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Jussi Björling's Record Season 1934-1935

By Bertil Bengtsson

If one surveys Jussi Björling's first seasons as an opera singer, one very soon notices that the breadth of his repertoire and the number of his performances are indicative of an almost unbelievable level of diligence and ability to learn roles during these years. He reached the apogee in this respect during two seasons—1934-1935 and 1935-1936. It is the first of these that I intend to discuss in detail here. To judge from surviving reviews, he also at this time was performing at a very high level both vocally and interpretively.

The 1934-1935 season (the period from 6 July 1934 to 28 June 1935) was Jussi's fifth as a contracted soloist at the Royal Theatre and the last before tours for opera and concert performances both on the continent and in North America complicated the picture. The long series of performances during this season began on 6 July with an orchestral concert at the Swedish Musicians' Union festival concert in Malmö

Folkets Park [People's Park]. The Concert Hall Foundation Orchestra under the direction of Olallo Morales accompanied Jussi in three Swedish songs: August Söderman's "Trollsjön" [The Enchanted Lake] and "Kung Heimer och Aslög" [King Heimer and Aslög] as well as Hugo Alfvén's "Lindagull." As an encore Jussi sang Wilhelm Svedbom's ballad "Sten Sture", which had to be repeated in response to the audience's enthusiastic and persistent applause. The songs by Alfvén and Svedbom are of special interest, the latter remaining in Jussi's repertoire as late as 1955. Svedbom's ballad was also one of the showpieces of Jussi's brother Gösta during their years with the Björling quartet. The concert in Malmö took place between a number of concerts that Jussi gave at the Tivoli in Copenhagen, the series ending with four orchestral concerts conducted by Frans Schnedler-Petersen on 11, 13, 18 and 20 July. These concerts

also included a recital component in which Jussi sang songs to the piano accompaniment of Ove Peters. This Copenhagen sojourn concluded on 21 July with an "Operetta evening" where Jussi sang, with orchestral accompaniment, arias from a number of operettas including *Das Veilchen von Montmartre*, *Der Bettelstudent* and *Das Land des Lächelns*.

Back in Stockholm, Jussi's opera season began with a performance of Kurt Atterberg's *Fanal*. The role of the executioner's son, Martin Skarp, had been created by Jussi at the premiere on 27 January that same year. During a very hectic season, which concluded with the Royal Opera's guest performances in Riga, Latvia, Jussi sang a total of 81 complete opera performances (eight of them whilst on tour) in 18 roles. Eight of these roles were new to Jussi's repertoire. The first two in this series of new roles would become two of his greatest parts: Gounod's *Faust* and Rodolfo in *La bohème*. Gounod's *Faust*, given on 25 August, was a revival of an old production and featured Helga Görlin as Marguerite, Joel Berglund as Méphistophélès and Einar Larson as Valentin, with Nils Grevillius conducting. Jussi sang 16 performances of *Faust* in the period up to 8 February, and Moses Pergament wrote of him in *Svenska Dagbladet*: "It was a delight to hear such rare vocal splendour". *La bohème*, another revival, opened on 13 October with Hjördis Schymberg as Mimì and Einar Larson as Marcello. *Aftonbladet* wrote of Jussi's Rodolfo "The voice has acquired a timbre it did not previously possess, a totally new sound with a beauty and passion which was quite astounding."

The one-acter *Il tabarro* from Puccini's *Il trittico* appeared in the repertoire again on 20 October after

many years absence. Jussi sang the role of the bargehand, Luigi, only four times, with the last being on 13 December. Kurt Atterberg wrote in *Stockholms-Tidningen*: “Jussi Björling has finally been let loose on Puccini; recently in *La bohème* and now in *Tosca* and *Il tabarro*. And seldom has he sounded better, as Puccini’s extended cantilenas are made for him. The auditorium is drowned in beautiful sound the moment he opens his mouth in a Puccini work.” A Russian opera followed, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Sadko* with the short role of the Hindu Merchant. The title role was sung by Jussi’s tenor colleague Einar Beyron, and Grevillius conducted five performances until 5 February. The third Puccini role this season was that of Dick Johnson at the Swedish premiere of *La fanciulla del West* on 29 December 1934, with Helga Görlin as Minnie and Joel Berglund as the evil sheriff, Rance. Grevillius was again on the podium for eight performances until 6 March. *Stockholms-Tidningen* wrote in part of Jussi that “his high notes have never sounded fuller or freer.”

