

from an Italian newspaper (*La Nazione* in Florence) which reads in part: "His extraordinarily controlled voice, so rich in nuance and flexibility, his great musicality, his convincing involvement in a role and his well-balanced dramatic interpretation—all these place him in the front rank of operatic artists."

May I be permitted a general reflection in connection with the unfortunately all too brief reminiscences I have been able to give above (I have never, by the way, kept a diary). Is it not so that the artist—the true artist—is, in the majority of cases, something of an "escapist"? He is out of place in the everyday world, but this very escapism provides his fellow human beings with a wonderful insight into what an unrestrained life-force means! There is one exception—and I am still speaking in generalities: the singer. He is both of and not of our world. He can—like Jussi—stand with his two feet on God's earth and, as an

extra gift, he is the possessor of a singing voice, that most wonderful of all instruments which—when it reaches perfection—helps one, as the smile of a child in its cradle and Mozart's music do, to believe in other worlds. Jussi Björling's timbre and artistry were such that he made one think of the deep longing, of which Levertin spoke in his poem "Folket i Nifelhem": "the buried longing"—in the Swedish heart—"that becomes song".

Joel Lagerberg (1888-1975) had comprehensive cultural interests and was a good pianist. He entered diplomatic service in 1912 and was stationed in Helsinki, Paris, Berne, Rome, Paris and Washington before he became envoy in Prague 1935-37, then Warsaw 1937-39, Madrid 1941-2, Rome 1942-46 and The Hague 1946-53. After his diplomatic service, he became First Master of Ceremonies 1953-70 and was also on the Royal Opera Board 1953-61.

Hostess Maija Budow presided over a spectacular smörgåsbord at a spring party for 25 friends, part of a two-day celebration of Bertil Bengtsson's "Evening with Jussi Björling" program in Georgetown (April 2003).



Among Swedes in the U.S.A.

By Lennart Nylander

“A nd one more thing! I'll be back next year and I want to give a concert then for the benefit of Swedish sailors. It'll be in Carnegie Hall and I promise to fill every last seat in that big hall. We'll have a really great time. Speak to my agent about the details.”

These were Jussi's farewell words to me—I was Consul-General in New York at the time—before he returned to Stockholm in 1947 after acclaimed performances at the Metropolitan Opera and concert tours around the United States. There was nothing to be done other than obey, and we did that more than willingly. That farewell proposal initiated an annual series of benefit concerts at Carnegie Hall involving the participation of Jussi and other Swedish singers. The concerts were usually organised by the Swedish Seamen's Welfare Fund, an organisation which had been formed in the summer of 1947 and which on several occasions worked together with—and shared its income with—the then very active Swedish-American charity association, United Swedish Charities, whose mission was to provide financial support in New York for Swedish children's and old people's homes, hospitals etc.

The achievements of our great Swedish singers after the Second World War in New York and, for that matter, all over the country, cannot be too highly praised. Sweden was

far from popular in the United States at that time. Isolated as we were during the war, we had had little opportunity to make our voice heard and to defend our actions. In Washington, Sweden was viewed with distrust, for Americans in general had difficulty in reconciling themselves to the fact that Sweden had maintained her neutrality during the war instead of joining the Allied side. Americans of Swedish descent were distressed when our country was made the subject of spiteful attacks in the American press and on radio, as often happened at that time.

When the sea routes were opened again and Sweden could once more speak freely, the old, traditionally good ties quickly began to be formed again, and along with the stream of visiting Swedes came, one after another, our Swedish opera singers. Never before had Sweden been able to present such a brilliant group of first-class singers abroad—a group in which Jussi Björling in particular stood out—and our country can be extremely grateful for their contributions to the rebuilding of Sweden's standing and reputation in the West. At the front of the Swedish musical "offensive" we find, first of all, the four "Swedish Giants", as they used to be called by the music critics in New York—Torsten Ralf, Joel Berglund and Set Svanholm with Jussi at the head; there was also Kerstin Thorborg, Karin Branzell and Hjördis Schymberg, and we should not forget Blanche Thebom who, although an American, came of Swedish stock and as a result often liked to join the Swedish group at the Metropolitan Opera.

From a few years later should be remembered Sven Nilsson and Gösta Björling among others. One name which is certainly at the periphery of

this topic of discussion, but which ought to be mentioned, is that of Fritz Busch, during that time a conductor at the Metropolitan Opera and, until his death about ten years ago, a warm friend of our country and a great admirer of Jussi.

In this short memorial piece I would like to recall a couple of features of Jussi's rich personality which stood out during the night onto 10 years we met in New York. First of all comes his naturally warm and generous heart, which all who got to know him personally had ample opportunities to experience. Coupled with an enthusiasm for a good cause which would sweep aside all hindrances and difficulties was his honestly open love for his native land. When he spoke of Sweden, which he willingly and often did, it was always in capital letters. He was proud of his country.

