

Jussi in the News: Media Notes of Interest to Our Members, from Our Members

Edited by Carla Ramsey and Dan Shea

First a big welcome to Madeleine Drake and her “Web Notes” guide to Jussi on the internet, which appears earlier in this issue. Her work will overlap with ours in this column, but we’ll try to concentrate on Jussi-news in the printed and broadcast media.

While we both very much enjoyed Web Notes’ report on master trumpeter Bud Herseth and his advice to brass students at a music clinic, in “Web Notes,” one of us (Carla) in particular was especially fascinated—here’s her reaction:

“The story on Bud Herseth is close to my heart. I was a student at the University of Chicago in the 1960s and studied trombone with members of the Chicago Symphony brass section. Through a wonderful grant program I got free lessons and free admission to CSO concerts—so every week, from the top balcony at Orchestra Hall, I got (almost literally) “blown away” by the fabulous, precise, and incredibly powerful playing of this world-class orchestra and its brass section. And none was more impressive than the masterful Herseth. His playing was just so “right on” the mark—week after week after week—with incredible accuracy and plenty of “squillo” (if I may apply that term to an instrumentalist).

“Fritz Reiner probably can take

credit for the marvelous precision and awesome dynamic range of the CSO. When they played pianissimo you felt more than heard the sound. And when they played fortissimo—well—I think you probably could hear the blast across the lake in Grand Rapids. As with Björling, however, the sound was never crass, edgy, or out of control. When they crescendoed, the sound just kept growing and growing. And then just when you thought they had “maxed out,” the intensity would redouble again, and again—a thrill I’ve never forgotten in all these years, and largely due to a brass section that never has been equalled, except by succeeding generations of CSO brass players. And Herseth has been there all this time!

“Another legendary member of the brass section was the tuba player, Arnold Jacobs. He developed new methods of teaching brass playing, and especially breathing methods—which, as in singing, is everything.

“Well, I could go on and on. But to find that Herseth, one of my heroes, admired Jussi is a wonderful connection between my trombone-playing past and my Jussi-loving present!

“Special note: If you want a perfect introduction to the CSO, try a recording of one of the Strauss tone poems and don’t skimp on the volume!”



There’s an extraordinary biography of Zinka Milanov coming soon from author Bruce Burroughs. It’s sure to be blunt and packed with real information, true to its subject—as we already can see from three long preview articles in *The Opera Quarterly*: The first one focused on Milanov in Verdi during 1951-52 (OQ vol. 17, #4) and we reported on that in our previous column, in issue #13.

Now in a two-part OQ article (vol. 19, #2,4) comes 125 pages on Milanov as Tosca, including detailed information about each one of her 108 performances of the opera, from Ljubljana in 1925 to Philadelphia in 1964.

Most interesting to many of us are her Toscas with Jussi: In fact, aside from the famous RCA recording, there were only three performances together in the theater (4 April 1956, at the Met, 10 April 1956 on tour in Baltimore; 11 December 1959 at the Met).

Burroughs supplies fascinating information about each of these performances. For instance, about the first of these (Walter Cassell as Scarpia, Mirtropoulos conducting), we learn that the Acts 1 and 2 were taped from the audience by a patron with the chutzpah to bring in a bulky tape deck and set it up in the theater—the first time that was ever known to have happened at the Met. But sadly that patron didn’t record Act 3, perhaps he was a Cassell fan and only wanted the parts where Scarpia appears! The performance was a brilliant one too, since the ovations after that performance produced 25 curtain calls, a record for the Bing regime at that time.

The OQ article provides over five

pages of detailed information—much of it from Milanov’s perspective—about the tensions of recording *Tosca* for RCA during two blazing-hot weeks in July 1957. Until now, we’ve had only a single page about this project in *Jussi*, and another page in conductor Erich Leinsdorf’s 1976 autobiography *Cadenza: A Musical Career*. (Leonard Warren’s biography barely mentions recording *Tosca*.) It’s very interesting to get all of Burroughs’ extra detail about these sessions, which detail day-by-day issues of health, personality, rehearsals, technicalities of engineering (this opera was recorded on three-track tape, released on monaural LPs and then in various stereo versions). Needless to say, the resulting reviews quoted here are a bit different from those quoted in *Jussi*, but that’s fine—according to one review, this recording gives us “a *Tosca* that is intense and Italianate. There’s nothing half-way or half-hearted about any aspect of this performance—its sound, its orchestral playing, its singing ... a rousing performance.”

