

"Of all 20th century tenors, Björling is the one who possessed the most perfectly balanced combination of a voice of unmistakable beauty (sufficiently ample and wide-ranging to cope with a vast repertoire), exceptional musicality and technical assurance."

Jussi Björling: The Supreme Singing of a Shy Man

By Stephen Hastings

On September 9 1960 the newstands of Stockholm were plastered with the news "Jussi död i morse" (Jussi dead this morning). It is rare for newspapers to call an opera singer by his Christian name, but then Björling's relationship with Sweden was a very special one. It had begun forty-five years earlier, when his father David Björling—also a tenor—decided to take little Jussi (born on February 5, 1911) on tour with his brothers Gösta and Olle. The "Björling Male Quartet" could not fail to win audiences over, with the boys dressed in traditional costumes singing music (including compositions by David Björling and the Swedish national anthem) calculated to move. Yet the quartet's survival for twelve years (they remained active until 1927, a year after the father's death), and the success of their United States tour (during which they made six acoustic recordings for Columbia) were attributable to less ephemeral qualities: the uniqueness of the "Björling sound" that the boys had inherited from their father and grandfather, and the superior quality of their musical and vocal training, described by David in a booklet entitled "How to Sing".

David Björling had studied at the Metropolitan School in New York at the beginning of the century and then at the Vienna conservatory, and was prevented from having a successful operatic career only by his obstinate character. Once, during an argument, he went so far as to kick Count Hans von Stedingk, the manager of Stockholm's Royal Opera, in the backside. It was thanks however to his training that Jussi (after completing his studies with the baritone John Forsell) was able to enter that same company when he was just nineteen years old, and to make his debut in 53 of his 55 roles in the time span of nine seasons. Only Des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut* and Don Carlo were added later (together with Calaf, performed only on record).

In 1938, after his first United States tour (as an adult), Björling left the company, but continued to sing at the Stockholm Royal Opera every year (excepting 1949) until his death. Most of his career in fact was divided between the United States and Sweden, with much briefer visits (often only for recitals) to other countries. He sang in Italy (Florence and Milan) during the 1943, 1946 and 1951 seasons; at the Vienna State Opera in 1936-37 and at Covent Garden in 1939 and 1960.

Björling was no less precocious in his recording career, which until the invention of the LP was entirely confined to Sweden. As early as October 1929 he signed a contract with Skandinaviska Grammophon, that represented His Master's Voice in Stockholm, and in the years that followed he recorded with them regularly, first for the Swedish market alone (a number of recordings of popular songs were sold under the pseudonym Erik Odde), then—from 1936 onwards—for the international market (with arias sung in the original language). In the 1950's on the other hand, Björling did most of his recording in the United States and Italy, making several complete opera sets (ten in all, plus the Verdi Requiem), almost all of them for RCA, which up to 1957 was linked to EMI. He never entirely stopped recording in Sweden, however, and his final Swedish recordings (1957, 1959) can be heard, together with 85 other recordings made in Stockholm between 1930 and 1953 (including all those originally made for the international label) and four selections recorded in London (1952) with Ivor Newton at the piano, in the EMI anthology entitled "The Jussi Björling Edition": An edition that includes a booklet with exemplary essays by Harald Henrysson, Curator of the Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge in Sweden and author of "A Jussi Björling Phonography" distributed by the Amadeus Press, and English translations of the Swedish songs.

These recordings confirm the tenor's exceptional vocal reliability throughout thirty years of adult career. The 1959 recordings reveal much the same beauty of timbre and flexibility heard in

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those made in 1930: the slight loss of freshness being compensated by a more solid production of the voice. This vocal longevity may seem less exceptional if one recalls that Luciano Pavarotti (whose voice is similar to Björling's in color and volume) was capable of singing with almost equal accomplishment at the age of sixty. Pavarotti however made his debut at the age of 26, and enlarged his repertoire very gradually, while at the same age Björling had already sung the following roles: Don Ottavio, Almaviva, Arnaldo, Nemorino, Lensky, Radamès, Tonio, Turiddu, Canio, Pinkerton, Florestan, Dick Johnson, Lionel, Il Duca di Mantova, Roméo, Narraboth, Cavaradossi, Alfredo, Manrico, Tamino, Erik, Riccardo and the Faustus of Gounod, Boïto and Berlioz (I have omitted the less important ones!). In the final years of his career, moreover, he suffered from a serious form of heart disease. He often experienced alarming palpitations during performances, and in March 1960 he had a heart attack shortly before the beginning of a performance of *La Bobème* at Covent Garden, which he courageously sang in spite of everything. He also suffered from alcoholism, alternating throughout his adult life between colossal drinking bouts and periods of semi-abstinence. This problem caused considerable unhappiness within his family (as his wife has testified in her superb biography of her husband written together with Andrew Farkas and published in 1996 by Amadeus Press), but had relatively little influence on the singer's professional behaviour. When, in the winter of 1953–54, Björling was forced to cancel many engagements, including the Toscanini recording of *Un ballo in maschera*, the cause—in spite of rumors to the contrary—was a persistent laryngitis. And it was his weak heart and not his drinking—as record producer John Culshaw claimed—that accentuated the misunderstandings that led to the interruption of another recording of *Un ballo in maschera* (that conducted by Georg Solti) in 1960.

