

which they have contributed, and will think of many supplementary activities. A program can be general or specific; about the performing arts, classical music, opera or Jussi.

- Plan a hands-on or physical activity. Use an artist, dramatist, set designer, dancer, costume designer, or a craftsman. Plan something for the body, the hands, and the voice.
- Keep it small. Small groups work best. Individual attention and time for questions and discussion is important.
- Call the newspapers. They love writing about “alternative learning activities.”
- Be enthusiastic. This is the most important element, your enthusiasm will communicate itself to the students.

Deborah Clemons has been a museum educator at museums in Elmira, NY, Pittsburgh PA and London, and has been living in Sweden for the past three years where she is director of Ornässtugan, a historical museum in Borlänge, and an occasional assistant at the Jussi Björling Museet. At the Arnot Art Museum in Elmira, she directed an interdisciplinary school project for fourth grade students that began with about 100 students and within two years grew to 600 students; now in its sixth year, that project features year-round activities involving cultural, historical and ecological programs.

Deborah stressed the value of Harald Henrysson's cooperation for their Borlänge project, and mentioned that the students loved his enthusiasm and ability to respond in just the right way to their questions.

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An Appraisal of the Vocal Art of Jussi Björling

(A chapter from *Mastera Vokal'nogo Iskusstva XX veka [Masters of the Vocal Art of the Twentieth Century]*, Moscow, 1974, pp. 72-85.)

By *Vsevolod Vasilievich Timokhin*

The countries of Scandinavia have given the world of vocal art many names which have achieved world renown. What music lover does not know about the “Swedish Nightingale,” Jenny Lind, who was one of the greatest singers of the Nineteenth Century? Or about those other artists, Patti’s rivals, Christine Nilsson and Sigrid Arnoldson? Or about the famous Finnish singer Alma Fohström, who performed for many years on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow? In our century many Scandinavian singers have achieved international fame; but it is interesting to note that almost all of them were adherents of the German, principally Wagnerian, vocal school. We have but to remember the names of the Danes Peter Cornelius and Lauritz Melchior, the Swedish artists Birgit Nilsson, Karin Branzell, Set

Svanholm, Joel Berglund, Nanny Larsén-Todsén, and Kerstin Thorborg, the Norwegians Kirsten Flagstad and Ivar Andresen, the Finns Martti Talvela and Tom Krause.... Some of them studied with students of the German school who were working in Stockholm and Copenhagen; others themselves went to Germany or Austria to study. It must be remembered that many of the severe epic Wagnerian music dramas have something in common with the traditions and legends of the northern lands, and therefore the emotional atmosphere of these dramas could not but find a response in the soul of a person who was brought up amidst cliffs, lakes, and fiords.

In any event, although other vocal schools do indeed have their representatives in Scandinavia, only a very few of them succeeded in achieving

any recognition. Among them are the Finnish bass Kim Borg, an outstanding interpreter of the Russian repertory, and the Swede Jussi Björling, "beloved Jussi," "the Apollo of bel canto," one of the most outstanding singers of the Italian school of our time, whom music criticism has styled the only rival of Beniamino Gigli.

Björling indeed had an unusually beautiful voice which contained distinctly Italian qualities. His timbre conquered with its remarkable clarity and warmth; his sound excelled in its rare plasticity, suavity, and flexibility, and was at the same time saturated with succulent ardor. Throughout its entire range it was produced evenly and freely. His upper register was shining and resonant, the middle captivated with its sweet flexibility. In his masterly performance one could feel characteristic Italian emotion, impetuosity, and openness of heart, although any kind of emotional exaggeration was always foreign to Björling.

