

The Recorded Legacy— Reviews of Recent Releases of Interest to JBS Members

By Harold Sokolsky

Undoubtedly the biggest news about JB recordings in 2001 came from Sweden's Bluebell label, via company manager Hanna Hedman and Bluebell Company board member Harald Henrysson: The 1940 Swedish Radio broadcast of Jussi and Hyördis Schymberg in *Roméo et Juliette* would be released as a complete opera – until now we've had to be content with the excerpts from this delectable performance that we could find on earlier Bluebell releases, or ripoffs of those recordings that appeared on various pirate labels. There has been continuing enthusiastic reaction to this release on the internet as more fans discover it, here're some of Chicagoan Frank Drake's comments (from Opera-L, October 18):

"I have long treasured the excerpts [of the 1940 broadcast] which have been previously available; indeed one passage from these excerpts is in my all-time pantheon of great singing: the final pages of Act II, 'Va repose en paix!' Björling here delivers some of the most ravishing and expressive piano singing I have ever heard from anyone. ...I just received my copy from allclassicalmusic.comNaturally I turned to my favorite passage and once again melted completely (not a pretty sight here in my office!). The sound quality is occasionally uneven on this set but overall it is most listenable and presents Björling in one of his greatest roles. I have

heard the later Met broadcast, and although it is in French, it definitely is not superior to the Swedish 1940 performance. Björling's voice is fresher in 1940, and I find the expression superior. Singing of that quality is worth listening to through the 'wrong' language (though IMO it is never the wrong language when singing is as glorious as this). Naturally, the rest of the cast does not reach Björling's exalted level, but the overall performance is more than serviceable. ...this well-transferred set is a true treasure...of great singing."

As is usual with Bluebell's releases of Björling material, the accompanying text is by Harald Henrysson and as always authoritative and fresh, with interesting excerpts from Swedish press reviews: In 1933, Svenska Dagbladet's critic opined that "In his Roméo, Jussi Björling revealed entirely new sides of this young artist. He clearly preferred an elegantly subdued style in the purely lyric parts...one could get a stronger impression this evening of his warm, softly varied piano than of his sonorous forte. This does not mean that the voice lacked its usual strength on the top, but only that the beauty of his positively surprising, soulfully rendered piano singing attracted greater attention."

Harald also quotes J.B. Steane in his Gramophone review of the earlier Bluebell release of excerpts from this broadcast: "...perhaps because

he is on home ground and singing in his native Swedish, he achieves an elegance which is more truly French than the Metropolitan performance which is in the French language.... Of course he sings superbly for the New Yorkers but it is the Stockholm house that calls forth his affections."

By the way, this and other JB material can be ordered from the Museum shop, go to: www.borlange.se/kommun/jussi/index.html

The year before this Roméo, Jussi made his Covent Garden debut in *Trovatore* and the performance of 12 May 1939 was recorded in house. By now there are at least four CD versions of this performance and keeping track of the differences is difficult. Luckily a careful and nuanced report has been made, by Andrew Farkas for *The Opera Quarterly* (vol. 17, Nbr.4), and we quote from that here: "Björling's singing is full of youthful ardor, passion, and lyricism; his voice rings freely and carries well in solos and ensembles.... His delivery abounds in musical subtleties. He actually reads the letter in act 2. He rigorously observes Verdi's markings in "Mal reggendo" and sings "non ferir!" at the score's ppp dynamic marking. Anyone doubting Björling's acting ability must listen to the lines in his confrontation with Leonora ("Pur ...figgi, o donna, in me gli sguardi!")—each phrase, nearly every word, is clearly delineated and driven home by his well-conceived musical inflections.

"The crowning achievement of Björling's evening is 'Ah sì, ben mio.' It is a demonstration not only of how to sing this aria but also of how to sing, period....The aria is sculpted, thought-out, built like an edifice with ornaments. The recitative is sung with exquisite sensitivity, every phrase communicating meaning and

emotion, as the tenor welds text and music into an inseparable whole.

