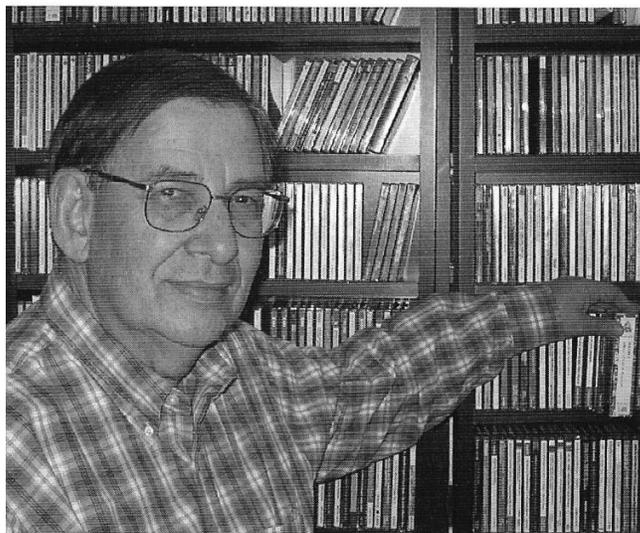


Jussi Björling: In Concert, Finland & The U. S.

(1940–1957) • Jussi Björling (t); Various accompaniments • BLUEBELL 116(2); mono (2 CDs: 142:55) Live recordings



Henry Fogel

There are many Jussi Björling recital discs available, and given the unique beauty of his singing it would be foolish to recommend one (or, in this case, two) as the one to have. I will say, however, that this is a treasure, and is certainly one of the best collections available. Some of the songs and arias appear more than once over the 54 tracks. But it is even interesting to hear the differences in interpretation over the 17-year span of his career represented here.

The sources include concerts in Helsinki in 1951 and 1955, a Ford Sunday Evening Radio Hour from Detroit from 1940, the Bell Telephone Hour from 1948, a New Orleans Community Concert Series presentation from 1955, and the *Rigoletto* excerpts from a 1957 Ed Sullivan Show on the CBS Television Network (yes ... back in the day when opera appeared on mainstream commercial networks). The *Roméo* duet with Sayão comes from a 1951 Salvation Army “Army of Stars” concert given at the San Francisco War Memorial Opera House. Bluebell’s sound is very good. Even accounting for the disparate sources, this is at its worst very listenable

monaural sound, and at its best almost studio recording quality.

The voice, and what a voice, comes shining through. The golden tone of this tenor is identifiable as soon as we hear one or two notes... What was not always as evident on his commercial studio operatic recordings was that he had a forceful personality as well. Björling was never an instinctive actor who could add meaning to a phrase with some specific inflection. But neither was he a simple note-spinner. The music, the vocal line, was what moved him, and he knew how to lean

into a phrase for maximum effect, and he knew how to employ dynamic shading to add beauty and intimacy to the moment. His soft singing in Sjöberg’s “Tonerna” is breathtaking. There are two versions of that little gem here. The first one, from Helsinki in 1955, is stunningly beautiful. But then we hear the second one, from the New Orleans recital later in the same year, and it is even more lovely.

We don’t think of Björling as the kind of extroverted singer who would hold onto notes for effect, but in fact he could do that and when the occasion moved him he did, and I feel sorry for any purist who refuses to enjoy the thrill. Listening to him in “L’alba separa dalla luce l’ombra”...or in Chénier’s last-act aria, we hear a singer who is more than capable of providing a visceral thrill

that goes well beyond just beautiful note-spinning. The long diminuendo on “le belle forme disciogliea dai veli” is unforgettable. There is a slight crack on the high C in the *Bohème* aria, but he recovers and carries on with a kind of “so there!” force. The remarkable thing is that in two-and-a-half hours of live, unedited singing, that is the only blemish to which one could point, and it is so brief as to almost go unnoticed.

Roughly half of the selections are accompanied with piano, by his long time and excellent pianist Frederick Schauwecker for the 21 items from the Atlanta concert, and by Harry Ebert, also effective, in the second Helsinki recital. The rest of the items are accompanied by orchestra, with the four items from the Ford Sunday Evening Hour being graced by members of the Detroit Symphony, playing as the Ford Symphony Orchestra, under the expert baton of Eugene Ormandy.

I listened through these two discs four times, and still found myself marveling at the vocal beauty, and the combination of elegant vocalism with an infectious joy in the act of singing that is communicated throughout. If you don’t know Björling’s singing, this would make a fabulous introduction to it. If you do know it, this will fill out your collection admirably. The booklet is filled with superb notes, by different writers with different perspectives on this great tenor, and a helpful piece by transfer engineer Seth Winner, who deserves much credit for the success of this set. ❖

—Henry Fogel

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Mark your calendars for a JBS Conference in Salt Lake City, June 10-14, 2015.

More to follow.