

Leslie Barcza's Pilgrimage to Jussi Björling Museet

By Leslie Barcza



Leslie Barcza

(Editor's introduction) Here's a stimulating blog title from a man who writes regularly and broadly about music. He describes growing up in a home with recordings of vocal music prominently available—Jussi Björling being a particular favorite.

As the instructor of an opera course, he suggests [opera] is . . . a medium that can be understood in at least these two ways: (1) as a series of composers and periods and styles of opera, stories told in different ways, [and] (2) as a series of big name stars, beautiful voices, larger-than-life personalities, and yes: divas.

My first opera favourite as a child wasn't an opera but a singer, a Swedish

singer, namely Jussi Björling. Long before I had any inkling of music, musicology or musicianship, well before I began playing the piano (and later accompanying my older brother, who would soon be a professional) I was already listening.

I had no idea about the words or the stories or plotlines, although I'd soon be able to name the operas & composers, and even to recognize them. I sympathize with people who are tenor-centric, because that's how I grew up, in a house with a few complete opera recordings plus a few LPs of arias & ensembles. Björling figured prominently, because he was a favourite in the house.

I hadn't yet seen an opera. My first was sometime around my 11th birthday, a production of *Il trovatore* by the Canadian Opera Company starring someone whose name I remember as Francisco Lazaro, who had the unenviable job of somehow living up to what I'd heard: Jussi Björling singing "deserto sulla terra", "ah si ben mio" and "di quella pira", and I knew every note of those pieces his way. It was impossible of course (for him? for me?). I vaguely recall it as a disappointment (or perhaps "heartbreak" would be more accurate). I suppose he [Lazaro] was okay, but like I said, it was a bit like asking a boy to do a man's job. There I was, expecting something resembling what I'd heard on the recordings . . .

Fast forward to the 21st century. I've been visiting family in Stockholm. The connection is deeper than expected. Yes I knew my brother was born here while the family lived in this city. In a curious way Björling was conflated in my head with my father, as both died in 1960, both dying far too young. I was only five years old when my father died so I hope I can be excused for making a connection that isn't logical, just the retrospective association of a young boy.

. . . I wondered aloud if there might be anything commemorating Björling, and was delighted to discover that in fact there's a museum. While there are societies to keep his memory alive (one in the USA [and the UK] as well as the one in Sweden), a museum can take it a step further, assembling memorabilia. Although I saw it would be a two hour train-ride north, I couldn't resist. I had to see for myself . . . Upon arrival [in Borlänge] I was given directions to the museum; it's a short walk in a charming little town.

Yesterday, when I entered the Museet I was greeted by Björling's voice singing one of his signature tunes. I should have expected it, but even so, for a moment I was overwhelmed with emotion. There are several pieces that I associate directly with Björling. Most songs and arias are sung by every tenor in creation, good or bad. But there are a number of pieces that I swear nobody else sings. It's not necessarily that the music is difficult, but these are tunes I have never heard anyone else sing. When I came in I heard him sing the song "Skogen sover", or "The forest sleeps." Its Swedish lyricism suits the sweetness of his voice. And I heard him sing "Ah leve toi soleil" from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, something every tenor sings, although nobody with such ringing top notes.

I can still recall the excitement when a new [Björling] LP came home. My brother did the leg work, I was just the one at home jumping up and down, and then listening to Jussi Björling in Concert. Some of it is with orchestra, some with piano. This is the recording where he does his only version of Lohengrin's narrative, where he sings Lensky's aria, where he sings a number of wonderful Swedish songs including "Till havs" with orchestra. There are also others with piano, from a different recital in August 1960, just a few weeks before his death in September, including an encore where we hear him announce "Devotion" by Richard Strauss. Was this the very last recording before he died? The voice was phenomenal even then . . .

I've never heard anyone else sing "Till havs", a song whose words I don't know. But

it's a song about the sea as far as I know. You listen to it and tell me you can't tell what it's about. It may not be John Masefield, but so what . . .

At times I was surprised by my own emotions as I walked around looking at pictures and hearing the voice. We see him as a child with his family, discover his family tree, see his teacher, but mostly we're immersed in the career. We see a wealth of photos from productions on either side of the Atlantic, often with familiar faces from the middle decades of the century. There's also a library and a video room. I was surprised to see video of his state funeral, overcome with emotion for a moment when I realized I'd been too young to see my own father's funeral, so I watched that segment twice. There's a small map if one wants to walk or drive to his grave-site but I chose not to. There's art—several paintings and sculptures of a famous face who was a huge star in his time and is clearly not forgotten—as well as a plethora of cartoons & caricatures.

