

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. . . .

<sup>1</sup> 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

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Björling's position in Swedish musical life of the time. On Christmas day itself (four months after his debut at the Opera) the nineteen-year-old (!) singer performed as the tenor soloist in Handel's *Messiah* alongside such well-known artists as Joel Berglund, Iwa Aulin-Voghera and Greta Torpadie-Bratt, and those who are aware of the care with which the participants for such occasions are traditionally chosen will immediately understand that he must have been, even then, a considerable success in front of the microphone.

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In 1934 he was heard for the first time in opera roles on the radio, naturally in the form of transmissions from the Royal Opera. On the 15th January he appeared in a small role in Richard Strauss's *Arabella*, and on Monday the 29th January in the same year the third act of Atterberg's *Fanal* was broadcast between 10 o'clock and 10:45 with, as it states in the programme guide, "Helga Görlin and Jussi Björling in the principal roles." The 1st November 1936 is a notable day in Jussi Björling's radio career, for on that day he appeared no less than two times in exacting assignments - in the evening he sang Manrico in *Il trovatore* in a broadcast from the Opera, but earlier that day he had sung Söderman's "Trollsjön" [The Enchanted Lake] and Sjöberg's "Tonerna" [Music] for a broadcast which was transmitted in part to the NBC in New York, and the hard-to-please New York press immediately acclaimed "a new international tenor with a wonderful voice". Is it going too far to imagine that this broadcast paved the way for Jussi Björling's first appearances in the U.S.A. at the Chicago and San Francisco Opera Houses the following year and his subsequent Metropolitan Opera career?

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A characteristic feature of the history of Jussi Björling's radio work, and an aspect which immediately reveals his unique position as a radio artist, is the role he played in anniversary programmes and important radio presentations for special celebratory occasions. As early as 1937—he was then twenty-six years old—it was taken for granted that he should perform in "A Parade for the Million" on the 8th April. This was a programme marking the sale of the one millionth radio licence, and Jussi Björling, who was the representative of the muse of "classical" singing, was in the company of great radio personalities such as Anders de Wahl, Ludde Gentzel, Karin Juel, Thor Modéen, Sven-Olof Sandberg, The Björk Family, Efraim Alexander and the trio "Sov i ro" [Sleep in Peace]. It was the same when the number of licences reached one and a half million in 1941. When "Greetings to America" were to be sent in 1937, it was natural that he would take part. When it was a matter of working on listeners' emotions in order to raise money for the victims of the Ulven disaster in 1943, he was called upon to sing for the Radio Newsreel, a unique occurrence. [The Swedish submarine *Ulven* was blown up by a German mine on 15th April 1943 whilst on a training exercise within Swedish territorial waters on the Bohuslän coast, with the loss of 33 lives.] When the then Broadcasting Service celebrated its 20th anniversary in 1945, naturally Jussi Björling sang; likewise at the drawing of lots for the World Football Championship in 1958, and I have lost count of the number of times his voice was heard on radio broadcasts for Swedish Flag Day.

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That a "classical" singer should reach a position of favour with the general listener which placed him on a par with, or even in front of, the most popular light entertainment artists must be something which is unique, not only in the Swedish context, but internationally as well. Of course Jussi Björling's repertoire included many popular numbers which went directly to people's hearts, but he still gained his triumphs with the general public with such features as operatic voice production and a serious, artistic interpretation of the musical material, even when this was of a light nature, and no other Swedish *Hovsångare* [Royal Court Singer, a title awarded by the King - JB received this title in 1944] or opera singer is even in the competition when it comes to popularity with listeners. A statistical proof of this came about in 1943-4, when the radio magazine *Röster i Radio* [Radio Voices] organized a poll to determine the most popular voice (all categories) on Swedish radio. The victor in this contest, ahead of Edvard Persson, Sven Jerring and Sigurd Wallén, was none other than Jussi Björling, and even if one naturally can't attach to such a limited test too firm a scientific significance, it is still strongly indicative

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of Jussi Björling's standing as a radio artist. It is easy to imagine what an artist with this unique popularity has meant in terms of the musical education of the general listener, and if there is anyone who has made the musically uneducated public acquainted with concepts such as "aria", "opera" and "recital" then that person is Jussi Björling.