Jussi’s first new role in 1935 was that of Belmonte in Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*—his third and final Mozart opera. Herbert Sandberg conducted, Hjärdis Schymberg sang Blonde, Stella Andrevä sang Constanze and the bass Leon Björker took the role of the harem keeper, Osmin. There were four performances until 17 March, and one reviewer wrote that “Jussi Björling’s voice is perhaps a little too strong to blend readily with a faithfully stylish Mozart ensemble. However, the singer performed the role of Belmonte with noteworthy assurance.” Next came a *verismo* role, Turridu in Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* on 14 February.

Karin Rydquist sang Santuzza, Conny Molin was Alfio and Sten-Åke Axelsson was on the podium for six performances until 5 April. A reviewer in *Stockholms-Tidningen* who signed himself “A-g” wrote “Jussi Björling had a big day as Turridu. He is making great strides dramatically, and he performed this role as well as one could wish to see. In addition, he sang with the intensity of which he is capable.” His eighth and final new role for the season was that of Florestan in Beethoven’s *Fidelio* on 26 March, in a revival with Leo Blech conducting and Inez Köhler in the title role. There were four performances until 10 April, and one reviewer wrote that Jussi “was somewhat wooden dramatically, but his voice was in top form.”

In addition to the role of Martin Skarp in *Fanal*, which has already been mentioned (a total of six performances during the season: five in Stockholm until 19 March and one on tour in Riga on 19 May), Jussi also sang Vladimir in Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (three performances between 14 August and 26 February), Cavaradossi in *Tosca* (six performances from 26 September to 18 February, of which four were on tour—in Malmö on 5 December, Ystad on 7 December, Kristianstad on 8 December and Östersund on 18 February), Almaviva in Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (four performances between 28 September and 3 March, of which one was on tour in Fagersta on 1 October). On 30 November Jussi sang the role of Mats in Rangström’s *Kronbruden* [The Crown Bride] at a gala performance to celebrate the composer’s fiftieth birthday. He also sang Alfredo in Verdi’s *La traviata* (two performances on 1 and 6 February), Lensky in Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* (three performances between

9 and 14 April), A Young Sailor in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (one performance on 6 April), Don Ottavio in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (one on tour in Riga on 16 May with John Forsell in the title role) and Ruster in Zandonai’s *I cavalieri di Ekebù* (one performance on tour in Riga on 18 May). Jussi also took part in a gala performance on 23 May singing Roméo in Act 2 of Gounod’s opera opposite the Juliette of Helga Görlin. As was the custom of the time, all these operas were sung in Swedish.

Despite this heavy workload Jussi also found time for concerts, for the performance of two oratorios, and for two gramophone-recording sessions. Concerts in Malmö and Copenhagen featured at the beginning of this article (as well as at the beginning of Jussi’s season). In total he gave 32 concerts during the season, the last of these being in Falsterbo on 29 June. If we return to the start of the season we find Jussi performing at a concert at Slottskogsvallen in Göteborg on 19 August alongside the Västergötland Singers’ Union choir. An interesting point to note here is that his programme included Widéen’s beautiful Serenade. At the end of the same month came a very important debut, namely his first two concerts at Gröna Lund’s Tivoli in Stockholm on 29 and 30 August. The reviewer styling himself “H. A-r” wrote in *Stockholms Dagblad* “Jussi Björling had to sing with drizzling rain splattering his face, but God, how he sang!” On 7 September he sang Mozart arias with Hjärdis Schymberg and Göta Allard at a soirée at Drottningholm Palace Theatre. The following day he travelled to Copenhagen for a further concert, which took place at the Tivoli that same evening. From Copenhagen he returned home over the Sound for

two concerts on 9 September, the first in Helsingborg Folkets Park and in the evening in the Malmö Realskola Hall. On the programme at both these concerts was once again Widéen's Serenade.