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The fact that Björling was able to cope with an extraordinarily heavy repertoire in his youth and sing impeccably even when his health was undermined is a tribute to his exceptional musicality and technique. Kurt Bendix, who conducted him many times at the Stockholm Royal Opera, stated that the tenor was practically incapable of making a mistake: "he was the kind of vocal and musical genius one is lucky to meet once in a lifetime." The composer Sibelius (whose music Björling found singularly congenial) also described him as a "genius." And Nils Grevillius, who conducted 275 of the performances sung by Björling in Stockholm and 81 of the 94 pieces included in the "Björling Edition," likened his control of his voice to "a Kreisler on the violin, a Casals on the cello." The English tenor Joseph Hislop—who helped Björling with the placement of his extreme upper register at the beginning of his career—said that he "got as much out of one single lesson as an average singer after six months instruction. . . . His musical taste, his phrasing, and feeling for rhythm reminded me of the violinist Jascha Heifetz's playing." One of the tenor's friends, Gösta Kjellertz, has spoken of his "incredible coloratura technique, fully comparable to the greatest instrumentalists", and further evidence of his vocal flexibility has been revealed by his wife Anna-Lisa (herself a singer) who recalls his vocalizing up to G above top C, and a performance in Stockholm during which he calmly terminated an aria in falsetto for a soprano who had a fish bone stuck in her throat.

On record I have not found examples of Björling's falsetto, and his florid singing does not go beyond a fluent "Il mio tesoro" and a brilliant cadenza at the end of "La donna è mobile." The highest note recorded is the brilliant top D flat that crowns one of his most joyful and exultant performances: "Ich hab' kein Geld" from *Der Bettelstudent* (sung in Swedish). Overall however the opinions quoted are fully confirmed by what we hear on disc.

Of all 20th century tenors, Björling is the one who possessed the most perfectly balanced combination of a voice of unmistakable beauty (sufficiently ample and wide-ranging to cope with a vast repertoire), exceptional musicality and technical assurance. If one judges tenors by these three criteria only Caruso and Pavarotti can be considered of comparable stature. The former however—in possession of an incomparably rich and suggestive timbre (in whose thrall Björling was to remain throughout his life)—lost in the last ten years of his career that ease of dynamic modulation which Björling maintained until his final concert with orchestra, recorded live a month before he died (it includes an unforgettable excerpt from *Lobengrin*; a role he never performed complete). Compared

to Pavarotti, Björling's musical instincts were less fallible, his command of the *mezza voce* and register break more assured (without those tight sounds that the Italian tenor sometimes produces).

At this point one might object that even Björling's voice production seems to lack spontaneity alongside that of Beniamino Gigli, who possessed a still more luxuriant timbre. No one would dream however (I hope) of comparing the musicality of Gigli with that of the 20th century's greatest instrumentalists.

This unique combination of qualities does not however automatically make Björling the greatest tenor of the century. As often happens with naturally gifted singers, his interpretative talent was not always brought fully and imaginatively into play. He did not like rehearsing, and both his singing and acting could seem at times simply "competent and businesslike" (to quote a review of a London recital in 1937, which could equally be applied to the *Bohème* duet filmed with Renata Tebaldi in the mid-1950's), while on other occasions—in operas such as *Manon Lescaut*—he left "his heart and his blood on the stage" (Regina Resnik).

His first operatic recordings made in 1930—"Ah!ève-toi, soleil!" and "Questa o quella"—reveal scholastic phrasing and an occasionally unfinished technique (understandable in a 19 year-old). But the timbre is unique in its silvery overtones, and he already possesses such *bel canto* requisites as evenness of tone throughout the range and a natural feeling for legato. It is one of those rare voices that seem to adorn even the tritest of melodies (such as Idabelle Firestone's songs in the famous TV programs now available on video); the sound blending bewitchingly with the accompanying instruments.