The purely technical aspects of his singing impress no less: the fine gradations of his diminuendo, the distinctions between *piano* and *pianissimo*, and the coloration of the voice from lyric to heroic. In strict observance of the markings in the score, on the recurring words “a me parrà” he attempts both times a trill. While it may not rival that of a Melba, a Sutherland, or even a Plançon, a trill it is, and I invite the reader to recall a Manrico in living memory who delivered the genuine article in live performance....‘Di quella pira’ blazes like a gleaming sword, the *squillo* of the high C textbook-perfect....

Throughout the evening Björling’s voice is in optimal condition. He sings effortlessly and with shimmering brilliance that both thrills and amazes, coloring and shading his tone at will from gossamer *pianissimo* to his hallmark high C....”

Interesting as these excerpts are, you need to get the entire 6+ page review to read the best account known to date of the provenance of the various available transcriptions. The late Terry McEwen plays a role, obtaining a copy from acetates of the performance in Sir Thomas Beecham’s collection (getting them directly from Lady Beecham herself), and there’s the tape copy made from 16” shellac discs owned by an elderly Englishman living in Brazil. You’ll want the whole story, as well as the result of Andrew’s careful listening-comparison of four currently-available versions. For that you’ll have to just read the whole article, either in a local library, or by getting your own copy (in North America inquire at jnlorders@oup-usa.org or 800-852-7323, elsewhere at jnl.orders@oup.co.uk or +44 1865 267907).

From these examples of Jussi in opera and still in his 20s, we jump to the recordings of Swedish songs that he made in 1957-59. The previous issue of this *Journal* (No. 12, Spring 2001, p. 32) refers to the *Classical Record Collector’s* cover story on Jussi by Stefan Nävermyr. That article tells of “Jussi Björling’s finest hours” as he recorded songs of Sibelius, Alfvén, Peterson-Berger, Sjöberg, Söderman, Stenhammar, Nordqvist and others, vocally in great form but in fact near the end of his life.

The new CD containing these songs is the Swedish Discofil Society’s “Till Havs” (SCD 1100), incorrectly titled “Romantic Songs” in our previous report. Harald Henrysson informs us that this release “is not a new one. It is the same as has been available as SCD 1010 since June 1999, except for the new inclusion of the Nordqvist song ‘Till Havs,’ and I would like to stress that the CD includes texts and translations for all the songs in the CD-ROM part. The CD-ROM is quite the same as in the earlier version, with just a few added selections, and is remastered. It can be played on a regular CD player, but for its special features the CD-ROM must be played on a computer.”

For those not familiar with CD-ROM, the new CD offers no clues. There is an add-on sticker that says “Including unique CD-ROM” and the back of the CD says in small type, “New transfers from the original master tapes. Also includes a CD-ROM file with extensive documentation and never before published photos from the recording sessions” The booklet does not provide the CD Rom contents. When you place the CD Rom in the CD drive, an icon appears on the desktop. When the icon is clicked the program opens with the following con-

tents. [If it doesn't open, it can be accessed from My Computer by clicking the appropriate CD drive]

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Recording and equipment

Swedish Society Discofil

The Jussi Björling Society

The songs

The original Swedish issues

The Jussi Björling Museum

Jussi Björling’s ancestry

The new CD also has the drawback of type design. The index numbers, songs, and timings are in red type on black background—hard to read. But the booklet insert is well done, thorough, with photos and text of the songs in Swedish and English, but, again, no instructions how to use the CD-Rom. The sound is gorgeous. The original CD was always a popular favorite, and the reissue is a marvel. And Harald Henrysson says, “I recommend the CD strongly for sound and performance.”

In spite of his many international tours and engagements, Björling always remained a Swede at heart. He included a number of Swedish songs, often patriotic in character, as encores in his annual concerts in Sweden. This collection includes some of these, together with several ballads that were favorites of himself and his audiences. They were recorded in 1957-1959 with Nils Grevillius, chief conductor at the Royal Opera in Stockholm 1930-1958, except for “Till Havs” which was conducted by Stig Westerberg and the Stockholms Filharmoniska Orkester. One can sense the profound intuitive musical communication that had been established and built up over the years between Björling and Grevillius.

