

The Recorded Legacy—Reviews of Recent Releases of Interest to JBS Members

By Kristian Krogholm

A big array of new releases during 2003 attest to the continuing popularity of our tenor. In addition to the expected re-releases of old favorites, two record companies have come up with exciting new material: Let's begin with the most significant two releases this year, Caprice's 1957 *Il Trovatore* from the Royal Opera in Stockholm, and RCA Red Seal's CD of Jussi's complete 1955 Carnegie Hall recital.

Then we'll bring you up to date on Naxos' ambitious "Jussi Björling Collection" which has now made available the first three CDs in a projected series; also Bluebell's CD "Fram för Framgång – Film and radio recordings" from 1937-1960; and EMI's two-CD set "The Very Best of Jussi Björling."

Also, there are at least two other releases of minor interest that we'll examine, more in warning than as a recommendation—these come from the Istituto discografica Italiana ("Opera Recordings 1948-1951"), and the Lebendige Vergangenheit series.

There's also Guild Historical's new 3-CD set of scenes from San Francisco Opera productions of the 1930s and '40s, which includes a key scene from a 1940 performance of *Ballo* with JB, Rethberg, and Bonelli. That recording is reviewed

elsewhere in this issue—see Madeleine Drake's *Web Notes* column.

1. Caprice has committed to assemble a series of opera recordings made in-house at the Royal Swedish Opera (not as radio broadcasts). Vol. 1 in the series presents a recording of *Il Trovatore* from January 26, 1957, complete except for Act 1, Scene 1. The two-CD set is filled out with five scenes from *Manon Lescaut* of November 1, 1959—a performance which was broadcast by Swedish Radio, with excerpts of the broadcast long available on an excellent CD by Bluebell. Thus it's interesting that this new recording of that performance derives from an entirely different microphone placement for the in-house recording. According to Caprice, this in-house recording "is amazingly successful in presenting Björling's voice in close-up, darker but still flexible, [just] as it sounded at the Royal Opera in the later years of his career."

In particular the first two selections, "Tra voi belle" and the sequence leading from "Cortese damigella" to "Donna non vidi mai" catch Jussi in superb sound, and the ring and ping of his top notes are matchless in beauty. The "Guardate, pazzo son" scene is thrilling, as are the tenor-soprano duets from Acts 2 and 4, sung with Hjördis Schymberg.

Conductor Nils Grevillius had a special affinity for Puccini's music, and shows it in this performance.

For the 1957 *Trovatore* recording, let's quote a review from Norway's *Aftenposten*, by the distinguished critic Kjell Hillveg, that appeared last June. Hillveg mentions that soprano Aase Nordmo-Løvberg would celebrate her 80th birthday on June 10, and lauded her performance as Leonora in this recording: "Jussi Björling had paid his homeland a short visit [and] perhaps that gives this whole performance some extra inspiration. But we are listening to a grand evening of singing. Hugo Hasslo's Count di Luna is no less great than Leonard Warren's famous performance. His singing is intense and stylistically secure. Margareta Bergström is a first class Azucena. Björling is in no need of any new recommendation—only that here his wonderful tenor sounds darker and gleams with more metal than earlier. But our Aase Nordmo-Løvberg is at her absolute best. Her shining and full soprano manages all of Verdi's demands almost perfectly, with a beautiful pianissimo, and considerable dramatic involvement, especially in the great final scene with di Luna."

Indeed this is a wonderful performance, and the sound captures the voices very well if not the orchestra—since the microphone was placed in the wings.

And the chorus sounds especially fine, engaged and enthusiastic.

There's an interesting four-page review of this set by Andrew Farkas in the Autumn 2003 issue of *The Opera Quarterly* from which we'll select a few quotes:

"The bad news concerning this release is that Act 1, Scene 1 is

missing. This shortcoming can be artificially remedied, as the Ferrando of the worthy bass Erik Saedén was recorded complete on 6 March 1960 in the same venue (on Bluebell ABCD 045). The good news is that the sound quality of the recording exceeds all expectations, and that Verdi's opera is sung in Italian."

Farkas finds Nordmo-Løvberg's Leonora "outstanding" and "enjoyable in all respects." "Only thirty-three at the time of this recording, she uses her attractive lirico-spinto to portray a vulnerable, feminine, lovely Leonora." "Jussi ... is in magnificent form ... he gives an exciting, emotionally involved, fresh (alive, as opposed to new) interpretation... He still pays attention to every shade and meaning of his introduction to 'Ah sì, ben mio' and successfully takes a stab (even now, at age forty-five) at the trill on 'parrà'; his prison confrontation with Leonora ... remains even more thrilling in its emotional violence. The singing simply cannot be faulted; 'Di quella pira' (here peaking on a B-flat) is still the climax of the role and the act. The 'Miserere' is a high point for both principals, for once finding the tenor not in the distance but close to the microphone, allowing the listener to wallow in gorgeous tenor sound."

