

Excerpts from En Minnesbok

(cont. from p. 21)

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.

¹ 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.

The great singer became, in a *folkpark*, “the people’s singer” who clearly had a place in everyone’s heart. Long shall we miss him; always we will remember him.

* People’s amusement park

Erik Järnklev (1907–1985) worked for the Folkparkernas Centralorganisation (The Central Organization of Swedish People’s Parks) during 1938–1972 as artist agent, artist manager, production manager and vice-president. ■

Songs and Arias at Gröna Lund

By Åke Sundborg

My first contact with Jussi Björling took place some time in the early 1930s and had nothing whatever to do with any plans for his being engaged for performances at Gröna Lund—he was considered to be just a novice at that time, and was thought to have a long way to go before he reached world star status. However, he was an almost daily visitor to Gröna Lund, where he let tenor cries be heard as the roller coaster made its downhill plunge, behaved like an angel of destruction in the “porcelain crusher”, tried his chances in the “love thermometer”, and he was to be found, without fail, in the first row of the audience when the 9 o’clock performance on the large stage was about to begin. The reason for this soon came to light and led eventually to the afore-mentioned contact.

Three beautiful young female singing students from the Conservatory had formed a group, which they called “The Viennese Trio”. Who helped them with the arrangements and repertoire I don’t know, but the result was very enjoyable and successful—a bit of Grinzing, a little Kreisler, some Strauss and also some more modern operetta composers—and their voices were young and fresh. The trio was engaged at that time at Gröna Lund, and one of the young ladies was a certain Anna-Lisa Berg, who had been Stockholm’s Lucia the previous year¹—so perhaps there is no need for any further explanation for Jussi’s interest in The Viennese Trio.

Times change and we with them, as the saying goes, and within the world of the amusement park in particular, remarkable things have happened. When Gröna Lund was busy with preparations for the celebration of its 50th anniversary, which was to occur in 1933, it was decided that a reconstruction of an old-world fun fair with a flea-circus, bearded lady and other “rarities” should be included as a draw-card, but we were then bitterly disappointed to discover that a bearded lady could no longer be found anywhere in the whole of Europe. And the greatest flea-circus expert of all time, the portly Frode Jensen of Dyrchavsbakken [an open-air theatre in Denmark], declared sorrowfully, with a tremor in his voice, that better hygiene and increased imports of vacuum-cleaners etc. had meant that “there’s not a single flea left in the whole of Denmark, and what the devil is one supposed to do then?” What indeed! Well, in the end, we did our rebuilding, and then we had another greater novelty to offer the public, namely the new Tyrolean restaurant, which right from the beginning was a great attraction.

The demands of new times must be met. Considerable expansion had taken place over the previous few years—the area had been increased six-fold and the number of visitors had grown by a factor of ten. During five seasons we had succeeded in offering Stockholmers a series of world-class artists on the large new stage, but we had a particular desire to celebrate our jubilee by also using the new stage for concerts. Of course, in that case we wanted to present true international stars. Our aim for the jubilee season was nothing less than a performance by the most popular Metropolitan Opera tenor of the day, Richard Crooks, who was very well-known in our country through his gramophone records. Unfortunately, it turned out that Crooks was not free to come to Sweden in 1933, nor was he available for 1934 (but he finally came in 1935!). Our concert plans had to be shelved for 1933, and things looked grim for 1934 too.

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