He was, as it were, the living embodiment of the traditions of Italian bel canto, an inspired singer of its beauty. The critics are absolutely correct in including Björling in the group of famous Italian tenors (such as Caruso, Gigli, and Pertile) whose beauty of timbre, ease of vocal production, and love of legato were inherent characteristics of their manner. Even in verismo works Björling never strayed into affectation or melodrama, never interrupted the beauty of the phrase with declamation or exaggerated accent. It does not follow from this, however, that Björling was an artist lacking in temperament. With what inspiration and depth of spirit his voice rang out in the dramatic scenes of Verdi and of the verismo composers, whether in the finale of *Il trovatore* or the Santuzza - Turiddu scene from

Cavalleria rusticana! Björling was an artist with a precise sense of proportion, an interior harmony of the whole; and the famous Swedish singer introduced a great proportion of artistic objectivity and concentrated narrative tone into the Italian style, with its traditional white-hot underlining of emotion.

Björling's voice, like that of Flagstad, held a special bright, elegant tone peculiar to northern landscapes and the music of Grieg and Sibelius. This soft elegiac shading lent a special pathos and sincerity to Italian cantilena, [especially] in the lyrical episodes which he voiced with bewitching magical beauty.

The singer's many recordings have preserved for lovers of the vocal art the artistic image of Jussi Björling, just as it was familiar to listeners over the thirty-year period of his brilliant artistic career.

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... [Jussi Björling] made his first recordings [as a tenor] in 1929. His voice had already acquired its warmth and its captivatingly beautiful timbre; thus it is not surprising that the outstanding Swedish baritone John Forsell, director of the Stockholm Opera Theater, recognized the young man's uncommon gift. So Jussi became a student of the Stockholm Music Academy and a pupil of Forsell.

John Forsell was an outstanding pedagogue who in his almost forty years of teaching activity educated a host of famous Swedish singers. A brilliant artist who performed with great success on many operatic stages around the world in the Italian, German, and Russian repertories, a precise and discriminating chamber artist, Forsell did not at first, of course, detect the Italianate nature of his new pupil's voice or his

artistic inclination to the works of Verdi and the verismo composers. Forsell carefully directed the growth of Björling's talent, insuring that the young artist's diapason of interests not be circumscribed by any narrow boundaries of repertory. Forsell also instilled into his pupil his own rich experience as a chamber artist. He was a connoisseur of the classic German *Lied*; the great attention which Björling later paid to that genre (which is absolutely unique for a follower of the Italian vocal school) may be attributed to the artistic influence Forsell had on his student. All his life Björling retained a warm sense of gratitude to his teacher, of whom he always spoke with sincere awe. Forsell died in 1941, having seen the start of the career of one of his most brilliant students, who would reach the heights of world fame.

Jussi Björling made his first operatic appearance in 1930. He sang the role of Don Ottavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The debutant had a great success with the public. At the same time the young artist continued his studies at the Royal Operatic School with the Italian teacher Tullio Voghera, who introduced the singer to the Italian traditions of interpretation of various leading roles of the tenor repertory in the operas of Verdi, Puccini, Leoncavallo, and Giordano [sic]. Voghera was Caruso's *repetiteur* during his first seasons at the Metropolitan Opera and, as the critics believe, instilled and developed typical Italian characteristics in his pupil's performing style. In 1931 Björling became a soloist of the Stockholm Opera Theater, with which he maintained permanent artistic relations throughout his entire operatic career. Despite much work created by his contracts and agreements with many theaters throughout the world and

with many recording companies, Björling sang regularly in Stockholm, and the public always greeted its favorite singer with great enthusiasm. One of his very last appearances, in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* [sic], took place on the stage of the Stockholm Opera.

By 1933 the young Swedish singer's fame had spread to many European musical centers. He made very successful guest appearances in Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Prague, Vienna, Dresden, [Berlin] and Paris; and in many cities the acclaim of the citizens was such that theater directors were forced to increase the number of Björling performances. In that same year Björling again went to America, this time with his name famous internationally. On November 28 he appeared in a radio concert, and four days later in a solo recital in Springfield, Massachusetts. [The city's] newspapers carried reviews of that concert on the front page.