And Farkas finds Hasslo a "stupendous di Luna. The man has everything: a large voice, range, beauty of tone, phrasing, involvement, passion, and the ability to act with the voice in the grand manner." In this distinguished cast, "Bergström is the lesser force ... but only marginally" since "she sings well and renders the different aspects of Azucena as written."

(If you would like a copy of the complete OQ review, notify Dan

Shea via email (dshea@chorus.net) or Andrew via post (Director Emeritus of Libraries, Univ. of North Florida, 4567 St John's Bluff Road South, Jacksonville, FL 32224 USA). Or better, consider subscribing to this fine publication—which in the same, current, issue features a 70-page article on Zinka Milanov as Tosca; for more on OQ see our "Jussi in the News" column in this issue.)

And for more on Caprice's new Royal Swedish Opera Archive series, including the personalities behind this project as well as plans for future releases, visit Caprice's website: <http://home.swipnet.se/sonoloco11/caprice/operaarchives1.html>.



2. BMG's RCA Red Seal Division has produced a treasurable CD of Jussi's 1955 Carnegie Hall recital, giving us the entire concert in best-available sound working directly from the **original tapes**: that fact is the key one, since it means more clarity and dynamic range in the sound than we could hear on the original 1950s-era LP of excerpts.

Jussi's voice, with its rich spectrum of overtones, is highly susceptible to careful digital remastering, and indeed the original tapes give us a voice that is fuller, clearer, more beautiful, and

well focused. Moreover we see the great dynamic range of his singing—easy power when needed, and then gorgeous full-bodied soft singing that carries throughout the big hall. I especially like the lieder at this concert, in particular Strauss' "Traum durch die Dämmerung," as well as the "Tonerna," "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra"; and of course his rendering of Foster's "Jeanie with the light brown hair" is incredibly beautiful. As I wrote in an online review for Amazon.com: Many thanks to the RCA people involved, who helped make that divine voice come alive once more. I have sort of fallen in love with this CD!

Some JBS members who'd been at the concert itself emailed personal memories of the event: Tony Coppola wrote, "Being a novice then, I'd never heard 'Amor ti vieta' and thought it was the most wonderful thing I'd ever heard until Jussi launched into 'L'alba separa,' but then there were 'Svarta rosor,' 'Come un bel dì di maggio,' on and on. The remastering job is great, much better sound than on the original LP." And Hal Sokolsky echoed these sentiments—recall that with Don Goldberg he provided our feature stories of Jussi at Carnegie Hall in the previous issue of this Journal (No. 13).

For a fine online review by Dan Davis, check www.ClassicsToday.com. See also the article by Don Goldberg and Harald Henrysson about this CD, elsewhere in this issue,

3. Naxos' Jussi Björling Collection consists of volumes 1-3 to date, with much more to come as various copyrights expire. You can read about the contents of first three CDs in the series at www.Naxos.com, or get a rough idea from the titles:

- vol. 1 is “Complete opera and operetta recordings in Swedish, 1930-38
- vol. 2 is “Songs in Swedish 1929-37”
- vol. 3 is “Opera arias and duets 1936-44” (all sung in Italian or French).

Actually vol. 3 has the title “Opera-arias och duetter 1936-44” since to date (fall 2003) it can be obtained only from Scandinavia, even though the excellent notes with the CD, by Harald Henrysson, are printed both in Swedish and English (with the translation provided by Sue Flaster).

We have heard rumors that Naxos’ next volumes will contain more transcriptions of 78s of arias and songs from 1945-1953, as well as the contents of the RCA LP “Jussi Bjoerling in Song” from 1952 (RCA chose never to release this gorgeous recital on CD; when Naxos releases it—outside of the US, only—we’ll be able to get copies from Europe or Canada). While Naxos’ engineers surely will do a fine job of transferring this LP to CD, the result cannot reflect improvements that RCA could have provided by working directly from the **original tapes**. We are deeply disappointed that copyright law seems to be working against quality here, and pray that a way will be found to allow the owners of original source material to make it available in optimal sound.

Of course, the same comment applies to the RCA opera recordings, like Jussi’s classic *Il Trovatore*. The early official RCA transfer to CD of this classic set was not very successful and we hoped for an up-to-date remastering from the original tapes. We still hope that will be forthcoming from BMG’s RCA Red Seal division,

given the unique quality of the performance, but acknowledge that the existence of cheap copies made from the LPs, now legal in Europe and available from there via mail, tend to discourage success for a more expensive quality product.