On Saturday 15 December Jussi sang at a charity concert for *Den tysta nöden* [The neglected poor] at the Concert Hall in Örebro (once again he sang Widéen's Serenade, with piano accompaniment by Algot Haquinius). That same day he had become engaged to Anna-Lisa Berg, and the next day, 16 December, they sang together publicly for the first time, at a charity gala at Sportpalatset in Stockholm. Jussi's first concert in the New Year took place at a rather unusual venue—Lorensberg's Circus in Göteborg. Nils Grevillius accompanied at the piano, and one critic wrote—"Jussi has a priceless gift in his throat... he sings with amazing ease and can produce a most wonderful *pianissimo*". Jussi was somewhat indisposed at this concert, and despite the positive comments cited above, the reviews were mixed. Negative criticism was also directed at him after a concert in Eskilstuna on 4 February. Nils Grevillius conducted when Jussi sang at an orchestral concert on 5 March in Uppsala University Concert Hall. The reviewer in *Uppsala Nya Tidning* wrote "a special point in the eminent singer's favour is that his voice sounds well in all registers and that he therefore does not need to fall prey to the temptation of producing some beautiful high notes merely to make up for what is lacking overall". These two concerts served as a warm-up for a concert tour in April, which Jussi undertook with his good friend and operatic colleague, the baritone Einar Larson. The tour comprised eight concerts and began on 8 April in Kristine Church in Falun, in

response to which a reviewer wrote, "In every song that Jussi Björling sang, his tones were like gleaming pearls, with perhaps the most beautiful of all coming in the oratorio *Elijah*." After this came concerts in Västerås Cathedral on 11 April, Kloster church in Eskilstuna on 14 April, and Karlstad Cathedral on 15 April, where the local press noted that "Jussi Björling had many opportunities during the course of the evening to convince us of the uncommon flexibility and beautiful lustre of his instrument". After Karlstad came concerts at the Brahe Hall in Jönköping on 16 April, Lorensberg's Circus in Göteborg on 19 April, Helsingborg Concert Hall on 20 April, and, finally, in the Malmö Realskola Hall on 21 April. The programmes on this tour included both solo arias for the two singers and duets for tenor and baritone. As far as Jussi's solo arias are concerned we can mention "Then shall the Righteous Shine Forth" and "If with all your hearts" from Felix Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, both of which are cited in the review for the Falun concert. The duets performed included "Omvänden Eder i avfälliga barn" [Turn, O backsliding children] by P. U. Stenhammar (the father of the composer Wilhelm Stenhammar), Faure's "Crucifix", Beethoven's "Die Ehre Gottes aus der Natur" and the famous duets "Solenne in quest'ora" from Verdi's *La forza del destino* and "O Mimi, tu più non torni" from Puccini's *La Bohème*, the last four being sung in Swedish translations.

On 3 June 1935 the wedding of Jussi and Anna-Lisa took place in Oskar Church in Stockholm. Their honeymoon in Italy had to be shorter than initially planned since Jussi had been booked for four end-of-season concerts at the Tivoli Concert Hall

in Copenhagen on 19, 21, 24 and 26 June. Jussi's season concluded with a further two concerts, one in Malmö *Folkets Park* on 28 June and the other at Strandbadet Restaurant in Falsterbo on the following day.

As if all this were not enough, Jussi also found time to participate as the tenor soloist in Handel's *Messiah* in Stockholm Cathedral on 1 December 1934 and in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* on 25 March, both performances being conducted by Tullio Voghera. He also managed to fit in two visits to the recording studio, the first on 4 March, when he recorded Martin Skarp's aria "I männer över lag och rätt" [Ye men of law and justice] and Dick Johnson's farewell aria "Ch'ella mi creda" [recorded in Swedish as "Låt henne tro"] with Nils Grevillius conducting. At the second session on 1 May, with Sune Waldimir in charge of the orchestra, he recorded Christgau's "Bröllopsvalsen" [The Wedding Waltz] and "Lilla prinsessa" [Little Princess] by Enders. Add to all of this, travel, rehearsals, study and other preparations and one can see how packed his diary was.