And there's an organization there, a friendly and welcoming group of people. I got a glimpse of how many recordings he's made, how many more there are to hear.

I encourage you to investigate if this intrigues or inspires you to want to know more. There's a society in the USA, another in Sweden, and the museum itself.

I am very glad I chose to visit. ❖

*Posted on June 14, 2014 by barczablog
Editor: Thanks for the acknowledging the Societies, Leslie. One may read his blog at http://barczablog.com/2014/06/14/pilgrimage_jussi_museet/#comment-83653*

Jussi Björling in Copenhagen

Jussi Björling (t); Bertil Bokstedt (pn); • JSP RECORDS JSP682 Mono (67:50) Live Falkoner Centret, Copenhagen 10/15/1959 • Arias and songs by MOZART, BRAHMS, LISZT, WOLF, SCHUBERT, BIZET, PETERSEN-BERGER, ALFVÉN, GRIEG, GIORDANO, TOSTI, R. STRAUSS & The Voice of Firestone: Broadcast 3/10/1952

Collectors of historical vocal recordings are always wanting more of their particular favorite singer. They do not often get rewarded for their enthusiasm. However, this CD must surely mark a giant find in the vocal annals for which we must be truly thankful. The silver voiced Jussi Björling was one of the 20th century's great tenors and much has been written about him. There has even been a splendid phonography, improved over the years by new releases, but even this recital escaped the doyen of Björling experts, Harald Henrysson.* This new musical discovery had tangled origins—according to John Haley of Harmony Restorations. It was his restoration of a 1969 Judy Garland concert that led another collector to acquire tapes from the man who had managed the Falkoner Centret concert hall in Copenhagen. Among those tapes was a live performance of what turned out to be Jussi's last concert appearance in Denmark. This concert is not long, as the tenor may have wanted to take things slowly after his recent hospitalization during recording sessions for *Madama Butterfly*. He was already suffering from the heart disease which eventually killed him in September 1960 at the early age of 49.

Miraculously this had no effect on the voice itself. The recital began with Tamino's first aria from *Die Zauberflöte*, sung here in Swedish. This is a slowish version, allowing Jussi to revel in the character, as well as sing with a perfect legato. One feels the aria naturally without, as Björling expert Stephen Hastings says, "any trace of self-indulgence". Björling and his accompanist Bertil Bokstedt had obviously worked hard as the German lieder sound rather more inspired than on a studio recital from some seven years earlier in New York, which sometimes verges on a run through. "Zueignung" for example has Jussi in as free a voice as ever with an excellent top A on 'heilig'. In the Brahms at 'Tranne rinnt' there is a gorgeous downward portamento seeming to find just the right emotional voice. And then the lovely diminuendo at 'Wang herab' to conclude the song. In the Wolf song "Verborgenheit" (Solitude) the sadness comes through at 'Seine Wonne seine Pein! There is a nice contrast in 'Ade' in "Die böse Farbe". In the flower song from *Carmen*, which Jussi sang many times, there is, disappointingly, no soft B-flat at the end but there is emotional contrast throughout the story of the aria, with real passion at 'un seul desir'. The next group are Scandinavian songs and one always feels that here is the essential Jussi, singing with just that bit more freedom. Alfvén's "Skogen sover" is really lovely—one of his best versions—with a glorious 'Juninatt' (June night) to conclude.

The bonus is the complete 1952 Firestone recital—it was also issued by Immortal Performances earlier in 2016, but with fewer announcements. The "Lalba separa dalla luce l'ombra" is majestic and as well sung as ever, leading to an exciting conclusion but the "Nessun dorma," his only one for Firestone—somehow lacks tension. However, Jussi can't help himself and still ends it with a healthy and splendid B. After hearing the two recitals from 1952 and 1959, those seven intervening years brought a darker and stronger voice but the unique timbre is there throughout as is the continued steadiness. The preservation of so much for so long was really miraculous.

This highly recommended CD is in excellent mono with the piano just a shade in front of the singer. The 24-page booklet is everything one should expect in an historical release, including a history of Jussi in Denmark by Henrysson and an in depth analysis of the concert by Stephen Hastings. Aside from being every collector's dream, this is also a wonderful opportunity for new listeners to hear one of the great singers of the last 120 years.

—David Cutler, Fanfare Magazine

* Editor's note: This recital was not known to exist, and therefore is not an omission on the part of Harald Henrysson.