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If then we move on to his first operatic recordings in the original language (1936), we encounter a supremely confident performer, perhaps already aware of having few rivals on the world's stages. I do not believe in fact that any other tenor in that period could have achieved in "Celeste Aida" such a perfect combination of purity of line (the legato is impeccable, the breath spans long and the breathing imperceptible), translucent beauty of timbre and dynamic control, even though Björling does not attempt the *morendo* on the final high B flat (many years later he regretted not attempting it on the complete recording made with Jonel Perlea). His diction moreover is excellent, and his pronunciation decidedly good. Björling's highly musical ear enabled him in fact to reproduce Italian vowel sounds most convincingly, though consonants caused him occasional problems. The passing errors of pronunciation that can be heard in many of his recordings rarely disturb the listener (Bruno Bartoletti, who conducted him in *Trovatore*, *Tosca* and *Bohème* in Chicago in 1956–57 was struck by both the power and ring of the voice and by the "perfect pronunciation"), even though his use of words lacks the inner resonance that we can hear in the finest Latin tenors. In his first recording of "Che gelida manina" (Rodolfo was the role Björling performed most frequently, followed by Faust and Manrico) the errors of pronunciation are somewhat glaring, but they do not prevent the enjoyment of his highly musical timbre and phrasing that convey not only the enthusiasm of youth, but also the shyness and melancholy that often accompany that enthusiasm. In this sense Björling's approach is very different from the traditional Italian interpretation, but it is a difference that enriches the expressive potential of the role.

There is no doubt that compared to the polyglot Nicolai Gedda or to Lauritz Melchior (who studied at length in Germany), Björling had little direct knowledge of the cultures that most of his operatic repertoire derived from. After conducting him in Vienna in 1936, Victor De Sabata would have liked to take him to Italy, but Björling's contract with the Stockholm Opera made that impossible. He did however have an excellent Italian maestro in Tullio Voghera (an ex-assistant of Toscanini and accompanist of Caruso who had settled in Sweden), and in a certain sense his limited exposure to the Verismo style of singing then in vogue in Italy enabled him approach the earlier 19th century repertoire in a purer style that proved particularly telling in operas like *Il Trovatore*.

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Of this century's tenors, Björling is the one who has perhaps come closest to embodying the ideal qualities for a role such as Manrico, thanks to his exquisitely youthful timbre, his inspired

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phrasing and formidable ring in the upper register. These qualities are very much in evidence in the 1938 and 1939 studio recordings of "Ah si, ben mio" and "Di quella pira," but they emerge still more irresistably in a live recording of a performance conducted by Vittorio Gui at Covent Garden in 1939. A performance worth hearing in its entirety (the *cabaletta* and the final duet with Azucena are particularly memorable) that includes the most perfect interpretation of "Ah si, ben mio" ever preserved. Comparing this performance in fact with others by Caruso, Fernando De Lucia, Aureliano Pertile, Antonio Cortis, Helge Roswaenge, Franco Corelli, Carlo Bergonzi, Placido Domingo and Pavarotti—and also with Björling himself in the complete recording conducted by Cellini—one discovers that no other tenor has succeeded in rendering so poetically every detail of Verdi's score, both in the recitative and aria. This achievement was made possible by Gui's respect for the prescribed tempo, *Adagio* (many conductors transform it into an *Andante*), and by Björling's ability to sustain that tempo with extraordinary virtuosity. Only Bergonzi approaches the effect he makes in this aria, but his line is less liquid, the details less finished, the timbre less caressing

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In the same period (1937–39) Björling recorded a number of discs that have become touchstones in the history of operatic performance: "En fermant les yeux" (*Manon*), "Salut, demeure" (*Faust*), "Adelaide" (which reminds us of his intense activity as a *Lieder* singer) and "Ingemisco" from the Verdi *Requiem* (that Björling sang three times with Toscanini in the years 1939–40). They are four miracles of vocal beauty and expressive balance, in which the singer's sensibility appears profoundly attuned to the music performed.

It is interesting to compare his performance of another aria—"Cuius animam" from Rossini's *Stabat mater*—with that of Pavarotti. The Italian tenor's phrasing is more emphatic, the tone both indignant and expansive, while Björling is more intimate and melancholy, his top D flat less prolonged and sunny. There are also a number of oddly pronounced words here, as in "Cielo e mar" (where they are more conspicuous), but on the whole this performance of Enzo's aria makes almost all other recordings of the piece sound crude by comparison.

