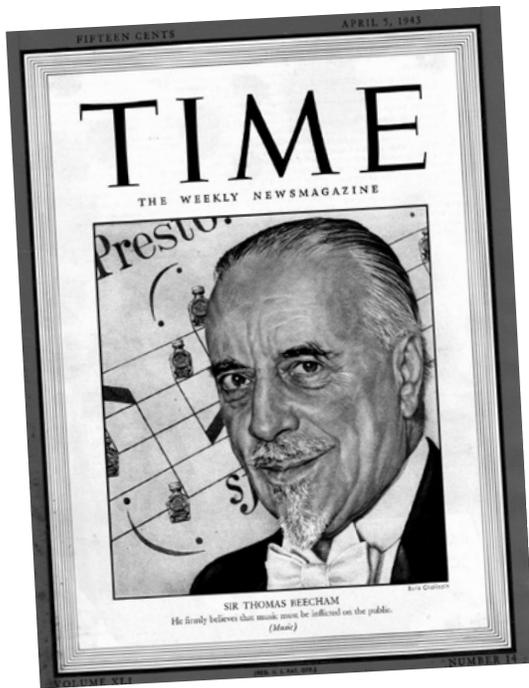


Beecham, Björling and Bohème

By Walter B. Rudolph



TIME Magazine Cover: Sir Thomas Beecham—Apr. 5, 1943

Thomas Beecham—*An Obsession with Music* by John Lucas (Boydell Press, 2011) has been a recent self-obsession. Since Beecham died in my teenage years, I've always admired his Mozart and Haydn, but in particular his last *Messiah* (Goosens orchestration), *Scheherazade*, and of course, *La bohème*. But in today's world Sir Thomas is probably better known for his definition of the harpsichord than for his contribution to music in the 20th century.

I dare say had it not been for Beecham (and his moneyed father Joseph—*Beecham Pill Company*) it is hard to know if the Royal Opera House would have become the world renowned company it is today. Born in 1879, he was 31 when he leased the building for a 3 ½ week season in the Spring of 1910. It would have included the British premiere of *Salome* except that British stage censorship laws had already denied the Oscar Wilde play (French), and the German translation wasn't likely to change the previous (1892)



decision. *Elektra* soon replaced it and established Beecham's exceptional talents. By the Fall season of 1910, Beecham had achieved a compromise, omitting the head for a bloody sword and changing the name of Jokanaan to Prophet. Finally, London had Strauss's *Salome*.

Short seasons of opera continued to be presented by the Beechams (and occasionally others), but always at a substantial loss of money. Sir Thomas was called into court facing bankruptcy more than once. When asked what he had done with the money that was known to exist in the family, he stated simply he had produced music with it—hardly considered a worthy expenditure by the British courts. Yet there was truth in the fact that Beecham spent several fortunes doing just that, producing music.

In 1919 the first Grand Season (13 weeks) of opera was announced—French and Italian (no German/Austrian immediately following WWI). Sir Thomas was the artistic director and a member of the syndicate board. The season was to include the British premiere of *Il trittico* and Puccini would come to supervise rehearsals. “Beecham took advantage of his presence to go through the score of *La bohème* with him, ‘in very close detail.’” (p. 153.) Beecham was now 40.

Twenty years later his stubborn tenacity still reigned. He'd put what money he had into the 1939 season, which included *Bartered Bride* with Tauber. That bailiffs were seizing possessions from his flat in lieu of debts probably added to some

tense rehearsals. One singer claimed that Smetana took one passage much slower and Beecham snapped “Smetana, I regret to say is dead. I happen to be music director here.” Tauber approached Beecham with great deference, asking for Beecham's patience. “We have been singing it wrong for so many years that it will take us a few minutes to put it right.” It was this same season when Gigli sang *Aida*, Melchior made his farewell Covent Garden appearance in *Tristan*, and Jussi Björling made his debut as Manrico in *Il trovatore*. (p. 238-39.)

