

Jussi Björling at Carnegie Hall

By Cantor Don Goldberg



You remember the old saw: the tourist lost in Manhattan sees a violinist walking down the street and calls out, “how do you get to Carnegie Hall?” The musician’s answer is, “Practice!”

Almost from the time he was born, Jussi Björling was practicing. We read in the biography *Jussi* that his father and mother “exposed their children to music and singing from the cradle onward.” Jussi debuted with his father and brothers in concert, at age four and a half; was on Swedish Radio at 17; and on the Stockholm Royal Opera stage at 19. For seven more years, Björling became a virtual singing machine often learning and performing one role per month while singing his previously learned roles. In essence, he was used and abused by the Stockholm Opera,—exploited to the full. [Cf. B.Bengtsson’s article also in this issue. -Ed.] On the other hand,

by the time Jussi decided to come to America, in 1937, he had performed in Scandinavia, Latvia, Belgium, Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Hungary, and England. He had made many recordings including those, in 1936, whose international distribution exposed the world to this rising young star, still only a lad of 25. So, Jussi’s first appearances at Carnegie Hall in the fall of 1937 were done the old fashioned way; they were earned.

That November 28, 1937 General Motors Hour radio concert from Carnegie Hall spread Jussi Björling’s voice to more people in the United States than any of his recordings could have. With two more of these extraordinary national General Motors broadcasts from Carnegie Hall, on December 5th and 19th of the same year, Jussi could be assured that no matter where he performed, in the United States, people would flock to hear him. During the course of Jussi’s roughly 16 years visiting the New York City area, he sang at Carnegie Hall 16 times. One could say that, unfortunately, only four of these appearances were standard, complete vocal recitals. But, Jussi appeared another 18 times of which 11 were full vocal recitals in venues such as Town Hall, Hunter College, Columbia University, Madison Square Garden, the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and even the United Nations. If one adds his appearances at the Metropolitan Opera, Jussi’s presence as part of the musical fabric of the New York City cultural scene was

quite significant given that he was also an international artist in great demand in the musical centers of the world. Of Björling’s Carnegie Hall appearances, eight of them exist in full, or in part, on long playing records or compact discs (albeit, mostly ‘pirate’ recordings of varying degrees of quality).

The invention of magnetic tape recording, in Germany, in the late 1930’s, and its growing use in America in the late 1940’s, begs the question of why RCA, Jussi’s recording company did not record all of his recitals and concerts for possible release at a later time. The reasons are sometimes justifiable, and in some cases not. For one, Jussi’s December 20, 1955 joint concert with Renata Tebaldi and Leonard Bernstein at Carnegie Hall should have been preserved, and may have been. Jussi was an RCA recording artist while Tebaldi recorded for London Records, and Bernstein for Columbia Records. Certainly, these three competitors could have agreed to release a long playing record album with each sharing in remuneration for the artists, record production costs, and of course, the profits. Over a decade ago, there was a newspaper report that a rarely used storage room at Carnegie Hall was opened, and boxes of recording tapes were found. Presumably, Carnegie was recording certain concerts on its own machinery, and for its own use. Since the report of that discovery, there has been no other word about it or what the tapes contained. How many of Jussi’s appearances might be on those tapes? My personal hope is that the April 29, 1959 joint recital with pianist Grant Johanneson and New Jersey’s Uppsala College Choir was one of them. At this concert, Jussi reputedly sang, “If with all your hearts” from

Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in English, a selection I sang at my own debut concert in 1961.

The September 24, 1955 recital at Carnegie is an enigma when it comes to releases and rereleases. At that recital, Jussi sang an incredible 23 selections of which 16 were released. RCA easily could have included the missing selections as the final side of the 1957 recording of *Cavalleria Rusticana* with Renata Tebaldi. Yet, we are fortunate to have Jussi's rendition of the aria, "Il mio tesoro" from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Though the role of Ottavio was Jussi's first major role, Harald Henrysson has informed me that standard performance practice at the Stockholm Opera, in those days, was to omit it. (On the other hand, Ottavio's "Dalla sua pace" was often featured in his programs during the 1930s and '40s.) Thus, this *may* have been the first and only time Jussi ever performed the aria. The concert also featured beautiful renditions of Beethoven's "Adelaide," "E lucevan le stelle" from *Tosca*, "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra," and Foster's "Jenie with the light brown hair." In 1958, perhaps partially to show then Met General Manager Rudolph Bing that his absence from the company was a sore point, and that he was still the best, Jussi programmed a recital that would be considered a tour-de-force (unless your name was Danish tenor Helge Rosvaenge whose Carnegie Hall debut at age 66, in 1963, featured no less than 12 difficult arias sung almost in succession). No tenor in his right mind begins the warm-up period of a major recital with the "Ingemisco" from Verdi's *Requiem* unless he is an absolutely assured singer. And, to follow this up with such difficult lieder as Schubert's "An die Leier" and "Die Allmacht"

as well as Beethoven's "Adelaide" is vocal and pacing insanity. Yet, after singing 16 selections, Jussi sings five more including arias from *Turandot* and *Rigoletto* (where he is heard to play with the audience), and *Tosca*. The final selection "Zueignung" by Richard Strauss is just more *Schlag* on a musically-caloric cake.

Six selections from the 1958 recital did appear on the long playing record, *Jussi Bjoerling in Concert*, LM 2784, as well as two RCA releases in Japan and Great Britain, and various 'pirate' labels. In the early 1960's, a private label called Cum Laude issued a *Jussi Bjoerling Recital* LP album listing selections, but no information about these selections. Coming home from my job at Brooks Brothers clothing manufacturers, I was wont to stop in at a record shop known as King Karol on 42nd street. I saw this album, but since I had all of the selections, I put it back, but wisely in the back of the rack. By the time I had arrived home in Brooklyn, a friend had called with information about a Björling recording 'scandale'. Someone working at RCA had copied the tapes of the 1958 Carnegie recital, and had released several selections on this Cum Laude label. RCA was suing, and the records were being ordered out of the racks. Without supper, I dashed back to the subway, and back to King Karol. Fortunately, the album was still in the back of the rack where I had left it. Luckily, the word had not reached King Karol, and I was able to escape with the recording which is still in my collection.

Around 1990, I struck up a friendship with RCA's excellent sound engineer, Nat Johnson, also a Björling aficionado. When I inquired about the 1958 recital, Nat told me that it did not appear on his computer, and

might have been done under the auspices of EMI which had split from RCA in the 1950's. I told him that a New York recital would have been recorded under an RCA contract. I asked Nat Johnson to do a physical search of RCA's tape archives. A few days later, Nat called to say I was right. The recital had been taped, but when he found the tapes, the boxes had not been labeled. It was only when he played the tapes and heard the "Ingemisco" from the Verdi Requiem that he knew he had found it. I asked him to take it to his boss, the late Jack Pfeiffer, because 32 years was too long for a recital by Jussi Björling not to be released in its entirety. Thanks to Nat Johnson and Jack Pfeiffer, the 1958 Carnegie Hall recital has been out on CD for about a decade.

Finally, why aren't more important and historical performances released by the major companies which recorded them? In the past 25 years, artistic interests have given way to marketing realities. Classical music makes up a very small part of record sales. One can only hope that before we all "shuffle off this mortal coil," all of Jussi Björling's performances will turn up in good sound. Until then, radio producers such as myself will continue to present Björling programs, as I will on February 5, 2002 on www.wmnr.org at approximately 8 PM New York time. So, log on, and call in, and together we'll celebrate Jussi's great gift and lifelong commitment to music.

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