In the 1940s Björling continued to record popular arias from the Italian and French repertoires and added a number of duets with the soprano Hjördis Schymberg (prima donna at the Stockholm Opera) and with his wife Anna-Lisa (a lyric soprano). Vocally they are splendid, but interpretatively they seem more superficial than the 1930's recordings, with a conspicuous lack of nuance in the more lyrical arias: "Una furtiva lacrima," "Je crois entendre encore" and "È la solita storia del pastore." "Nessun dorma," on the other hand, is a triumph, and "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra" represents a moving homage to Caruso, whose recording inspired Björling. He sought in fact to imitate the phrasing and timbre of the Italian tenor (as he did when he recorded the *Otello* duet with Robert Merrill after listening repeatedly to the recording made by Caruso and Titta Ruffo). In the end however Björling wins over the listener even here with qualities that are entirely his own: an airy lyricism that contrasts with the warmer—but less elegant—sensuality of his model.

One notices often a difference between the 1940s studio performances—rather stiff in expression—and the live radio broadcasts of the same period. In the aircheck of *Roméo et Juliette* at the Metropolitan in 1947, "Ah! lève-toi, soleil!" is more varied in dynamics and spontaneous in rubato than in the 1945 recording. In "Di tu se fedele" (*Un ballo in maschera*) Björling is more high-spirited in New Orleans in 1950 than in the studio in 1944: he plays with the rhythm, adds the odd embellishment, and performs (the second time with brilliant success) the fearful leap from high A flat to low C. And in "Donna non vidi mai" (*Manon Lescaut*) the words are more alive and more passionately projected at the Met in 1949 than in the studio recording a year earlier. And it must be said that Björling betters his earlier performances also in the operatic recital conducted by Alberto Erede in 1957 (available on a Decca CD), where he sings splendidly, and in unusually idiomatic Italian, a number of arias recorded for His Master's Voice in the 1940s.

The Italian role which proved perhaps most congenial to Björling (among those recorded complete) was Des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut*. It was one of the few parts in which he achieved a total

identification with the character. Being reserved and in some respects emotionally repressed, Björling found emotional release in the extrovert passion of certain verismo characters (other examples are Turiddu and Canio). A sense of release that is all the more electrifying in that it is clearly the expression of someone who is used to controlling his emotions. He rarely fractures the musical line in the manner of Latin tenors, but that line itself is stretched almost to breaking point by pent-up emotion.

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A similar expressive abandon, though at a lower emotional temperature, can be heard in many of the Swedish songs included in the EMI anthology, some of which he had sung since his childhood. It is significant in fact that even in the 1930 recordings—two sentimental yet attractive pieces by Wilhelm Peterson-Berger—he reveals an interpretative assurance absent in the operatic recordings made at that time. Here and in the romantic Ballads by Söderman (1957–59), Björling's timbre seems to reflect ideally the peculiar luminosity of the northern landscapes evoked, and he spins out the tales with truly binding legato. In a love song that Hugo Alfvén composed especially for him—"Så tag mit hjerte" (So take my heart)—the 48 year-old Björling apostrophizes his beloved with the timid delicacy of an adolescent. While in patriotic songs such as "Sverige" (Sweden) and "Land, du välsignade" (Thou blessed land) his fervent phrasing and open-hearted, ringing tone never compromise the perfect finish of the vocal line. Still more fascinating is "Tonerna" (Music) by Carl Sjöberg, that speaks of music as a refuge from everyday sorrows. This was a message deeply felt by Björling himself and he sings the two verses with such spontaneity of expression that he seems to have access to the same source of inspiration as the composer himself (there is also an English language version with a piano accompaniment and a very different text).

Claude Levi-Strauss once wrote that "the invention of melody is the supreme mystery of mankind," and personally I feel that no tenor better than Björling enables us to understand the depth of that mystery. Oscar Wilde on the other hand wrote that "real beauty ends where an intellectual expression begins." He was referring to physical beauty, but the phrase is nonetheless applicable to the singing of this tenor, who had nothing particularly cerebral about him (if he had not been a singer he would have liked to be a fisherman), but who achieved in his moments of highest inspiration that limpid fusion of form and feeling that other more sophisticated performers have sought in vain. ■

Stephen Hastings is an English music critic who has been living in Italy since 1978. He has been Opera News' correspondent from Milan for the last decade and recently became Editor of the Italian magazine Musica. This article was first published in that magazine in the winter of 1998.

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