

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).

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Jussi's classic recordings of the lyric tenor repertoire seem to remain the benchmarks by which to compare newer star tenors—Witness a review of **Roberto Alagna's** recently released "French Arias" (EMI 57012): "He begins 'O paradis' [the aria from *L'Africaine*, usually sung in Italian] softly and dreamily and builds the aria to a satisfactory climax though it hasn't the knockout punch of the Björling and Domingo recordings." (*American Record Guide*, Sept/Oct 2001)

David McKee, reviewing in *The Opera Quarterly* (Spring 2001) an Irish production of *Aida* recorded by Naxos, dubs the RCA Milanov/Barbieri/ Björling/ Warren/ Christoff/ Perlea version "the most aristocratic of *Aidas*."

Speaking of comparisons, a fascinating one was passed along by Milano-based Stephen Hastings some time ago in his article "The Art of Luciano" for *Opera News* (April 1996). [You'll recall Stephen's fine article on Jussi in the previous issue of this Journal, and of course he spoke on JB in Verdi at the June JBS Conference.] In his O.N. article, Stephen wrote that "When **Pavarotti** made his debut in 1961, singing Rodolfo...the veteran tenor Alessandro Ziliani (who was soon to become his first manager) was struck by the voice's resemblance to Jussi Björling's...the resemblance is quite evident. One could never confuse the two timbres—Pavarotti's has more vibrato and is less refined in texture, and there is a degree of (very appealing) Nordic shyness in Björling's singing that contrasts with the Italian tenor's more idiomatic, extroverted projection of the text—but both voices have a silvery, youthful quality that is intrinsically musical. Indeed they

are so limpid and luminous in their overtones as to enhance any piece of music...."

And other evidence of the "benchmark" effect occurs even for the recordings of live performances (what constitutes a "pirated" performance seems to depend on whether EMI or Myto is selling it, or whether the broadcast emanated from La Scala or the Met, or whether the sale is made in Canada or the USA). More and more of these re-engineered live performances—if considered sufficiently "historic"—are being reviewed as legitimate recordings, with the emphasis often placed on the quality of the engineering. Thus the following:

In a November 2000 review in *Gramophone*, **Alan Blyth** lauds the Naxos Historical Series issue of the Met's *Rigoletto* broadcast of December 29, 1945, as "a set worth every penny. Björling and Warren are at the peak of their powers...[JB] sings a Duke of Mantua imbued with supreme confidence and tremendous brio—try the start of the Quartet to hear what I mean. He and the house revel in his display of tenor strength, yet that power is always tempered by innate artistry....All round, there are few recordings that match this one for vocal distinction...."

The same eminent reviewer (in an article whose source we have lost track of: can you supply the reference?) described a recording of the 1947 Met broadcast of *Roméo et Juliette* as enshrining "some of the most glorious tenor singing ever heard. Indeed, after listening to six sets devoted to the great Swede [which ones, we wonder?] you might have difficulty denying that he is, taking everything into account, the greatest tenor of the century."

An altogether different perspective

of these "live" performances is taken in an *Opera News* (Sept 2001) tale of two *Trovatores*, one from London featuring JB in 1939 and one from Rome starring Franco Corelli in 1961 (a 1957 *Ermani* from Florence with Cerquetti, Del Monaco, Bastianini, Christoff and Mitropoulos is also considered). That the singing is great is taken for granted, and the story is mostly about the engineering. One sentence grants that the 1939 and 1957 performances especially are "justly famous and offer invaluable artistic insights into the singers involved." For more insight into the 1939 recording, we recommend Andrew Farkas' six-page discussion in *The Opera Quarterly* (Autumn 2001, vol. 17, Number 4); some highlights from that article are given in Hal Sokolsky's column elsewhere in this issue.

We recommend this current issue of OQ to you for several additional reasons:

- Insightful and positive reviews by William Albright of the fine Leonard Warren biography by Mary Jane Phillips-Matz and the new 2-CD compilation of Warren's recordings (issued by the Leonard Warren Foundation and distributed by VAI).
- A 35-page sampling of **Bruce Burroughs'** eagerly awaited biography of Zinka Milanov details the diva's return to the Met for the 1951-52 season and a new production of *Aida*. Three of those pages deal with the recording sessions for *Trovatore* in February and March 1952, which paired "the incomparable team of Milanov and Björling" for happy posterity.