We eagerly await Burroughs’ completed biography, but in the meantime you can hope to find the current issue of *The Opera Quarterly* in your local bookstore: Besides the 70-page article on Milanov and *Tosca*, there are other interesting articles and reviews, for instance a meaty review by Andrew Farkas of Caprice’s new 2-CD release of *Jussi* in *Trovatore* and *Manon Lescaut*. Of course, this review is discussed elsewhere in this issue by Kristian Krogholm in his column on new Björling record-releases. Maybe the best way to get this issue is by subscribing to *OQ*: that will get you all four issues of Vol. 19. For further information, call 800-852-7323 in North America.

From elsewhere, e-mail for information at jnls.cust.serv@oup.co.uk.



The extraordinary 64-year continuous sponsorship of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts by Texaco began with the 1940-41 season, and Jussi Björling opened that season with Zinka Milanov in the company’s new production of Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera*. The broadcast of December 14 featured also Stella Andrevá, Bruna Castagna, and Alexander Sved, with Ettore Panizza conducting, but the performance is famous because of the singing of Jussi and Zinka. Here’s what Paul Jackson wrote in his classic history of the most important broadcasts 1931-1950, “*Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met*” (1992, Amadeus Press):

“Both Milanov and Bjoerling possess glorious instruments, and their unrestrained youthful plenitude of voice gives an impassioned thrust and vitality to the love duet; honor aside, these two voices deserve to love one another.” Jackson proceeds to detail the special attributes of the singers, pointing out that “no matter how often encountered, a Milanov crescendo on a high note thrills” and, of Sved, “One takes almost guilty pleasure in the plummy rumble of his baritone as he adds an unpublished cadenza (by Verdi)” which “rises to B flat and is immensely effective,” according to Sved himself. Jackson’s greatest enthusiasm is reserved for his description of Jussi’s performance, which takes an entire page. Here we give just a few lines:

“The stylistic and technical demands of Riccardo” require “elegance of phrasing and deft rhythmic play, ... tonal beauty and vocal pith.

When all these attributes unite in a single artist, he is clearly favored by the gods.... Jussi Bjoerling is such an artist. His gifts include a vocal timbre of singular radiance in the middle and upper range, while the lower notes are touched by a modestly rich baritone coloration. Lyricism is his native habitat, but when expedient, his plangent timbre gives him the thrust of far more stentorian voices.”

Fast forward to to the March 16, 2002, Met Opera broadcast intermission feature, a “Singers’ Roundtable” featuring Neil Shicoff, Sam Ramey, and Denyce Graves, with Sarah Billingham as moderator. We had heard a prediction from JBS member Steve Galantieri that Neil would be likely to mention his admiration of Jussi, so were ready with pencil for the first question: “When you were developing your talent, whom did you really love? What past singer possessed for you the ideal voice?”

For Ramey, the answer was Pinza; for Graves it was Leontyne Price and Franco Corelli. And here’s what Shicoff said:

“You know, there’s really three that come immediately to my mind: Jussi Björling, Franco Corelli, and Richard Tucker are really three special voices. Franco Corelli had a very sexual, animalistic voice, visceral sound.

And Jussi Björling had the most beautiful timbre, really, for me ever, with unbelievable control of *piani* and *forti*. And Richard Tucker had incredible soul and an incredible way of expressing a character on stage, all very very moving.”

Since that time, Steve has introduced Dan to Neil, backstage at Lyric Opera after an all-star performance of *Un ballo in maschera*. We had the pleasure of inviting Neil to join JBS’s roster of distinguished Honorary

Advisors, and were delighted that he agreed to lend his name in support of JBS-USA. You can read more about Neil Shicoff's career elsewhere in this issue.



