

*N.B. Björling's answer to the question, "Do you like to sing on the radio?" is apparently a self-directed bit of humor, i.e. "I don't like mechanized voices, that's why I make records." The fun is in the contradiction.*

Editor's Note: As we know from the biography Jussi, Björling returned one more time to Budapest, in November 1942, but this time the circumstances were very different. Mr. Gardner has written about that visit as well, and we plan to return to his report of Björling in Budapest in a future issue. In the meantime, we invite you to preview that story by reading *Jussi*, pp. 147-8.

*Alfred Gardner is a member of the U.K.'s Jussi Björling Appreciation Society, who contacted the Hungarian newspapers quoted here and was very pleased with their cooperation. (He provides a good example for similar sleuthing by the rest of us, about other periods of Jussi's career!) Alfred especially wishes to express his thanks for assistance with translations to Andrew Farkas, Harald Henrysson, and László Ottovay of the National Széchenyi Library, Budapest. He also thanks Eric Wimbles for his encouragement and editorial help.*

*(And your Editor would like to express further thanks to Andrew, Harald, and Eric, as well as to Craig Mann, for their help with some fine points of translation.)*