In fact, the new Naxos issue of this *Trovatore* is a successful transfer from the RCA LPs, thanks to careful engineering by Mark Obert-Thorn, and I prefer it to the RCA’s 15 year old CD-edition. For the time being, I am content to settle for this Naxos version of what is for me THE *Trovatore* recording! Barbieri, Milanov, and Warren all share in the glory, but for me “Ai nostri monti” is especially beautiful and Björling’s singing there gives me the “pelle d’oca” (goosebumps)! His “Di quella pira” has an intensity that is still unmatched (his gruppetti are superb), and seems taken at a faster clip here than in his previous recordings of the aria. His high C’s ring out like laserbeams, and the voice seems especially fresh and brilliant here, compared to the old RCA CD-version.

(But be forewarned that the notes with Naxos’ *Trovatore* are by Tully Potter—who Javert-like reappears to insist that Jussi sang offpitch. Weird. Aside from this slip by Naxos, we still recommend the set.)

Here are a few excerpts from recent reviews of Naxos’ vols. 1 and 2:

Complete opera and operetta recordings in Swedish, 1930-38: “The sheer sound still stops your heart and takes your breath—only one voice had that clarity, purity, and beauty. And as we hear in this vol. 1 of Naxos’ complete Jussi Björling Collection, the tenor possessed all of those qualities, plus a remarkable maturity in recordings made when he was only 19.... This

collection, where everything is sung in Swedish, also presents Bjoerling in repertory that he soon abandoned: operetta and popular song. If you have never heard these selections, here offered in excellent transfers by [Stefan Lindström], you are in for a treat. ‘Dein ist mein Ganzes Herz,’ from 1932—he was all of 21—rivals any of the classic Tauber recordings; the Kálmán arias could hardly be bettered; and the arias from Offenbach’s *Belle Hélène* and Millöcker’s *Bettelstudent*, with its spectacular high D, are beyond compare. Here’s one of those rare recordings that you’ll play again and again.” (Lee Milazzo, writing in the *American Record Guide* for March/April 2003.)

Songs in Swedish, 1929-1937: “This collection of lighter songs, originally in a variety of languages but all sung in Swedish, is an example of the performer lifting the material out of the league of the ordinary. A few of these are rightly classics but many others are fairly unimaginative junk.... But as sung by Björling, everything sounds like a masterpiece. He lavishes scrupulous musicianship and that golden timbre on everything—neither applying too much seriousness to the mercurial nor *kitching* it up. In a couple of these songs, he floats some *pianos* that will take your breath away. (“Ninon” and “Ay, ay, ay” are two examples.)

“These recordings date from 1929-1937... a time when he sang with a bit more abandon and freedom than was the case later on. There is not a single track here that doesn’t represent the art of singing at its highest level. If you want to stick to more serious repertoire, then you might want avoid this disc, but if you do you’ll miss some glorious singing....

“Harald Henrysson’s notes are a positive and informative addition to the disc. Jussi Björling was one of the very greatest singers of the 20th century, and his recording career was long and distinguished. Naxos’ budget-priced issue of these records is to be welcomed.” (Henry Fogel, writing in *Fanfare* for May/June 2003.)

And I’ll add that the gypsy song “Varför älskar jag” from 1932 is a favorite of mine (Jussi was not yet 21 when he made this!), and of course the 1936 recording of “Ay, ay, ay” is close to a miracle. The ease with which Jussi sings the *diminuendi* borders on the impossible: a truly superb rendition by a singer who already knows that he can do, musically, whatever pleases him. Once again the transfer sounds ideal.



4. Bluebell’s “Fram för framgång” collects songs and arias from Jussi’s films of 1937 and 1953, and his Swedish radio recordings from 1944-45 (with orchestra conducted by Tor Mann), 1957-58 (Stig Westerberg conducting), and the Gothenburg concert of August 1960 (Nils Grevillius conducting).

The Gothenburg concert has especially wonderful sound here (the

transfers are made directly from the original tapes), and with Jussi in gorgeous voice. To me, his *Lohengrin* Grail Narrative and *Onegin* aria are only warm-ups, possibly he’s pacing himself and checking how that weary heart of his is coping. But from the Puccini (“Donna non vidi mai”) onwards, he sings at full glorious power. The last song, Alfvén’s “Jag längtar dig,” is incredibly well sung. The Rangström song “Tristans död,” from 1957 is once again Jussi at his incomparable best—this dramatic song takes power and tonal beauty, and his performance is *hors concours*. (If you don’t have it, you need to get it!)