Of course, Jussi's name comes up regularly during Met Opera broadcasts and also in *Opera News*, and we'll mention some recent sightings here:

Especially welcome was the mention of JBS' Conference in New York City, in *Opera News*' October 2002 issue. This paragraph in the "Opera Watch" column told about our four-day conference that would celebrate "the life and work of the Swedish tenor and many of his Met contemporaries," and referred their readers to our JBS website. The accompanying photograph of Jussi as Don Carlo had the caption: "**Manhattan tribute set for prince of tenors.**"

July 2003's *Opera News* reviews a Hardy Classic DVD release of *Trovatore* with Gencer, Barbieri, del Monaco, Bastianini, and Clabassi, asserting that the central attraction is Mario del Monaco, who sang Mänrico just once at the Met, in 1952. According to reviewer Martin Bernheimer, "He may not have equaled the lyric grace of Jussi Bjoerling, probably his prime rival in the role. Still, he sings here with reasonable elegance in moments of introspection, reveals a fine appreciation of legato phrasing, and, unlike Bjoerling, blasts the climaxes with emphatic élan." This comment reminds us of the enthusiastic competition between RCA, London-Decca, and EMI-Angel during the 1950s, with regular releases of recordings presenting teams like

Milanov-Björling, Tebaldi-del Monaco, and Callas-di Stefano in operas like *Trovatore*, *Aida*, *Tosca*, *Manon Lescaut*. Those were the days!

Recently *Opera News* has featured a last-page essay called "Coda," and the September 2003 issue's essay, by William Dunlop, was titled "Bend It Like Bjoerling." The reference to soccer here is developed at length, to show how a passion for either the sport of soccer, or opera, can be deeply rewarding: "At those rare and precious moments when performers, athletes or musicians, achieve a feat extraordinarily, fantastically perfect, the only possible response is open-mouthed ecstasy. One is simply lost in admiration." Author Dunlop provides several good examples, for instance the thirty-yard volley "that could not have been more sweetly struck" by England's Steven Gerrard, in Olympics play against Germany. Gerrard "pinged it, you might say, like—well, like **Jussi Bjoerling's Radamès** pinging those high As at 'Sacerdote, io resto a te.' This example convinces us completely—and you'll find several more in the full article.

The December 2003 *Opera News* features Neil Shicoff in a cover article about his most recent Met assignment, Eléazar in *La Juive*. There also are three substantial mentions of Jussi in this issue:

1. *Benvenuto Cellini* tenor **Marcello Giordani** is quizzed about his personal opinions, and when asked for his "all-time favorite singer" answers "Jussi Björling."
2. The new RCA Red Seal CD "Björling reDiscovered" gets a lengthy review, with praise like "Björling's technique remained flawless and seemingly effortless, his glowing sound free-flowing and unblemished.

He could still sing convincingly at any dynamic level in any part of his range, with a completely organic and unfailingly tasteful sense of drama."

(For further information, see the complete *Opera News* article, or Kristian Krogholm's column elsewhere in this issue.)

3. The new VAI Videotapes or DVDs of the 1956 Producers' Showcase television broadcasts called "Festival of Music" are reviewed, and there is much to be grateful for. According to Ira Siff's review, "the picture and sound quality are excellent: even the few excerpts from the shows that appeared previously elsewhere are in far better quality here. For instance, for the chunk of Act 1 of *La Bobème*, featuring Renata Tebaldi and Jussi Björling (which here begins with Mimí's entrance rather than 'Che gelida manina'), VAI found a separate superior audio source, which they have seamlessly synched to the video, making the sound comparable to a fine '50s studio recording." There's a great deal of other opera here, from stars such as de los Angeles, Milanov, Peters, Thebom, R. Stevens, M. Anderson, M. Miller, Peerce, Warren, Christoff, with memorable host Charles Laughton.



As usual, we have more material than we can use for this issue, but please continue to keep us in mind; as you see good material for this column, please pass it along either to Carla Ramsey (792 Castle Valley Blvd., New Castle, CO 81647, or via carlaramsey43@hotmail.com) or Dan Shea (3337 Conservancy Lane, Middleton, WI 53562, or via dshea@chorus.net).