At the end of 1937 the artist made his debut at the Chicago Opera (*Rigoletto*), and the New York concert-going public made his acquaintance. Finally, on November 24 of [the next] year, he made his Metropolitan Opera debut (*La bohème*). Björling sang in a cast which included the famous Italian soprano Mafalda Favero, who herself made her debut in that theater at this performance. The artists were received with great warmth; but Björling's complete triumph occurred only at the performance of *Il trovatore* on December 2—he sang the role of Manrico, as the critics wrote, with such “unique beauty and brilliance” that he immediately conquered America.

The theater's historians confirm that Björling was the youngest tenor with whom the Metropolitan ever concluded a contract for leading roles.

Björling's debut at Covent Garden

in London in 1939 was no less successful; and he opened the 1940-41 season at the Met as Riccardo in *Un ballo in maschera*. Traditionally, that theater's administration invites singers who are especially popular with the public to open the season. The Verdi opera had last been heard in New York almost a quarter-century before! In 1940 Björling appeared for the first time with the San Francisco Opera (*Un ballo in maschera* and *La bohème*)....

After 1945 Björling's name attracted listeners into the concert halls and opera houses in many European and American cities. He returned to the Metropolitan in the 1945-46 season and made guest appearances with the Chicago and San Francisco operas. For fifteen years these American operatic centers regularly received visits from the famous artist. For example, between 1945 and 1960, only three Met seasons passed without Björling's participation. His appearance in many performances became historic events: *Roméo et Juliette* of Gounod, with Bidú Sayão, 1947; *Manon Lescaut* of Puccini, with Dorothy Kirsten and Giuseppe Valdengo, 1949; *Don Carlo*, with Cesare Siepi and Fedora Barbieri, conducted by Fritz Stiedry, which opened the 1950-51 season; *Faust*, with Victoria de los Angeles and Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, conducted by Pierre Monteux, which opened the 1953-54 season; and *Tosca*, with Renata Tebaldi and Leonard Warren, conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos, 1957.

Throughout all these years Jussi Björling was in brilliant form. In his review of the singer's appearance in the 1959-60 season in *Cavalleria rusticana*, a critic wrote that most certainly Caesar himself, returning victorious to Rome, had never been met with an ovation such as that which greeted Jussi when he returned

to the Met stage after an absence of two years. As early as the prelude, the public was seized by the expressiveness and warmth of Turiddu's serenade, and the pathos and passionate emotion of the “Addio alla madre” left an indelible impression. No one in the theater could have imagined that he was present at the artist's final performances....

Jussi Björling's death on September 9, 1960, was a heavy loss to the vocal art. He was only 49 years old and in the full glory of his gift as a singer. Performances of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* had been planned for that fall at the Metropolitan Opera [and many important recording projects] went unfulfilled.

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Björling's operatic repertory was rather broad, including more than forty roles; not all of them, however, figured in his permanent repertory. His best and most frequently performed roles were in Italian and French operas: *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Faust*, and *Roméo et Juliette*. Almost all of these were recorded; moreover, Björling also recorded roles that his listeners associated less often with his name: Calaf in *Turandot*, Canio in *I pagliacci*, Radames in *Aida*, and Pinkerton in *Madama Butterfly*. Björling also recorded operatic scenes and arias, operetta selections, ballads, and folk songs (for example, for the American recording company RCA alone he made eighty-three recordings). After the death of the artist, work was begun to issue Björling's entire recorded legacy; a significant portion has already been published, including his earliest recordings.

At home Björling sang in the best

works of his native operatic school—*Kronbruden* by Ture Rangström (on a subject by Strindberg), *Engelbrekt* by Natanael Berg (on the subject of a peasant uprising in Sweden), and *Fanal* by Kurt Atterberg (on a subject by [H. Heine]), and also appeared in *Saul and David*, an opera by the Danish composer Carl Nielsen. He touched upon the German repertory; in particular, he sang Florestan in *Fidelio*, a role seemingly outside the framework of his usual interests. He sang in Russian classical operas: Vladimir in *Prince Igor* and Lensky in *Eugene Onegin* were particularly close to the artist. It is well known that adherents of the Italian vocal school were as a rule less than successful artistically in the Russian repertory, because they tried to introduce into the performance of Russian opera expressive devices which were totally foreign to their realization.