Of his total of 116 performances during this season, eight were broadcast: the concert in Malmö on 6 July, the concert in Göteborg on 19 August, acts 2 and 3 of *Faust* on 28 August, the soirée at Drottningholm on 7 September, acts 3 and 4 of *Kronbruden* on 30 November, and the complete performances of *Il tabarro* on 11 February and *La fanciulla del West* on 6 March. Regrettably none of these broadcasts has been preserved for posterity. Jussi would later learn four of that season's 18 roles in their original Italian or French for his international repertoire: Rodolfo in *La bohème*, Cavaradossi in *Tosca*, Turiddu in *Cavalleria rusticana* and Gounod's

Faust. In addition, he sang Alfredo and Dick Johnson in Swedish at guest performances on the continent in 1936 and 1937. He would also eventually sing excerpts from Florestan's role in English at a festival performance in Cincinnati in May 1948. It should also be mentioned that in 1935 Jussi celebrated 20 years as a concert singer, having made his debut as a four-year-old in Trinity Church in Örebro on 12 December 1915.

Many of John Forsell's pupils were pushed very hard; in certain cases it is not going to far to say that the voice was abused. Among the singers to whom this applied are two previously mentioned in this article, the baritone Einar Larson and the tenor Einar Beyron. The former had, in his glory days, a very beautiful lyric-dramatic baritone, but in the mid 1930s his vocal powers began to decline considerably, partly as the result of an inadequate technique. Einar Beyron's career as a tenor had a very successful start, but he too was burdened with too many roles too early, many of which, moreover, were far too dramatic for his lyric tenor voice. The result was that his voice, too, was irreparably damaged. Jussi Björling's voice was also worked hard from his earliest years at the Royal Opera. But in contrast to Einar Larson and Einar Beyron, Jussi was equipped with a very solid technique, the foundations of which were laid in his childhood years, and this allowed him to undertake 53 roles, both lyric and dramatic, during the first eight seasons of his operatic career without causing any damage to his voice. Quite the contrary, in fact. To judge from the reviews, his voice continued to grow in size, richness, power and security as season followed season. The 1934-1935 season can be seen as

something of a breakthrough in Jussi's career. In earlier seasons both public and critics alike had obviously understood that Jussi was an exceptional talent, especially following his interpretation of Gounod's *Roméo* in late summer 1933, but it was not until the 1934-1935 season that the various elements of his voice began to consolidate into that indivisible unit of technique, power, brilliance and beauty which, allied to a unique interpretative ability, came to be the unmistakable characteristics of the legend that is Jussi Björling.

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Bertil Bengtsson was born 29 June, 1962 (fortuitously he addressed the Gustavus conference on the 39th anniversary of that event, which did not go uncelebrated). His academic degrees are in arts administration, and he has held positions at the museums in Sweden devoted to the work of Anders Zorn and J.B. Bertil helped found the Swedish Jussi Björling Sällskapet (Society) and is a valued member of the Advisory Board of JBS-USA. He is preparing an English-language version of his program "A gala evening with Jussi Björling, the legendary tenor—a presentation in sound, words and pictures" for a prospective lecture tour.

[We thank Gail Campain for her translation of this article, another in a series that eventually will include, in particular, the entire text of the 1960 "Memory Book" dedicated to Jussi—the ninth installment of which can be found in this issue. —Ed.]

More on Bertil's Smithsonian Lecture in Washington D.C.

Here is a portion of Don Pruitt's report on Bertil's talk of June 26 at the Hirshhorn Gallery: "Alla and I have just returned from Bertil's outstanding lecture at the Smithsonian. The talk was fascinating, with several new (to me) photos and sound tracks, including a wonderful *Carmen* Flower Song from the Firestone Hour and a 'La donna è mobile' from, of all places, the Ed Sullivan Show. The latter used a seductive Maddalena mime who clung to JB throughout, apparently affecting his performance toward greater feats of verisimilitude that the usual partaker of this role could ever hope for.

"There was a lovely photo of JB and Anna-Lisa in costume for *Roméo et Juliette*; a backstage shot at the Met of the same opera with Anders and Lars standing before a beaming Sayão (Bertil told of how they remember her embraces!); JB, Kirsten, Baccaloni and Valdengo at *Manon Lescaut*; a backstage shot from *Don Carlo*; two lovely candid of Jussi with Anna-Lisa, one in Bermuda and one in Hawaii, complete with ukelele; and lots more. "Bertil thoughtfully dedicated Jussi's 'Che gelida manina' to Bea Bobotek, who did a splendid and much-appreciated job in organizing the lecture with the Smithsonian and Embassy officials."