Among the happy memories I have from Jussi's years in New York I can here mention a Swedish Christmas celebration at the consulate, when "Nu är det jul igen" [Now it is Christmas again] was sung with more roof-raising bravura than ever before by a trio comprising Jussi, Joel Berglund and Torsten Ralf. Another occasion comes to mind too. Jussi and his great friend from the Met, Robert Merrill, had eaten a Swedish dinner in the Swedish "recreation room" down in the basement and had then stretched themselves out full length on the sofas in the library to enjoy some of Jussi's latest recordings. Jussi related how he had sung no less than sixteen arias and songs on one day [April 11, 1952] for a new recording ["Jussi Bjoerling in Song"]. Merrill said: "Are you crazy? If you continue like that you'll have a heart attack. Never more than six at the most at

one time." But Jussi liked hard work.

Out here Jussi also practised his great hobby: fishing. He was without doubt enormously proud of having single-handedly pulled in some massive 80 kilogram deep-sea fish off Miami and with Wenner-Gren in Nassau. But he always went back to his "friends," the zander and pike around Siarö—they were closer to his heart.

I started by mentioning our conversation during the farewell evening at the consulate when Jussi offered to give a concert for the benefit of Swedish seamen. Over the years there were, as I have said, a great number of musical events in which Jussi participated and donated his services. One such occasion took place on 11th April 1949 when Jussi, along with Joel Berglund, Karin Branzell and the conductors Fritz Busch and Max Rudolf, gave a gala concert titled "Sweden in Music" to a full house at Carnegie Hall with a programme of music by Söderman, Alfvén, Sjögren and Rangström. At heart, Jussi was not really completely happy about the programme, which he thought was too heavy and serious; he wanted to sing some Puccini and let the public have its heart's desire. The evening was a success, though, and raised many thousands of much-needed dollars for the fund for the future Swedish Seamen's Hotel on South Portland Avenue in Brooklyn.

It would take too long to enumerate all the other occasions on which Jussi helped with "Swedish work" in New York, but I would like to mention here just one further episode. The Swedish Seamen's Hotel had been completed in 1951, and for Christmas 1952 the management of the hotel had the pleasure of being

able to distribute thousands of Christmas parcels to those Swedish ships berthed in New York harbour which would be at sea on Christmas Eve, and to sailors who would celebrate Christmas at the hotel. Again it was Jussi who was responsible. Together with Anna-Lisa he had given a concert at the beginning of December at The Swedish Seamen's Hall which was full to bursting-point and many Swedish sailors sent grateful thoughts to both of them that Christmas. During the evening Jussi unfortunately caught a bad cold and was subsequently forced to cancel several important concert engagements.

In my modest contribution to this memorial book it has been my wish to connect Jussi's name with the welfare work which has been carried out in New York under the leadership of the Swedish Merchant Navy's Welfare Council in Stockholm. Jussi has earned the deepest gratitude of the thousands of sailors who each year use the hotel and for whom, through his singing which has accompanied them at sea, he has long been a good friend. But those others of us in New York, who in various fields and different capacities were a part of the united Swedish efforts, would here also like to pay our warmest tribute to Jussi's memory for his great and truly unforgettable contribution.

Lennart Nylander (1901-66) entered diplomatic service in 1928, was stationed in Moscow and Berlin before he came to New York as Consul General in 1945. He left NY in 1955 for Mexico, where he was envoy until 1956 and then ambassador until 1962.

KARL HEKLER REMEMBERS ANOTHER ONE OF JUSSI'S PERFORMANCES (A CONTINUING SERIES):

Jussi Björling Appears in Concert at Manhasset, New York, on December 8, 1956 (the first time that Janet Neidt Björling heard her future father-in-law perform)

By Karl Hekler

I too, was there, but gaining admission, if you weren't a relative, was not so easy.

The first time I visited the superb Björling Museet in Borlänge, Sweden, I told the curator, Harald Henrysson, that I had attended a Björling recital at Manhasset High School, Long Island, New York, that does not appear in the Performance Chronology of Harald's *A Jussi Björling Phonography*. After checking, Harald told me that the museum had no record of any such recital. I couldn't tell him the year, let alone the date. Now, Harald Henrysson is to curating and history what Jussi Björling is to singing. No sloppy inaccuracies; no approximations of pitch or rhythm; no entries into the official Björling archives based on anecdotal hearsay.

When I got back to the US, I called two friends who were at the recital with me, Ed McNally, a retired cardiologist living in La Jolla, CA, and Dave Shahin, a retired recording industry executive. I asked if they still had their programs or

could remember the date (I lost a packed suitcase of saved programs in a cellar flood, including the Manhasset recital). Dave came through. He was able to say with certainty that the date was December 8, 1956, because his wife Marge was due to give birth to their first child on that date, and Dave remembers not being sure what he would do if Marge went into labor and he had to choose between being at the hospital or at the recital. Luckily, the baby was 3 days late, and Marge joined us at Jussi's recital. I told this to Harald, but I got the impression that this was still inadequate proof. I later learned that he asked Cantor Don Goldberg to research the Long Island newspapers, and Don found a small article saying that Jussi would be singing in Manhasset, but there was no date mentioned. I still didn't know whether Manhasset made it into the archives.

And now, I've just learned that in a magazine interview [see this issue's "Web Notes"], Janet Björling related that the first time she heard Jussi