Björling's surviving recordings of the cavatina of Vladimir Igorevich and of Lensky's final aria disclose that, even if in these instances we cannot say that he becomes totally at one artistically with the character he is portraying, we must nevertheless allow that the artist has achieved a certain stylistic transformation in his conceptualization. Björling sings Vladimir's cavatina in an exceptionally successful way: he portrays the enamored prince with tender, transparent colors and soft, floating *pianissimi*, but there is no Italian sentimentality or sweetness in his cantilena. The primary conception is one of contemplative lyricism, as is completely appropriate to the character of the music. Foreign singers face more difficult problems in Lensky's aria from Act II of *Eugene Onegin*. Too often they treat this aria in an unjustifiably dramatic or veristic manner, as in Cavaradossi's final aria or Turiddu's final scene

with his mother, as a "farewell to life," as it were. It is clear that such an interpretation, even when it involves interesting personal discoveries, deliberately contradicts the emotional content of Tchaikovsky's music and Pushkin's poetry.

Björling was one of the best foreign interpreters of the role of Lensky. While it may be true that his Lensky is no eighteen-year-old youth [as Pushkin described him], but a man with considerably more experience of life who has felt and endured much, this portrayal of the hero as emotionally more mature does not plumb the fullest depth of the character—his authentic spirit. Björling sings the aria with rather fuller sound in comparison with traditional [Russian] performance practice, but transmits its lyricism, spirituality, and palpitating sentimentality in marvelous manner. There is none of the over-dramatization of the narrative or over-expressivity of accentuation, none of the sentimental delicacy or sense of melancholy, which a singer of the Italian school would misapply here. Björling accurately feels the deep poetry of Tchaikovsky's music and finds in his voice the intonations and colors which allow him accurately to create soft, pensive hues, lucid sadness, and remarkable warmth.

On the operatic stage Björling, like Gigli, as eyewitnesses unanimously confirm, was more a singer than an actor, but with his voice alone he was able to convey to his listeners the feelings which filled the soul of his heroes, their loves, their dreams, their joy and sadness, with such clarity, emotion, and sincerity that those listeners were able in their imagination to round out fully the stage portrait which the artist created.

On the concert stage, the disproportion between vocal and scenic

images naturally disappeared. There, the voice of the remarkable artist in all its inimitable beauty ruled; his ability to reveal a wonderful, unique world in each phrase which he sang reigned. Björling's concerts invariably met with great success: he was not like those popular tenors whose concert programs comprised basically well-known operatic arias, Neapolitan songs, and a dozen or so classic Lieder. Björling the concert artist was distinguished by the breadth of his artistic horizon, his uniqueness, and sometimes the originality of his interpretive choices.

Of course Björling sang operatic arias and Neapolitan songs at his concerts, but his programs never gave the impression of stylistic monotony. His concert repertory included works of composers of various national schools and movements—Beethoven and Grieg, Schubert and Sibelius, Brahms and Rachmaninoff, Tosti and Richard Strauss.

From time to time his interpretations provoked disagreement, but even the listeners who deeply disagreed with the artist could not deny the mastery and conviction with which he carried out those interpretations. The character of Björling's artistic gift was operatic before everything else, and of a distinctly romantic order, and his interpretations of many classical concert works must be examined from such a point of view. As a sensitive artist Björling understood which works could, in content and form, bear this romantic transformation. And here, one must say, his taste and sense of proportion never betrayed him.