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Swedish Radio's archive of its own recordings is a valuable source for studies of Jussi Björling. There exist two sets of acetates from as early as 1934, namely the previously-mentioned transmissions from the Royal Opera of *Arabella* and *Fanal*. Both are fragmentary (only a few discs have been preserved), and even with eager straining of one's ears, it is difficult to detect Jussi's voice in *Arabella*. (His role in that opera was, of course, a rather minor one.) In *Fanal*, however, the characteristic voice cuts through the murky sound like a welder's flame, hot and bright. A recording from 1936 of Viktor Hruby's potpourri of operetta melodies, *From Strauss to Lehár*, with Inez Köhler, Jussi Björling and Gösta Kjellertz, is badly affected by the ravages of time, but with some effort it is possible to hear that Jussi "gave her a kiss, but only on the shoulder." [One excerpt is from Millöcker's *Der Bettelstudent*: "Ach, er hat sie ja nur auf die Schulter geküsst."]

A unique recording from a premiere performance in 1942 provides, on paper at least, the most enticing prospects, for in this Jussi sings something very different from his usual repertoire, namely Ture Rangström's three burlesque ballads to poems by Frans G. Bengtsson: "En ballad om Lameks söner" [A Ballad about Lamech's sons], "En ballad om narren och döden" [A Ballad about the Jester and Death] and "En ballad om god sömn" [A Ballad about Good Sleep]! Unfortunately, the promise of the printed programme is not fulfilled in the experience of encountering the discs. After the announcer has solemnly proclaimed "that [the songs] are here being presented for the first time", a roar of surface noise starts up which is beyond belief. A combination of unfortunate circumstances—wartime acetate, a technical mishap with the disc-cutting machine and an obviously too frequent replaying of the fragile discs—make these recordings of historic interest only. They show, nevertheless, that the established international tenor had, at this time, an interest in and a desire to learn completely new and, for his repertoire, unusual material.

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A number of archival recordings of great interest are, however, of quite excellent technical quality. There exists, for instance, a recording of Rodolfo's aria from the afore-mentioned 1937 radio licence programme which can be instructively set against a later recording from the similar programme in 1941. In the first recording the aria is sung in Swedish; in the second, in Italian. Between the two performances Jussi's big breakthrough at the Metropolitan had taken place. With regard to intensity and temperament, the differences between the two are not appreciable. On the other hand, in the later recording one can observe an obvious addition of refined Italian sweetness and a well-judged use of a sigh *à la* Gigli, which clearly shows that Jussi had, during the intervening period, acquired international artistic techniques. His "Flower Song" from *Carmen* from the same occasion (1941) displays masterly finesse with fine control of the rise in intensity, demonstrating what a conscious artist he was. The most gripping testimony from this time, however, is the complete first act of a 1940 *La bohème* with Hjärdis Schymberg, which is of sufficient technical quality for re-broadcast. In this performance Jussi radiates a brilliance which is quite incomparable; his intensity of feeling, the handling of the voice, his youthful pathos, his self-forgetting passion in musical declarations of love—this is truly a young and ardent lover on the opera stage, so much so that it is difficult to listen to this recording without shedding tears. As far as living intensity goes, it makes a much stronger impression than the recordings which Jussi, as an international star, later made in the technical perfection of the recording studio.

Among other recordings of Jussi preserved in Swedish Radio's archives are a technically rather unsatisfactory first act of *Aida* from 1940, a complete *Roméo et Juliette* from the same year (unfortunately rather dry-sounding and only partially playable), *Pagliacci* and *Cavalleria rusticana* from 1954, *Il trovatore* from 1960 (his last performance at the Royal Opera) and, above all, *Manon Lescaut* on the 1st November 1959, a performance at which he was truly at the absolute top of his form. Also

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to be found in the archives is a recording of Lohengrin's narration made in 1952. This, and one of the same aria from his last radio concert on the 5th August 1960 are, as far as is known, the only Wagner recordings he has left. [Two further recordings of Lohengrin's narration (from 1953 and 1954) exist. See "A Jussi Björling Phonography," 2nd ed., by Harald Henrysson (Swedish Music History Archive, Stockholm, 1993).]