Besides the obvious interest of the above to readers of this Journal, this issue of OQ celebrates Verdi with other articles and reviews—we highly recommend it. If you can't find it in

your local mega-bookstore, ask for it via email: jinlorders@oup-usa.org, or in North America telephone 800-852-7323. Do consider subscribing, even.

For now, we just quote a bit of what Burroughs writes about RCA's *Trovatore* recording "that set the standard for every one that followed and has never been out of the record catalog for the half century since it was made ... no [subsequent] version, however complete or wonderful sonically, ever made anyone think that the original had been supplanted...."

Burroughs interviews the producer, Richard Mohr, about the appeal of this recording, and Mohr responds: "It was the singing, absolutely. When you have artists who can take a daunting singers' opera like that and bring it to life that beautifully, without strain or pain and yet still completely convey the passion, you have a priceless treasure." Mohr continues, to our Milanov-biographer: "And I want to tell you that it was Zinka most particularly. The other achievements, great as they are, were equalled in later recordings, but she never has been. Her contribution, and the opportunity to hear it alongside Björling and Warren, is what makes the difference." (Well. This comment seems to depend on what you're looking for in your Manrico or Di Luna, and that's a matter for pleasant discussion. In any case, we earlier repeated here a Taussig put-down of Zinka, so now we can consider the score settled.)

One more hint on what we have in store, when Burroughs' biography finally hits the shelves, is provided by the Author's Note at the start of the article: "In keeping with [OQ's] traditional scope and purview, [most] reference to the soprano's exceptionally volatile personal life has been eliminated." Thus, if you want the really delicious Zinka stories, you'll have to wait for the book!

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Of interest to all operaphiles is a recent 2-CD set entitled *John Cargher's A Century of Singers*. Originally broadcast as a four-part radio series, the set traces "the great operatic voices from the scratchy, early days of recording through to the technological wonders of today" – from Melba's day onwards. In a review in the magazine *ABC Radio 24 Hours* for April 2001, Martin Buzacott states: "But ultimately, opera isn't so much about technique as it is about voices whose natural beauty can take your breath away. When one hears Jussi Björling singing the 'Ingemisco' from Verdi's *Requiem* one forgets about anything technical. However he achieves it, the effect is always the same—with thrilling tone and timbre and immaculate intonation, Björling sings straight through the heart of each note, as if pinning it to the wall. Has there been a greater tenor in recorded history?"

Yet another "Ingemisco" tribute appeared in the *New York Times* on April 22, in a review of the Gergiev (Bocelli-Fleming) recording of Verdi's *Requiem*: "In an ideal world, one could add to these CDs an appendix track of Jussi Bjoerling singing the 'Ingemisco,' which might allow Bocelli fans and foes alike to gain a more reasoned understanding of what the other side, in this strongly polarized debate, is talking about." [Our thanks to Sue Flaster for sending this.]

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Do you sometimes listen to the Public Radio International show "Schickele Mix"? You may have the experience that one of us (Dan, listening in Madison) did: suddenly in the middle of a normal radio broadcast bursts forth the juvenile trio of

Jussi, Olle and Gösta Björling singing Wennerberg's "David's Psalm No. 4" and the question is, what's going on? Turns out that Peter Schickele's Program Number 95 in his ongoing series is titled "Prodigious Talents" and deals with "kids who were strongly encouraged to make music together as part of a family group." That certainly applies to the Björling boys, who were encouraged to help keep bread on the table! (Other examples on this program were Dmitri Shostakovich Jr, piano, and I Musici de Montreal conducted by Maxim Shostakovich, in a Shostakovich concerto, and The Watson Family singing the traditional hymn "When I Die.")

Last summer Beau Kaplan sent us the *Washington Post's* TV Week booklet for July 22-28, which devoted its "Popular Videos" column to the Voice of Firestone videotapes now to be available from Kultur Video at about \$20 each. The article features a big photo of "Jussi Bjoerling as Verdi's Don Carlo at the Met, 50 years ago," and the text mentions that "The first release is made up of 'Jussi Bjoerling in Opera and Song,' featuring three appearances on the show by the famous tenor and duets with his wife, Anna-Lisa Bjoerling." Subsequent videos would involve Tebaldi & Corelli, Eleanor Steber, Melchior in "The Art of the Heldentenor," and individual tapes featuring Tucker, Moffo, Thebom, Tagliavini, Merrill and others, all in vivid black and white. (The "vivid" applies to the *performances*.)