The aircheck that exists of Jussi's May 12th, 1939 performance is sufficient to demonstrate why Palson-Wettergren wrote the following of his debut. “Beniamino Gigli ... sat in the audience, which perhaps contributed to Jussi's nervousness, because he wasn't in his best form.” But Gigli must've been impressed because after the performance he went to Jussi's dressing room and embraced him. Gigli appreciated artistic excellence in others, even in rival tenors, and soon after the visit, he sent Jussi a handsome photograph, inscribed Al tenore Björling—con ammirazione cameradesca (To the tenor Björling with collegial admiration). (Jussi, Farkas, p. 121.)

Beecham spent considerable time in the USA during WWII, making an indelible contribution to the growth of the Seattle Symphony. And there was considerable excitement in New York City when Met General Manager, Edward Johnson announced that both Beecham and Bruno Walter would conduct during the Met's 1941-42 season,

which indicated “a distinct change of direction for the house.” Oscar Thompson, veteran critic of the *New York Sun*, wrote “Beecham’s arrival ‘put the seal of approval on conductors’ opera, as distinguished from singers’ opera.’ ... something new in the history of the Met, for even the rivalry of Mahler and Toscanini ‘occasioned much less buzz in the corridors of the Metropolitan ... than the rivalry of Caruso and Bonci ... or Geraldine Farrar and Mary Garden.’” (*The Björling Sound*, Hastings, p. 273.)

The fabled *Bohème* recording was a serendipitous event that just seemed to happen in the Spring of 1956. Beecham agreed to the proposal with Victoria de los Angeles as Mimi, on condition of the remainder of the cast being first-class. Everything and one fell into place and the recording was made at the Manhattan Center between March 16 and April 6, 1956.

In the middle of the recording sessions, Jussi developed severe back pain. *Sir Thomas Beecham remarked that to the best of his knowledge the spine wasn’t the organ a tenor used for singing, but his calculated sarcasm withstanding, the session had to be interrupted. Bob Merrill sent [Jussi] ... to his own chiropractor. After the treatment ... Jussi continued the recording.*

There had been no prior onstage performances, nor even any piano rehearsals. RCA Producer, Dick Mohr recalled: Sir Thomas was at his crotchety best. In the third act, de los Angeles didn’t want to cough. It would ruin her vocal line, she claimed. After the first take, when she had not coughed, *Sir Thomas said, “Young lady, now we’re going to do that again, and if you don’t cough, we will later, after the tape is put together, hire a professional cougher, and you may not be able to hear a note you sing!” We did another take—and she coughed.* (*Jussi*, Farkas, p. 282-83; *The Björling Sound*, Hastings, p. 158.)

Beecham was one of the great opera and orchestra conductors, as well as having the energy and fondly remembered wit to excel as both impresario and entrepreneur. Often a paradox, his *Messiah* defied the original score, while his *Bohème* aimed to restore Puccini’s original intentions. ❖

The Jussi Favorites Survey

I’m sure you’ve noticed that you cannot make an online purchase (or comment) without being pestered into oblivion with surveys. Don’t know about you, but it’s one of my pet peeves (PET PEEVES).

So why not a survey that has a tinge of fun about it? Add to that the recordings of Jussi Björling—now what could be more appetizing than that at the end of 2016.

Here’s how it goes:

There are three categories: (1) arias (2) songs, and (3) complete operas. Since he often had multiple recordings of each, please be specific in identifying each choice.

- You are to choose your 5 most favorite JB arias and list them in order of preference.
- Do the same with songs—list your 5 most favorite, again in order of preference.
- Since there are fewer operas, please just list your 3 most favorite complete operas.

Remember to be specific about which recording. Normally the year of the recording and conductor/accompanist should be sufficient. The survey is open to all known JB recordings. And it is limited to members of JBS-USA.

Your selections should be sent by email (preferably) or snail mail to:

codyite@gmail.com (that’s me) or

Walter B. Rudolph
1056 North 840 West
Orem, Utah 84057

Deadline for participation is January 31st, 2017. Results will be tallied and shared in a future JBS-USA publication.



Jussi Bjoerling

Jussi Bjoerling, the great Swedish tenor now at the top of his prime will again make a coast-to-coast concert tour. Bjoerling rejoined the Metropolitan Opera in NY in the fall. RCA Victor Red Seal Records.