And that 1944 “Nessun dorma!” (untampered with, by sound engineers) is absolutely the slowest, most marathon performance of that aria in the entire catalogue (as a survey of recordings of this aria, for *Fasolt* magazine, proves). Another astonishing feat by our tenor.



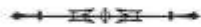
5. EMI’s 2-CD set “The very best of Jussi Björling” is being advertised widely as part of a series “celebrating the most distinguished singers of the past and the present” and “generously programmed on 2 CDs ... a superb survey of the artist’s recorded legacy at a two-for-one price.” Other

artists chosen for this series are de los Angeles, Caballé, Corelli, Carreras, Domingo, Fischer-Dieskau, Freni, Norman, and Wunderlich.

While this set may be a fine way to introduce Jussi’s recordings to folks who don’t already have them, is there anything of interest for the members of this Society? Donald Vroon, the Editor of the American Record Guide, reviewed the EMI set in ARG’s Sept/Oct. 2003 issue and wrote that “if you don’t have Bjoerling on CD, this is a perfect collection at a very affordable price....The voice is fresh and glorious; there is very little here that anyone sang better. ‘O holy night’ is sung in Swedish, but almost everything else is in the original language, including heavily accented English. Many ARG writers call Bjoerling their favorite tenor, and this collection will show you why. He’s certainly my favorite ‘Italian’ tenor—meaning that his repertory is the standard Italian items, unlike Wunderlich, who specialized in the German repertory and never tried to beat the Italians on their own turf—as Bjoerling certainly did.”

On the other hand, it’s fun to find old favorites that can still delight us. Jim Kern wrote to the Björling discussion-group that the EMI set “has about four songs that I either have not heard in about 30 years, or as in the case of ‘O holy night’ that I have never before heard Jussi sing. Listening to the songs ‘Because,’ ‘Only a rose,’ ‘For you alone,’ and ‘Cantique de Noël’ brought back memories of the very first time I heard Jussi. Until today, the most outstanding rendition of ‘O holy night’ that I had ever heard was by tenor George Thill. Without a doubt, Jussi’s singing of this classic surpasses Thill’s. And

while I am making comparisons, let me say that I prefer Jussi's version of 'Because' better than Jan Peerce's—I say that even though I like the quality of both Thill's and Peerce's voices. Although I have all the other material on this set, I think the four songs mentioned are worth the cost of the whole set." Probably many of us agree. *Chacun à son goût!*



Then there are lots of other new releases this year, a consequence of European copyright law ceasing to protect recorded material after 50 years. For instance a CD called "Jussi Björling Opera Recordings 1948-1951" has been issued by the "Istituto discografica Italiana." However, the sound on these knock-off issues does not reach the quality of the material available from original sources from EMI and RCA, e.g. in the standard RCA set called "The ultimate collection."

Similar comments apply to the *Lebendige Vergangenheit* [Living Past] series, the sound on their CD about J.B. is barely adequate. When you are considering getting one of these "no name" CDs, our suggestion is to keep in mind the old saying, *Caveat emptor!*

Coming in our next issue: A discussion of Yrsa Stenius' controversial book on Jussi

Swedish-Finnish journalist Yrsa Stenius has written an unusual appreciation of Jussi Björling, combining intense memories of her theatrical mother's love of the tenor's singing, her own fascination with Jussi's voice and career, and her personal reflections on the stresses of a public life—where one's reputation is always at risk. She boldly interprets known facts about Jussi's public and personal life to fit her theories of the artist's creative angst, and it seems that for many readers she has put together a plausible picture. Indeed many reviews of the book have been positive, but some have been strongly negative. **What are we to think, who are not Swedish and unable to read this book ourselves?**

We have assembled a collection of the more influential articles and reviews, positive and negative, on this book—and found translations of these articles, thanks to the generous efforts of Anders Björling, Ben Swahn, and Richard Vowles. **Thus we hope to be able to help explain the controversy created by the book in Sweden, in our next issue of this *Journal*.**

One small sample from the book came to the Björling online discussion-group from Stefan Olmårs, as a contribution to our discussion (late January 2003) of Jussi's interpretation of Canio: According to Stefan's translation, Stenius writes "The young Jussi Björling could enjoy excelling in his improbable high

notes. The somewhat older and more mature man no longer sings just for making effects. He sings for life, for all that he is worth. His singing is serious, it's true and clear as an open eye. It's for real, as a young boy expressed to his mother, asking her to turn off the record-player with Jussi's last recording of 'Vesti la giubba,' because 'it hurts so much!'"

(No one can really object to this sort of discussion—which accords with the good memories of many Swedes of Jussi's singing at concerts, opera and over the radio, and explains why Stenius' book has increased the interest of young Swedes in Jussi's life and career. But some of her other opinions are less easy for some to accept.)