Many of us already have some of these tapes from their original incarnation, produced by VAI. If you missed those you can get them from Kultur, try 1-800-718-1300 for further information. The Björling tape is given a fascinating analysis by voice teacher David L. Jones, see his

three-page essay on “A visual and audio study of the artistry of Jussi Bjoerling” at <http://www.voiceteacher.com/bjoerling.html>

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Classified Ad: WANTED—Opera fan willing to surf web for items of interest to readers of this *Journal*; the items to be collected would include testimonials to Jussi Björling’s singing. An ability to organize this material for publication in a column (“Jussi in Cyberspace”?) is preferred, as is the ability to learn to make and send Word files. Apply to the Editor of this *Journal*.

Until we find a volunteer for this job, here are some samples we found in the archives of Opera-L: (we’ll quote from only a few, focusing on listeners who had heard Jussi in person.)

• “I once heard JB’s ‘Salut! Demeure’ from the 1950 *Faust* broadcast—and was amazed that God lets mortals hear things so beautiful.”

• “I first heard Bjoerling in his ‘return’ to the Met in *Cavalleria* in the fall of 1959. I was standing upstairs, and was right smack against the stage wall...I heard this incredibly pure voice sing the *Siciliana* and I felt chills. It was so beautiful. It wasn’t big, but it was perfectly placed and carried well...to my ears, the voice was one of the two most purely gorgeous voices of the century—the other being Gigli.”

• “I was fortunate to have seen Bjoerling live often at the old Chicago Civic Opera and at Lyric. He never was anything but Bjoerling. His voice was not a Vickers or Del Monaco size, but it could ride over an orchestra and slice through like

silver. On the opera stage he didn’t act much, but you didn’t care, when he was singing. [A recital in the early 1950s at Orchestra Hall] started at 2:00 PM and was still going at 5:30 with a short intermission. The audience would not let him go. When the programmed material was sung, the audience continued to stomp and scream. Thereafter, he sang almost another concert as an encore, and in so doing, removed his tux jacket, sang more, removed his shirt, sang more and by the end, he was in his Italianate tee shirt. The audience ate it up and Bjoerling was delighted. He laughed a bit and said, pointing to his throat, ‘That’s all I’ve got.’”

• A listener who heard JB in San Francisco on many occasions recounts that “the voice was unforced, unfailingly smooth and brilliant. It filled the house, as much because of his focus and projection as sheer volume. He was not a great actor, but that didn’t matter. He was not very glamorous. I remember especially his *Romeo*. Dressed in tights, he sort of looked like a potato on toothpicks.”

And because we don’t want to leave you with this image of our tenor, here’s one more that gives Jussi-philes a reason to wag their tails: check the website <http://w1.869.telia.com/~u86903036/page6.html> to find a handsome terrier, apparently a first prize winner, named Jussi Björling! Harald Henrysson told us about this website, which belongs to the Swedish Kerry Blue Terrier Club, and urged us to see for ourselves “who is today wearing Jussi Björling’s name.”

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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 (carlaramsey43@hotmail.com), or at 2501 Cisar Ct., #1E, Glenwood Springs, CO, 81601) or Dan Shea (see Masthead on p. 3).

A Note from Ed Walter about the Gustavus Conference

Here’s a note recently received from Ed Walter, about his reaction to our recent conference at Gustavus:

“I often think of the wonderful weekend in St. Peter, MN. I had waxed and waned about going—who wants to sit around talking about a singer for four days?—but I loved every moment. Good fellowship, intelligent discussion, beautiful music. And I came away with an even greater appreciation of Björling. (Friends tell me that’s impossible!) Like so many in the group, I never tire of hearing Jussi’s magic voice. When I’ve had my fill of Alagna, Corelli, Vargas, DiStefano, Gigli and the rest, I shove a Jussi recording on the player as if it were water after a trek through a desert. No singer pleases me like Björling. Melchior and Caruso come close.”