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Singing from the Heart

Kissed by the gods: A remembrance of the tenor Jussi Björling

By Jürgen Kesting

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Ever more frequently the work of record companies results in damage to the legacy of their artists. A current example is a so-called "Ultimate Collection" published by RCA/BMG in the "Artists of the Century" series, marking the death forty years ago (on September 9, 1960) of Swedish tenor Jussi Björling at the age of 49.

The word "edition" is inappropriate for this thoughtless and indiscriminately cobbled-together collection, in which some selections are incorrectly dated and others not dated at all; and moreover the recordings themselves are often, technically speaking, grotesquely distorted. They distort and disfigure the image of one of the most brilliant tenors of the twentieth century whom RCA can thank for ten complete opera performances, classics all. *Il Trovatore*, *Manon Lescaut* and *Aida* are vocally unequalled; *Cavalleria*, *Pagliacci* and *Turandot* are outstanding.

Only through naive ignorance can the project degenerate, as it does here, into a careless assemblage of arias by Verdi, Puccini, Mascagni, Gounod, Borodin, Giordano, Flotow, Donizetti and Tchaikovsky—sometimes single titles, sometimes scraps cut unclean out of complete recordings, not organized in any way by composer or stylistic considerations. But any singer intends his voice [in a given selection] to express [aspects of] a characterization, for instance the age and emotional state of his subject.

And then mistake upon mistake! The November 30, 1950 recording of the duet from *Don Carlo* is dated June 3, 1951. The duets from *Pearlfishers* and *Otello* recorded on that day are ascribed to November 30 of the previous year. The selections from *La Forza del Destino* and *La Bohème*, recorded in 1951, are postdated somehow to November 30, 1957. The correct dates can be found not only in the complete *Phonography* (by Harald Henrysson), but also in earlier RCA/BMG long-playing records. Instead of keeping the duet recordings together as documentation of star vocalism, they are separated by recordings of arias and duets made four or five, or even nine years later. And because of digital re-mastering, the recordings are so hard and shrill that even Björling's richly-overtone voice stings the ears.

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In any case, it's comforting that the legacy of the singer has in the last few years spread far and wide, even though that hasn't happened in a systematic way. From EMI, a four-CD set appeared with opera and operetta arias, lieder and songs, that Björling recorded between 1930 and 1950. Unfortunately, the (six) sides are missing which the eighteen-year old made in September (and December) 1929, with his still purely lyric but already perfectly formed voice. The lad's singing of "For you alone" perfectly voices the yearning of a young lover, and brings tears to one's eyes.

Bluebell has brought out more than a dozen CDs with excerpts from (and out of) opera performances, radio broadcasts, concerts and diverse rarities, some with alternative takes. A portion of these recordings is from Björling's regular guest appearances in Sweden. These live recordings directly demonstrate with what generous dedication Björling sang to his audiences. But most important is the publishing of [recordings by] Arturo Toscanini Society, Myto, Legato Classics, and on the same level "The Radio Years" excerpts from Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, *Ballo in Maschera*, *Don Carlo* and *Requiem*, as well as Gounod's *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*.

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At the performance of *Roméo et Juliette* at the Met on February 1, 1947, the tenor, along with the magical Brazilian soprano Bidú Sayão, must have been kissed by the gods. He sings the passionate

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cavatina ("Ah, lève-toi, soleil") of the inwardly burning Roméo with masterful emphases; every phrase spun out in a *legato* stream and with effortless concentration of tone at the two ascending lines to a high "B" at "parais." Similarly magical is the sudden pianissimo at the phrase "qui vient caresser . . . sa joue"—the soft end of the phrase maintaining the same healthy resonance.

The appeal of the shining *forte* notes lies not in their loudness, but in their intensity. Tender, glowing love lies in the tone of his voice: When he sings "Nuit divine" with his partner in the tomb scene ("Salut! Tombeau") it is saturated with agonizing despair.

It is said that Björling was a lethargic performer. But for him who really listens carefully, there appears through the "eyes of the ears" a passionate human being. That was stressed by his sometime recording partner Victoria de los Angeles. At the death of Mercutio, for example, Roméo takes on a voice of blazing, raging anger at Tybalt. Banned from Verona, he crowns the finale of the act with a high C of sheer unimaginable brilliance. The listener is perceptibly shaken by this passionate *cri du coeur*.

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The voice of the young tenor stood out because it had an unusual luminous shining strength at the top, a silvery timbre of choice quality, richly colored and often shaded with melancholy. If ever any tenor was spared a vocal crisis, it was Björling, even if in some of his recordings in his fiftieth year—namely *Trovatore* and *Tosca*—he sounds strained, rougher and grainier, sometimes also sharp, singing a phrase too high and allowing single held notes to tear off, instead of letting them pulsate and end without a perceptible thrust of air. The volume [of the voice] was not great, but he didn't have the slightest trouble projecting into the last rows of the Met.

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The proportions of the registers was ideal: a masculine ring in the lower register, a sonorous vibrato in the middle range, an effortless glide into the so-called *passaggio* and above that a secure focused high register up to D-flat, which can be heard in both the tenor solo "Cujus animam" from Rossini's *Stabat Mater* and the operetta piece "Ich hab' kein Geld, bin vogelfrei" from Millöcker's *Bettelstudent*. The measurements of Swedish sound engineer Johann Sundberg demonstrate the exceptional concentration of energy in the singer's high range, due to the ideally produced voice at approximately 3500 Hertz. Persons who heard him report that Björling's sound output was of such intensity, that it felt like an electric shock.

