

Spring, 2001

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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.*

## Excerpts from En Minnesbok (Bertil Hagman, Editor)

*Translations by Gail Campaign (Part 8).*

### Skansen Concerts—and the Last One

*By Gösta Berg*

Jussi Björling sang for the first time at Skansen on the 15th September 1935<sup>1</sup>. 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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## Excerpts from En Minnesbok

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But one soon discovered that his whole nature was characterised by conscientiousness and an obvious anxiety about not always being able to give his best on every single occasion. He never let us down either; all the agreed-upon concerts went ahead as planned.

With the passage of the years Jussi undeniably acquired a certain magnificence of demeanour, which gave a sense of festivity and monumentality to these great occasions. When the broad-shouldered, stocky figure allowed his voice to soar out over Solliden and rise towards the dusky blue sky on a beautiful summer evening, there was not a soul who was not drawn into the intense atmosphere.

For the general public, Jussi Björling acquired the aura of a national hero—understandably enough, when one thinks of his life-story. He came from modest beginnings but won an international reputation at a young age. The little boy who had once sung, together with his brothers, at mission-hall festivals and Good Templar meetings in his native district—once in front of the house in the village of Ullvi in Leksand where I now spend a few weeks every summer—came eventually to appear before the notables of this world in the most splendid settings.

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Jussi Björling made a great contribution to retaining and further enhancing the standing of Skansen as Stockholm's, and Sweden's, foremost place for entertainment and festivities, the reputation which Artur Hazelius hoped Skansen would acquire. It was therefore fitting that it was up there, on Solliden's stage, that he ended his career and on one last occasion, on the 20th August 1960, sang for an admiring and enthusiastic audience.

When one met Jussi more privately, one took away a deep impression of an unassuming and good-hearted man. But to get closer to him was not to be thought of. Behind his calm and for the most part apparently secure manner, there must have lain a sensitive, even over-sensitive temperament, well concealed from the view of outsiders. What was so deeply hidden fed instead into his singing, singing which took an irresistible hold on the hearts of his fellow man.

*Gösta Berg (1903–1993) was an ethnologist who was director of "Nordiska Museet och Skansen" between 1956 and 1963. Nordiska Museet is a large folklore museum which had been jointly administered with Skansen; today they are separate units.*

<sup>1</sup> Gösta Berg's memory is incorrect here —Björling's first recital at Skansen actually took place on the 10th September 1933. ■

## The People's Singer

By Erik Järnklev

When Jussi Björling's name could be announced for a concert in a *folkpark*\* it was a great day, and his name would be advertised in the largest type the printer could find.

Rapturous acclaim greeted him everywhere; the storm of applause at the end of a concert was endless and so affectionate that our Jussi, though he had received so many plaudits the world over, often wiped tears of happiness from his eyes. He didn't stint on encores either.

Engaging Jussi for a concert was not the easiest of tasks. His passion for Siarö and fishing caused us many worries. One episode in particular comes to mind. We had sent him a contract for an appearance in Bohuslän. We waited and waited, but heard nothing. The staff at Konsertbolaget [Jussi Björling's Swedish agent] did all they could, and when I telephoned Siarö myself it was Mrs Björling who had to pass on Jussi's reply: "The fish are biting so well at present I just can't put down the fishing-rod". That the fish were costing him many thousands of kronor obviously didn't concern him. It was difficult to drag him away from his family and the archipelago.

One of his last performances was in a *folkpark* in Rättvik on American Independence Day on the 4th July 1960.