Ian Lacey reviewed the CD in *Classical Music on the Web* [www.musicweb.uk.net/classrev/]

2000/nov00/bjorlingCD.htm] and following are some excerpts: "The concert opens with the two demanding Alfvén songs. 'I long for you', is a passionate exhortation with Björling's big voice rising to a tremendous final crescendo. Conversely, he is all poetic expression in the exquisite 'Now take my heart', and just listen to his beautiful, delicate pianissimo ending. His virile heroic voice takes wing in the proud and independent spirit of 'Among the high fir-trees in the forest ...we have built our own little nest...I can still be contented in the company of my love and live and die happily in the mountains.' In 'Toward the sea' the voice soars confidently, defiantly against a storm-tossed sea.

"In the epic ballad 'King Heimer and Aslaug' Björling demonstrates the warmth and richness of the lower registers of his voice. This beautiful song is interesting because of its origins in the heroic Old Norse sagas. It tells of Aslaug, daughter of Brünhilde and Siegfried, the man who killed Fafner. Hidden in a hollow harp, the child Aslaug is smuggled to Norway by the old king Heimer, so as not to fall victim of the political intrigues of the day. The other epic ballad by August Söderman, 'The enchanted lake' is about a youth who is tempted to pluck a beautiful water lily from the surface of an enchanted lake. He is too awed by the ghostly song he hears enticing him to pluck and be transformed and so he "wanders timorously in the mountains deprived of peace in his heart". Again this is a lovely but demanding song with a highly colourful orchestral accompaniment.

"'Evening mood' is a lovely nostalgic pastoral evocation of lakes and forests. 'Sweden', is regarded by many as the unofficial anthem of

Sweden and Björling sings it with immense pride and affection. 'Thou blessed land' is another patriotic song in the same vein. One of the most meltingly beautiful melodies on the disc has to be Carl Sjöberg's 'Music'—"The heart that suffers from life's commotion, music, to you it wants to escape"—and, not surprisingly, Björling responds most affectingly.

The first of the two Sibelius songs is highly atmospheric with brilliant orchestral tone painting—'Sigh rushes, sigh' is a narrative song, somewhat enigmatic, about a love lost beneath the waters of a lake. Björling is passionate and that top note is amazing. The second Sibelius piece, 'The diamond on the March snow' is equally evocative and passionate.

"Beethoven's 'Nature's Praise of God' gives Björling the opportunity to show off the oaken strength of the voice in a more formal and sterner song. The final carol, 'O Holy Night', is Adam's best-known composition aside from his *Giselle* ballet music and the opera *Le Postillon de Longjumeau*. It was made famous by both Caruso and Björling and it makes a fitting final showcase for the singer's prodigious talents. If you buy only one recording this month, I unhesitatingly recommend it should be this one. 'Music' and 'Now take my heart' are still ringing in my ears; songs to die for."

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The recordings mentioned above span the years 1939-59 and attest to the remarkable consistency of JB's voice throughout his career: His voice did darken somewhat in the 1950s, but it's impossible to find a point where he was somehow not at his peak form: his "peak" was constant!

Gösta Winbergh Remembers a Mistake of His Youth

Mike Richter's website is always interesting, we recommend it to your attention: mrichter.com. During November it featured three Swedish tenors in "Che gelida manina": JB (from his 1939 Holland radio broadcast), Nicolai Gedda and Uno Stjernqvist. In October there was an interesting interview of Gösta Winbergh by Jim Farber of the *LA Westside Rave!* Just at that time, the LA Opera was starring Winbergh in *Lohengrin*, and Farber asked him about his youthful fling with pop music, as part of a rock band that played the youth clubs of Stockholm. As Farber recounts the story, Winbergh "offhandedly turned down his only opportunity to hear the greatest Swedish tenor of them all, Jussi Björling. 'I told my parents I'd rather go to the cinema with my friends,' Winbergh says with obvious regret."

As Toby Hekler commented, "It's ironic that Winbergh missed his chance to hear Jussi in exactly the same way that Jussi missed his chance to hear Caruso."

According to the interview, Winbergh would be singing Siegfried for the first time this season in Zurich, and returning to LA Opera in that role. He's 55 at this time and still very much in demand.