

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.

cont. on p. 24

Excerpts from En Minnesbok

(cont. from p. 23)

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But then a great attraction landed on our doorstep, so to speak, and this could be considered to be a representative prelude to what was to come—it was no less than a highly qualified ensemble of singers from La Scala, Milan. A daughter of a shipowner from Bergen in Norway had pursued singing studies in Italy, mostly as a hobby, and had married the La Scala baritone, Cesare Formichi. The couple was spending the summer of 1934 with the bride's parents in Norway and had invited a number of friends and colleagues to accompany them there. Among the guests were the tenor Luigi Montesanti, the elegant baritone Fernando Autori and two female international stars, Toti dal Monte and Rosetta Pampanini. Helmer Enwall of Konsertbolaget [Swedish Concert Agency] had contacted them, and so a performance at Gröna Lund was quickly arranged. The result was a concert in July that attracted much attention and praise. The beginning of the season was so successful that one scarcely could have hoped for better.

But the visit of the Italians was not all—at the same time a famous mixed Rumanian choir, Cantareia Romaniei, with 70 members, also turned up within our reach, and the choir gave a concert in August. We started to hope for some third big musical event to provide a fitting finale to Gröna Lund's first concert season.

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And then it came—something totally unexpected! The relatively unknown, but very promising young tenor in Stockholm, Jussi Björling, had been engaged for a concert in the fine concert hall at Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens, and his performance there was an overwhelming success which sent the Copenhagen public quite wild with enthusiasm and immediately resulted in new contracts. One of these was with Gröna Lund, which in this way came to conclude its first concert season with Jussi Björling, who thereby began his twenty-seven year association with Gröna Lund. Jussi's first concert took place on the 29th August, and this time it was Anna-Lisa who was to be found in the first row of the audience in front of the large stage.

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The extensive publicity the young singer had received drew an enormous audience to the concert, despite the fact that the weather was by no means favourable—it was drizzling in fact—"but God how he sang", wrote one reviewer in a Stockholm newspaper, and he went on to say: "Without doubt Jussi Björling is the first Swedish tenor who has succeeded in delivering the full glory of the Italian school. He brought the audience to a state of ecstasy." At this very first concert in Stockholm by the then twenty-three-year-old Jussi, the audience heard arias from *L'Africaine*, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La Bobème*, among other items. Since that time, Gröna Lund's audience has had the opportunity to follow one of the world's most remarkable singing careers, from its beginning and through the whole of its meteoric journey to the top.

Jussi often used to say that he felt "at home" to a very special degree at Gröna Lund. He always had an audience there whose appreciation and enthusiasm were unmistakable, and he also expressed on many occasions his pleasure and gratitude at the public's behaviour—"You would perhaps expect," he said, "to have a more disruptive and rowdy audience at an amusement park, but here it's so quiet when you are about to begin singing that you could hear a pin drop!"

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There were many ties which bound him to Gröna Lund—in particular he enjoyed reminding people that his wife, Anna-Lisa, had sung on that stage before he had. The experience of being able to give a concert there with his wife was also an especially memorable and remarkable one, and this took place on the 3rd August 1950. Mrs. Björling had continued with her voice-training, and it was a great occasion when she appeared alongside her husband and sang duets with him from *Roméo et Juliette* as well as the Waltz Song from the same opera. As an encore they performed the duet from the end of the first act of *La Bohème*. Dagens Nyheter [a Swedish newspaper] declared "a truly amazing success", while Svenska Dagbladet wrote that "she sang with real feeling".

In fact, Anna-Lisa could have had a singing career—she later gave a number of performances in America—but, mindful of her duties as a wife and mother, she did not pursue that course.

I should also mention that a film recording exists of Jussi performing at Gröna Lund.

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Yes, during the course of twenty-seven years a great deal can happen. He gave his last concert at Gröna Lund on the 28th July 1960, and he was also engaged for a further performance on the 4th September, but continuous rain prevented the concert from taking place. No one could then have imagined that after only a few days he would be gone. . . .

¹ The celebration of St Lucia's day on the 13th December is an important part of midwinter festivities in Sweden. All over the country, local communities select a girl to be Lucia, "The Queen of the Light". In the 1920s a Swedish newspaper introduced an annual competition to choose Stockholm's Lucia.

Åke Sundborg, born 1878, was originally a journalist, active with several Stockholm newspapers, but became publicity manager for Gröna Lunds Tivoli AB (Gröna Lund) in 1924 and remained in that post until 1958 (!).

Jussi Björling and the Radio

By Bo Teddy Ladberg

It is self-evident that Jussi Björling's prospects of reaching a position of great popularity as a radio artist were quite special indeed. A singer whose greatest assets were a voice of incomparable beauty and an innate feeling for a musical phrase must naturally be predisposed to success in precisely this medium. But that his position in this respect became so dominating, indeed unique, is truly something remarkable and beyond further analysis.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves! Let us begin by taking a look at the radio archives and assembling some memories from the old days in radio.

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Such a level-headed and sceptical individual as the former head of music at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation, Natanael Broman, can today attest to what an experience it was to hear that beautiful voice sound forth in "O sole mio" at the obligatory audition in the original studio in Malmskillnadsgatan, and we can find documentary proof that the then seventeen-year-old totally unknown *dalmas* [male inhabitant of Dalarna] really made an impression by drawing out a pay-card from 1928 and a daily programme for the 9th March 1928. From these it can be seen that Jussi Björling sang in a variety programme which included such greats as Sven-Olof Sandberg and the pianist Wiatcheslaw Witkowski. A third participant in this historic broadcast was an artist who was evidently popular at the time—"C. Vitalis, xylophone". Jussi's fee for this debut was thirty *kronor*.

The next entry on this pay-card from the Swedish Radio archives is for the 20th July in the same year, when Jussi Björling once more collected thirty *kronor* for "singing with the Radio Orchestra", but this entry is something of a mystery: in the daily programme and studio report there is, in fact, no mention of his participation. However, as a curiosity it can be mentioned that Ruth Althén performed, on that same evening, one of the songs which Jussi would later include in his repertoire, namely Alfvén's "Skogen sover". That evening's radio broadcast, by the way, was characterised by the presenter on duty, Bo Willner, with the routine comments: "no line-faults" and "minor interference on account of lightning". Furthermore, a well-known professor and lecturer decided not to turn up at all and, as a result, "the lecture was cancelled".

After this there is a gap of two years in the story of Jussi Björling and the radio and we jump forward to 1930 (the year of his debut at the Royal Opera) when he sang for an entertainment programme on the 3rd April for a fee of seventy-five *kronor*. The programme is interesting and already includes some of the pieces which were to accompany him over and over throughout his concert career: he sang "Land, du Välsignade" and arias from *Rigoletto* and *La fanciulla del West*. In the same year came a performance of a completely different type, which instantly demonstrates Jussi

cont. on p. 26