The well-known Schubert songs "Serenade" and "Die böse Farbe" display Björling's interpretive thrust in this regard. They sound almost like dramatically saturated, impassioned arias from verismo opera,

very elevated, expressive, with clear dynamic contrasts. Undoubtedly such concepts as "expression" and "dramatic pathos," which are of clearly operatic derivation, hardly comprise the essence of Schubert's vocal style. But even while understanding this, the listener at the same time cannot fail to respond to the impassioned animation with which the artist projects the details of his interpretive plan; and the heart agrees with the emotional transformation of the Schubertian image which suffuses the art of the artist. Of course, Björling offers his reading of Schubert's songs not because he did not know the traditional interpretations; he was quite sensitive to the boundary which separates the individual, the unique, perhaps even the unusual in the art of interpretation, from the arbitrarily subjective or deliberate, and he never permitted himself to step across that boundary.

As far as Björling's manner of expression is concerned, he did not routinely exaggerate or resort to operatic declamation and oversimplification. His recorded legacy contains many outstanding examples of classically strict interpretation (for example, the famous Beethoven song, "Adelaide"), carried out with genuine elegance and refinement, or based in deep and penetrating lyricism ("Traum durch die Dämmerung" of R. Strauss, or "En drøm" of Grieg). And in what masterly manner Björling sang Stephen Foster's "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair," a wonderful pastel portrait of the captivating young girl, painted in the softest, most transparent colors, in the most tender, most evanescent, most melting of all possible *pianissimi*.

Björling performed the works of Tosti in true Italian fashion. He sang the dramatically agitated songs with

passion, fire, and true meridional temperament, and the lyrical contemplative songs with that warmth and penetration, that rare wealth of nuance of timbre and dynamics, which are epitomized in the art of Gigli. And with what heart-felt trepidation Björling imbued his performances of Scandinavian folk songs! It seems that in the very timbre of the singer's voice, in its tender beauty and poetic elegance, was distilled the essence of Swedish song, which came to be loved by listeners of many lands all over the world just because of Jussi Björling's voice.

The singer's spontaneity and freedom of artistic expression made it seem that, during his concerts, the vocal images, the sketches, were being created before one's very eyes by improvisation, that they were the result of an eruption of inspiration which engulfed the artist. Björling was a very sincere singer; his enthusiasm was immediately transmitted into the concert hall. His art, directed at the heart of his listeners, found vivid emotional response among them. One has but to hear transcriptions of his live performances in order to feel in some measure the festive, elevated atmosphere which reigned at his concerts....

The years take us ever farther from the times in which Jussi Björling lived and worked. Nevertheless, like many exceptionally gifted artists, he remains our contemporary, and his masterful art, preserved in recordings, is inseparable from our surrounding musical world, for the art of this singer never ceases to move deeply and touch the hearts of men.

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This article was translated and edited by Donald Pruitt, with valuable assistance from his wife Alla and

Harald Henrysson. Here are some biographical notes on Don (who also was featured in a Spotlight article in Issue 10 of this Journal):

A native Virginian, Don considers himself especially fortunate to have grown up in a time and place where the Saturday Metropolitan Opera broadcasts were accessible; these broadcasts made possible his subsequent lifelong fascination with opera. He has a Ph.D. in Russian Languages and Literatures from The Ohio State University. He and Alla have a son, Steven, who currently is studying art history (and who also loves opera).

Don also supplied the following statement, at our request for some biographical information on our author:

"Soviet bibliographical research being what it is, we have been unable to identify this erudite author except tangentially. Vsevolod Vasilievich Timokhin contributed many entries to the five-volume "Theatrical Encyclopedia" which was published between 1961 and 1967; among them are those on J.B., Gigli, Melchior, Svanholm, Callas, Ljuba Welitsch, Margherita Sheridan, Suzanne Danco, Menotti, and two theaters: the Metropolitan Opera and the Kaertnertortheater in Vienna. We have not been able to establish his dates, his professional life, or his associations. For this we must apologize to those who, like us, consider such information about sources indispensable. It must for now suffice to say, without condescension, that his knowledge of the art of singing and of those artists and institutions which he describes are profound and compelling."

[Needless to say, if our readers can supply some information on this author, we would be glad to pass it along to our readers. -Ed.]