

Travels in Time of War

By Harry Ebert

One gets to experience much in the course of a decades-long friendship spent journeying in the service of music. Jussi and I travelled together a great deal, both in Sweden and on the Continent, but above all in the U.S.A. where we lived together through four long tours. Let me for a moment recall some of my memories of our adventurous travels right in the midst of war.

Anna-Lisa was prevented on one occasion from accompanying us, and we set off across Europe in October 1940, travelling by train, ferry and plane to Lisbon where we were to board the clipper for the U.S.A.

We took the train to Malmö, gave a concert in Lund, and then travelled via Trelleborg and Sassnitz to Berlin. Jussi's well-known love for his family and his native land meant that he always left Sweden with the greatest reluctance and, as is known, often did all he could to avoid leaving at all. When the ferry departed from Trelleborg, Jussi stood well back in the stern and sang "Du gamla, du fria" [Sweden's national anthem], his voice fighting against the noise of the propellers and the roaring water. Jussi would express in song all his love for his country as he left Sweden and again when he once more had the soil of his native land (or at least that of Europe) under his feet. When this particular tour of the U.S. was over after six long months, we journeyed home in a similarly adventurous fashion, not by aero-

plane this time, but on board an old ship which had been condemned and went by the name of "Siboney".

This trip was just as dramatic as the journey over by clipper had been, as we were threading our way between mines and submarines. When we finally reached the customs-house in Lisbon, Jussi sounded forth with "Hell dig du höga Nord" [Hail, you high North]. We certainly had a bit further to go before we got there, but Portugal seemed fairly close. He sang with such passion this time that he ended up cracking on the high C, but he did not lose heart—he started again and this time actually went a third above C. He undoubtedly astonished all the passengers in the customs-house, who, although they did not know who he was, surely understood that this was no run-of-the-mill singer. But I have now gone six months ahead of events.

To return to the outward journey—in Berlin Jussi thought of backing out of the tour and returning home. Some friends and I managed to prevent this and we eventually arrived at Tempelhof Airport. We flew over a ravaged France, and it was strange to see all the destroyed airfields in Lyons, Marseilles and other towns, all the ruined bridges and wrecked roads. From Marseilles we finally reached Lisbon, after landings in Barcelona and Madrid.

When we arrived in the Azores, which at that time was an important intermediate landing place on the way to the U.S.A., a rather amusing

episode occurred. The airline company advised us that we were invited to lunch at a beautifully situated restaurant up on the mountain. A pre-World War I Buick was awaiting us, and Jussi and I took our places in it. We were just about to depart when an elderly gentleman wearing a monocle came over to us and said with a perfect Oxford accent: "Yes, I do believe that...yes, the three of us can travel together here and it will be cheaper." I replied that it could not be any cheaper as the airline was paying, and I invited him to get in. I looked at him and saw that he was my old "English teacher", Somerset Maugham. He introduced himself and it became apparent that he had left Europe for the considerably greater tranquillity to be found in America. We had a very pleasant lunch together which stretched through to dinner before we boarded the clipper again. I will never forget that departure. It was blowing a gale in the harbour and the sea was very rough, but the plane cut through the waves and took off. Somerset Maugham did only two things, other than eat—he played bridge with us and another passenger, and he read detective novels. We also slept a little between the Azores and Bermuda where we were to spend a night in proper beds, something that was very welcome as there was not much rest to be had and the majority did not dare to sleep. From time to time the plane dropped perhaps 400 metres in airpockets. That part of the journey took fourteen hours, and when we reached sunny, warm Bermuda we went for a swim in the Atlantic and then sat down to a wonderful lunch. From there we made the last stage of the journey to New York.

Early the next morning Jussi had to sing with, among others, the bass

Alexander Kipnis, in something called "Mr Bagby's Musical Mornings", which did not exactly suit him after the long journey. It should have been an honour for Jussi to be able to sing at one of these concerts where only the world's foremost artists were invited to perform. The millionaire Bagby pointed this out, but Jussi replied that it was both the first and the last time he would perform at a concert at 11 o'clock on a Monday morning. "You don't even have time to clear your throat before you have to sing," said Jussi. But he still sang gloriously.¹

The next day Jussi and I were to make some gramophone recordings. I knew that Jussi recorded quickly, that is to say, he didn't, as most singers do, rehearse for several hours before a record was cut. His Master's Voice used to pay by the hour, but I wanted to be paid per disc or per side, and after a few moments' discussion this was agreed upon. Among other things, Jussi recorded Beethoven's "Adelaide" and Richard Strauss's "Morgen". Jussi made some further recordings with me at the piano, including Ejnar Eklöf's "Morgon", which was only available arranged for bass voice. Jussi wanted to record it, in spite of my protests, so I had to transpose it on the spot. When the composer later heard the recording

he was very indignant about a mistake I had made (a minor seventh instead of a diminished seventh).

[Note: According to Harald Henrysson (notes for Bluebell ABCD 050), "Morgon" was included in the recording sessions only by accident, when it was realized that "Skogen sover" would be too short to fill out a side of a 12" 78 rpm record. -Ed.]

After these two days in New York we travelled on to San Francisco. The journey from Sweden to California, including the two days in New York, had taken six days, and I still remember the headlines in the newspapers: "The modern travelling of a modern tenor." We went directly from the airport to a rehearsal at the San Francisco Opera.