Björling never attempted to imitate the Caruso bright-baritone ring as heard in others such as Beniamino Gigli (or later del Monaco and Domingo)—except for one single recording, in which he undertook a demonstration of this manner [of singing] in Tosti's "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra." And unlike Gigli, Aureliano Pertile or Richard Tucker, he didn't allow himself to be infected with veristic mannerisms. Nor did one experience that he imitated emotions as gushed-forth buckets of tears or with antiquated heroic screaming. He was a classicist singer, but no belcantist. He didn't sing ornate music, and if he did, [it was] without ornamentation (excepting perhaps Don Ottavio's "Il mio tesoro" or Nemorino's "Una furtiva").

The pianist Ivor Newton recounted in his memoirs "At the Piano" that Björling never had to warm up before concerts. Due to the training he got from his father as a boy in preparation for the professional "Björling Quartet" (there are several recordings from 1920), he was spared technical problems with his voice for the rest of his life. After relatively short studies with baritone John Forsell, he was allowed on July 21, 1930, to sing in the Stockholm Opera the small role of the Lamplighter in *Manon Lescaut*. His major debut was on August 20, as Don Ottavio. After 5 years of study, during which, among others, he sang Arnoldo (*William Tell*), Des Grieux (*Manon Lescaut*) [sic], Erik, Almaviva (Rossini's *Barber of Seville*), the Duke in *Rigoletto*, Wilhelm Meister (*Mignon*), Alfredo (*Traviata*), Vladimir (*Prince Igor*), Cavaradossi, Tamino, Faust, Belmonte, Florestan, Turiddu, Manrico, Faust (Berlioz), Rodolfo, Tonio (*Daughter of the Regiment*), he came to the Vienna Staatsoper. Under Victor de Sabata, he debuted as Radamès and sang, in Swedish, in an ensemble that sang in Italian. His repertoire included more than 50 roles, plus Masses and 400–500 songs. His musical memory was extraordinary, and once he had studied the music, he remembered it securely and could frequently perform it without rehearsal.

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In 1937, he made his debut in Chicago as the Duke of Mantua, 1938 at the Met as Rodolfo, 1939 in Covent Garden as Manrico—there is a recording of the performance conducted by Vittorio Gui. He sings the *stretta* ["Die quella pira"] in C major and crowns it with a fullthroated high C that, with a good wind, one must have been able to hear in Stockholm. But far more important and spell-binding is the lyrical flow of his singing in the duets and the *cantabile* ["Mal reggendo"], and the dynamic flexibility in the aria "Ah si" with a fine trill at "para".

Already in 1929, before his debut, he had made recordings—until 1936 in Swedish, and with a splendid voice and with the limitations of youth. His first Italian recordings, his diction not yet idiomatic, were a sensation—among the 46 titles which, until 1950, were made for HMV, one finds pearls: "Celeste Aida," "Cielo e mar," "O Paradiso," "Salut demeure," Manrico's arias, "Nessun dorma" (with climactic brilliance), "Ah! Lève-toi, soleil" and Riccardo's "Di tu se fedele" (sung with closely-controlled verve).

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He was supposed to record Riccardo in 1960 under Georg Solti. What blighted the project—whether problems and unreliability due to the severe alcoholism and heart disease of the singer, or the rigidity of the conductor—one can scarcely determine. Anyway, the 29-year old Björling, in his arguably best Verdi role, can be heard live: excerpts from the Met under Ettore Panizza, Toscanini's right hand. His partner was Zinka Milanov, who claimed she had the most beautiful voice in the world, and shows here that she didn't have the slightest reason to need faint-hearted modesty. Björling sings his role with incomparable verve, brilliance, elegance, musicality, spontaneity — paradoxically without Riccardo's aria from the last act "Ma se m'è forza perderti." [The question is] whether the singer wanted to spare himself—the part is the longest of all Verdi tenor roles (except the St. Petersburg version of *Forza*)—and the aria lies in the most uncomfortable *tessitura*. In any case, in the portrait gallery of tenor heroes of Italian and French opera, Björling's Roméo and Riccardo are counted among the masterpieces.

Translated by Karl and Toby Hekler, with help on one especially difficult sentence from Yoël Arbeitman and Harald Henrysson. Thanks also are due to Bea Bobotek, Armin Diedrich and Max Hekler for their assistance.

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Skansen Concerts—and the Last One

By Gösta Berg

Jussi Björling sang for the first time at Skansen on the 15th September 1935¹. I retain vivid memories of the deep impression he made even then on me and on the large audience.

And he returned. Actually, it became a tradition that he came to us at least once each year. In all, he appeared here fifty-three times, sometimes with the Royal Orchestra, but mostly in solo recital, including three times with his wife Anna-Lisa. The public attendance was usually overwhelming, and there were some who arrived as early as 10 o'clock in the morning in order to secure a place.

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When one heard Jussi sing one was struck by the ease with which the tones seemed to stream from his throat—[the composer and conductor] Adolf Wiklund once compared them with rolling peas.

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