

Newsletter

of the Jussi Björling Societies of the USA & UK

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Rolf Björling in Utah (1979)

By Walter B. Rudolph

“It’s a mini-cycle,” he explained to me afterwards. ‘Ständchen’ is the serenade (setting up the date). ‘Heimliche Aufforderung’ is the date, and “Zueignung” the expressed thanks at the end.” The three Richard Strauss songs had ended Rolf Björling’s printed program on April 13, 1979 in Ogden, Utah. The Goodfellow review was simple and to-the-point, “...as thrilling as I’ve ever heard them.”

William S. Goodfellow (critic, Deseret News) knew his stuff. He and I discussed singing and singers on numerous occasions amounting to (at least) a cumulative several weeks. But I didn’t know him until a few years after Rolf’s recital. He died just 3.5 years ago, so as I write this, I’m remembering Bill, and acknowledging both Jussi and his son, Rolf.

Rolf Bjoerling: Jussi would have been proud by William S. Goodfellow

Friday, April 13, 1979, Deseret News, B11

OGDEN – It’s unusual enough when one area of the world gives us as many fine singers over the years as has Scandinavia (Flagstad, Nilsson, Melchior, Roswaenge, Schiøtz, Gedda, etc. – the list is practically endless). But one family?

Rolf Bjoerling comes from such a family. Like his father Jussi (who first came to the United States from Sweden at age 8 as part of a male quartet that included his father and two brothers), he is a tenor. And Thursday night before a small but appreciative audience at Weber State College he gave evidence that the strain runs true.

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Jussi holding Rolf, c. August 1929 (Björling Museum, Borlänge)

Promotional brochure, Joanne Rile Management, Philadelphia





The President's Pen . . .

Terry Williams

Some might suggest that I spend more time on Facebook and YouTube than one ought. Be that as it may, I enjoy the many wolf pages I follow on Facebook along with lots of pages featuring singers and singing. YouTube is fun because it has figured out what I like and constantly brings me something new to enjoy.

Many of the samples that come my way via videos on Facebook and YouTube (and sometimes only audio on YouTube) are singers who had big careers and still are/were singing well into their 70s and 80s. Examples include Giorgio Zancanaro, Giacomo (Jaume) Aragall, Robert Merrill, Gino Bechi, and Giuseppe Valdengo to name a few. The great Russian bass, Marc Reisen, was still singing into his 90s. These are examples of what I call *Old Guys Rule*. Seriously, listen to Aragall singing “Non ti scordar di me” for a fund raiser in 2012 at age 73. The crowd goes nuts and for good reason. Find me a tenor today in full career who can match, let alone surpass him. Valdengo’s terrific at age 80 singing Tosti’s “T’amo ancora.” The crowd doesn’t just applaud at the end of the song, it applauds the end of the first verse!

So considering all that, this question came to mind—what if Jussi Björling had not died at age 49. Would he still have been singing into his 70s or even 80s? I know, he speculated that he would be able to sing at top form only into his mid-50s. But what if this was just Swedish modesty? What if, like his dear friend Robert Merrill, JB could still have been singing in top form at age 75? Would he have been a member of the *Old Guys Rule* club? Sadly, we will never know. But isn’t it fun to contemplate the possibility. I know if I were a betting fellow, my money would be on Jussi to be able to show just how much *Old Guys Rule*.

We are very excited to report that we have begun the much needed overhaul of our website. The project, under the very able leadership of Susan Flaster, is expected to be complete by the first of the new year. Stay tuned for more details in the Journal next February. Equally exciting is that the Jussi Björling Appreciation Society (UK) has agreed to partner with us. This is an expensive but very necessary undertaking. We would be most grateful for anyone who is able and willing to help with a special contribution earmarked just for the website overhaul. Please contact Allan Buchalter or our treasurer, Janel Lundgren, to arrange details. We will thank you in the Journal.

Maintaining our membership records requires a great deal of time and technical skill not to mention dedication to the Society. You receive the Journal and Newsletters in large part thanks to the work of our membership chairman, Allan Buchalter. I am pleased to inform you that at the annual meeting of the Board of Directors, Mr. Buchalter was elected Vice President - Membership. Congratulations Allan. You earned it and deserve it. Keep up the good work.

You will find interesting articles in this Newsletter, including one where Leslie Barcza recalls his pilgrimage to the Museum in Borlänge, and another by Wally Rudolph about a performance of Rolf Björling, one of Jussi’s sons, in Utah.

On the back cover Sue Flaster previews our “mini” conference in DC next November. I hope you will put us on your calendar now so we will see you then.

Thank you for your loyalty and ongoing support. The Society could not exist without you. ❖

Rolf Björling continued from page 1

I realize that in saying that I run the risk of sounding like just another newspaper hack looking for a headline; I’m aware that Jussi Bjoerling possessed one of the truly great tenor voices of the century. But this was quite simply the most memorable vocal recital it’s been my privilege to attend in some time (unfortunately I missed Tom Krause—another Scandinavian—last month at BYU).