Jussi's great love for his country made him a fanatical opponent of Nazism. During the war we gave some concerts in German-occupied countries—Holland and Denmark, among others—and it was often difficult to prevent Jussi from saying "unsuitable" things which might have created problems for our homeward journey. (One time he was denied a transit-visa when he had been too outspoken.) On one occasion, when Jussi was to sing with Willem Mengelberg and the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, he heard that it would not be Mengelberg conducting, but

rather a German conductor with Nazi views. Jussi suddenly became very hoarse, but his indisposition disappeared when he got his way and Mengelberg was brought back. Another time, when he was going over the gangway to the Copenhagen ferry, he said loudly and clearly [in English] in front of some German inspectors: "God Save the King", meaning King Christian.³ This caused a frightful commotion, but we were allowed, nevertheless, to proceed unmolested since no one dared to touch Jussi.⁴

Finally a brief recollection from a tour through Sweden which further illustrates the strength of Jussi's feelings for his home and family. During this tour he gave a concert in Stora Tuna Church, his native district's church where both his parents—and now also he himself and Gösta—lie buried in the churchyard. The last number on the programme was Stenhammar's "Sverige". When Jussi came to the words "där våra fäder sover under kyrkohällen" [where our forefathers sleep in the churchyard] his voice broke with emotion and he was unable to continue.

Jussi's love for his country and his family was so great that he could never be talked into accepting all the proposals which were made to him in the U.S.A. during the first two years of the war urging us to stay in America and thus avoid the events in wartime Europe. Jussi wanted to go home, and when we returned in the autumn of 1941 we would remain there throughout the rest of the war with only occasional visits to the Continent. A few months later he was, it is true, on his way to the U.S.A again, but he got no further than Stockholm Central Station where he suddenly disappeared as the train was rolling out from the platform. His intuition was right, for

Sir Isaac Stern, dead at 81

The great violinist received many accolades at the time of his death, September 29, at the age of 81. We highly recommend his autobiography "My first 79 years," where you'll see the range of musical connections he made. In fact at one point he sets down his "short list" of his own personal favorite musicians, one of whom is J.B. In vocalists as well as instrumentalists, Sir Isaac had impeccable taste!

on 7th December came the attack on Pearl Harbour. It was not until September 1945, some months after the end of the war, that he returned to the U.S.A.

The Swedish pianist Harry Ebert (1897-1986) studied in Paris with Maurice Ravel and Sergei Rachmaninoff. He was a prominent soloist but enjoyed accompanying other artists, especially Jussi "whom he believed to be a perfect artist and a perfectionist in his work," according to Anna-Lisa Björling [Jussi, p. 132]. Their collaboration began in 1936 and continued into the 1950s.

¹ It would seem that Ebert has misdated Jussi Björling's participation in the Bagby "Musical Mornings". This series of concerts was held during December and January, whilst Ebert's recollections relate to the period October 1940. Björling is known to have given two Bagby concerts, one in December 1937 with Lily Pong, the other in December 1938 with Zinka Milanov. No trace, however, has been found of the concert with Kipnis mentioned by Ebert. See "Jussi", Anna-Lisa Björling and Andrew Farkas (Amadeus Press, Portland, 1996) p135.

² See "A Jussi Björling Phonography", 2nd edition, Harald Henrysson (Swedish Music History Archive, Stockholm, 1993) pp 60, 74-5 & 159 for a detailed discussion about Ebert's dating of these recordings.

³ King Christian X of Denmark chose to remain in Denmark throughout World War II and became a revered symbol of Danish resistance during the Nazi occupation.

⁴ This should be "spring of 1941". Jussi Björling returned to Sweden on 20 March 1941.

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

Edited by Carla Ramsey and Dan Shea

When a Jewish mother watches her child graduate from medical school she "kvells" (Yiddish for swelling—and that's just the way we feel when we see glowing references to JB in the media. The past few months have turned up more of these than we can print, but here are a few highlights—so that you, too, can "kvell" with us:

Jussi continues to be cited by singers young and old as a major role model. (Recall the comments made by Greg Turay and Frank Lopardo in our story on this year's Santa Fe Opera season, earlier in this issue.) In a January 2001 article in *Opera Japonica* by Simon Holledge, the 28-year-old Argentine tenor **Dario Volenté** says "Many people compare me to Björling. People say there is something in the color of my voice that reminds them of him....I don't go to the opera. I like to listen to the old singers like Caruso, Warren, Björling."

Heldentenor **Ben Heppner** has been singing *Otellos* in Chicago this fall and *Meistersinger* Walthers at the Met, but will soon be touring North America in a concert tour devoted mainly to art songs. His bright sound reminds some of Jussi's, and we recall an April 1998 *Opera News* interview in which Heppner states "My first favorite, when I started listening to other singers at university

was Fritz Wunderlich... I loved the fluidity, the musicality, the beautiful tenor sound. Then I discovered Jussi Bjoerling, still my favorite voice—passionate, committed at all points."

And here is a commendation from one who should know: **Walter Taussig**, Metropolitan Opera coach and associate conductor since 1949, who was recently interviewed by Ira Siff in *Opera News* (April 2001). After stating some highly positive opinions about Fausto Cleva, William Steinberg, Kirsten Flagstad and Birgit Nilsson, Taussig was asked about Zinka Milanov. His response: "Look, I have a differentiation between 'singers' and 'artists.' Nilsson was an artist. Milanov was a singer—a very fine singer, with a wonderful voice, but not an artist." Siff pressed Taussig to name other singers whom he also considered artists, other than Nilsson, and he responded: "Vickers...Bjoerling—incredibly beautiful." Taussig continued with his blunt talk, handing out opinions ranging from raves to scorn for many other artists and singers, including Callas, Corelli, Tucker, Warren, Albanese, Steber, Risé Stevens and others. We very much enjoyed this five-page article (if you can't find it in your local library, let us know and we'll send you a copy).