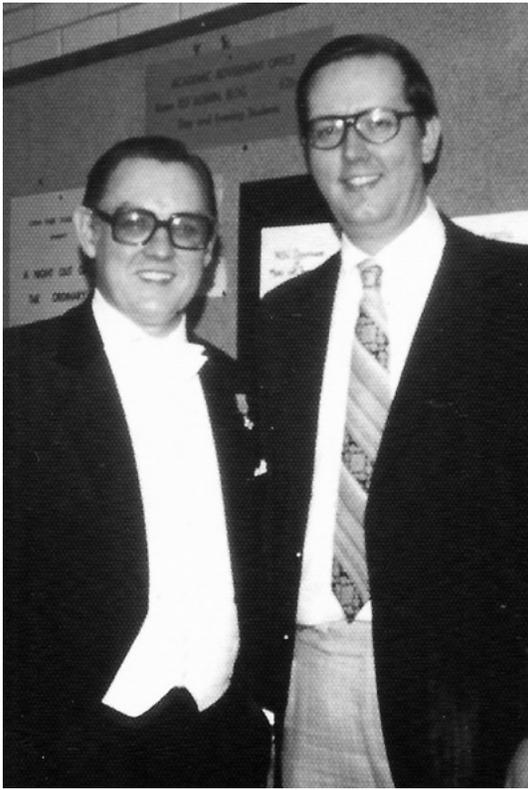
Not that Rolf’s voice is a carbon copy of his father’s, because it isn’t. Production is occasionally stiffer and at times Thursday the middle register took on an almost baritone timbre. Most of the time, though, the likeness was uncanny – equally clear and controlled, with the addition of a ringing top Bjoerling *père* might have envied.

Typical of that was a “Nessun dorma” from Puccini’s *Turandot* that revealed a much more natural voice for Calaf than Jussi ever commanded, resonant and heroic, with its climactic B natural squarely attacked and smoothly ridden. The first of two Leoncavallo encores, “Vesti la giubba” from *I pagliacci* was just as dramatic—and just as well disciplined.

There is, in fact, nothing casual about Rolf Bjoerling’s artistry, in any sense. Once he had warmed up a bit on a grouping of Beethoven songs and could be sure of the outcome, his singing had a freer, more open sound than had been apparent at first. But interpretively things were on a firm footing all night. Especially fine on both counts was his “Es war ein König,” its semi-pompous exposition beautifully set forth in full tones and with ample theatrical flair.

No less impressive were his forays into the twilight world of Richard Strauss (a fanciful “Ständchen”—with a glorious finale – and “Heimliche Aufforderung” and “Zueignung” as thrilling as I’ve ever heard them) and the glimmering ice kingdom of Jean Sibelius (a “Törnet” worthy of Jussi).

Those electrifying top notes did a lot for Gastaldon’s “Musica proibita.” But it was in Tosti’s “Lalba separa dalla luce l’ombra”



Rolf Björling and Walter Rudolph, April 1979

that the singer gave it everything he had, to marvelous effect.

The program as a whole was aided by the sympathetic keyboard accompaniments of USU's Irving Wassermann, as well as Björling's own explications of the spotty texts and translations provided by the college. He is, happily, the most unremote of artists, something that lent the evening a warmth and intimacy impossible to come by any other way. But one hopes that it won't be long before his very real talents put him on the pedestal he so richly deserves.

In the interview he gave me after that recital (April 1979), Rolf elaborated on his relationship with his father. Excerpting from his comments, he began by talking about *singing with the Björling name, which always made people curious enough to come hear me. People liked my recitals, but*

you could also hear them say "but he's not Jussi." There is less of that today. I've never considered myself in his league. No one can fill those shoes. But I'm a pretty good tenor, and luckily people are starting to recognize me that way.

It was very difficult especially during my early years. The stigma for being born out of wedlock in the 30's was much more pronounced in those days; the secret years when nobody knew where I was. I knew he loved me. We met maybe 3-4 times a year. He would come to my grandmother's where I lived with my mother, usually in the evening. He would whistle and they would throw down the key and he would come up ... and nobody knew where he was.

I knew that he loved me very much; I felt it, and I had very great respect for him, such a respect that when he said something, I jumped. I'm now very, very good friends with Ann-Charlotte and my brothers, and we've talked and they have also said they have the same respect. He somehow created respect around him just by being the way he was. He was fantastic. He could look straight through you. He knew when you were lying.

I always wanted to be a singer, but I never studied with him. He only heard me sing once—it was a C scale up to high C. Some friends said, 'come on, Jussi, let the guy be a singer when he wants to be a singer. He has a good voice they say.' So he went to the piano and got the C scale up to high C, and he told me 'do this now,' and I hit the high C. And he just looked at me and said 'Well, I don't care. I want you to have a decent job anyway.' He didn't want any of us to sing. He wanted us to have a background to stand on. A good decent job is what he called it, in case something went wrong.

I don't think [opera lovers] are ever going to forget him. He's becoming more and more a saint. He wasn't easy to come close to. He got into himself very much and didn't let go of his feelings to other people. But opera lovers love him as a singer, and they can hear the warmth that was also around him. He was a fantastic warm person, and if he liked

somebody he could take off his last tie or shirt and give it to him right there. (Harald Henrysson also reports, "a person who knew Rolf used exactly the same expression about him: He could be difficult to deal with, but he could also give away his last shirt to a friend...")

I lived in Chicago when he died. I didn't know he had had a heart attack in London. In fact I heard about my uncle Gösta's death from some customers (I was a salesman at the time). In those days I wasn't family at all and I wasn't supposed to know. Even when I first started to sing professionally, it wasn't received too happily.

My sister, Ann-Charlotte has a wonderful voice and she's making a career now on her own. She's cute and she has the warmth—you can feel it, and she has a beautiful voice.

When I think about my dad, what I remember most is that he was concerned about our upbringing. He hated people that lied, especially when we lied. He wanted us to be straightforward and nice-going. I miss everything about him ... (pause) everything.

Had he lived, he would probably be singing concerts. He was a singer—he was an instrument—he wasn't his own—he belonged to the world. At the time of his death, he had Otello and Lohengrin ready to celebrate his 50th birthday.

I too found Rolf to be pleasant and unassuming. And my assessment of his recital matched the Goodfellow review.

Rolf Verner David Björling was born on Christmas day 1928 and died on March 31st, 1993.