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The opinions of radio personnel, both technicians and programme producers, about Jussi Björling are unanimous—an artist totally without pretensions. If ever the old cliché "the same unaffected chap" was appropriate, then it was in so Jussi's case. He never threw his weight around or made himself important during his visits to the radio studio (which, unfortunately, became all too rare as the years passed), even if he was not really one for superficial fraternisation—despite his friendliness and openness he always maintained a certain distance which prohibited him from ever playing the clown in order to win favour with those around him. There are two things in particular which the radio staff remember well and were grateful for: firstly, that he had always "done his homework" and, secondly, that he was always ready and willing to comply with the technicians' demands. There is nothing that can irritate a recording technician more than a famous singer who "marks" the music in a rehearsal voice during a microphone test. The instruments on the control panel and the microphone diaphragms must be adjusted before a broadcast, and Jussi never had any objection to risking his precious vocal chords when a technician asked him at a rehearsal for a demonstration "at full throttle". During the early years, at least, he was extremely keen to listen back to his recordings with a severely critical ear, but with the rise of his international reputation and progress in microphone technology, his interest in wasting valuable time on rehearsals naturally decreased.

The only time he had anything that could be likened to a personal outburst of temperament was at the important radio transmission to the U.S.A. in 1936 when he had, as usual, saved his high A flat for the second verse of Sjöberg's "Tonerna". This was in radio's infancy (Yngve Hugo is said to have finished his introductory greeting in English to the American listeners by saying in Swedish, within the hearing of the wide-eyed radio audience: "Will I do it again?"), and a lack of time meant that it was precisely this second verse with the high A flat that was completely cut from the broadcast. When one thinks of what this transmission must have meant for a twenty-five-year-old singer who was hoping, with all the impatience of youth, for an international career, this "outburst" seems completely understandable. Obviously the A flat was not needed, as is clear from what has earlier been related.

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May I be allowed to conclude this brief look at the story of Jussi Björling and the radio with a personal memory. The occasions on which Jussi Björling spoke on radio were generally brief and conventional. Usually they consisted of short topical interviews at his celebrated homecomings after his triumphs abroad. As a result, the present writer became, rather early on, intensely desirous of being able to conduct a detailed radio interview with Jussi Björling, one in which the radio audience would finally be able to meet its idol other than in his usual role as a singer. With this aim in mind I began to telephone him quite early on. (An example of the lavish generosity with which Jussi gave of himself is the fact that he never bothered to have an unlisted telephone number as many considerably lesser personages than he love to do.) As a rule I came up against a brick wall—his wife, Anna-Lisa. She always promised to deliver my request, but it never went any further. Now it is time for an aside. Jussi never rebuffed journalists, and any number of my colleagues from the press visited Siarö with good results. But a radio interview is something completely different from a newspaper interview. In front of the microphone one's personality is revealed in an entirely different manner than it is before a newspaper journalist with a notebook, and therefore a radio journalist can never make the same demands as those made by a colleague from the press. This fact is especially obvious with musicians, whose task it is to express themselves in music rather than words. Jussi was no exception. He could be in high-spirits and hospitable in the best Swedish style with visiting newspaper journalists, but he had the singer's and musician's respect and inhibitions towards the naked spoken word.

Therefore I telephoned in vain many times. During a break in a concert in Stockholm's Concert Hall in summer 1958 I cheekily took the opportunity to put forward my request personally, but with negative results. "Let me finish singing this first", Jussi said in undisguised *dalmål* [the Swedish dialect spoken in Dalarna] and I shame-facedly withdrew. The broadcast of *Manon Lescaut* in 1959 gave me the chance to renew my efforts, and after having taken at least three deep breaths, I telephoned. To my surprise, he answered the phone himself. To my further surprise, he agreed on the spot to a radio interview of twenty minutes duration to be broadcast during an interval of *Manon Lescaut*—it would be by far the most extensive radio interview with the world-famous star Jussi Björling—and while my heart was somersaulting with joy over my good luck, we reached an agreement on a recording time at his home in Karlavägen. An announcement about the interview was quickly sent off to the press. At the appointed time, and with my heart pounding, I and my technical colleague with his microphone in hand knocked on the door, well knowing that radio recordings of this sort could result in a total fiasco. He opened the door himself.

I only needed to take one look at his face to see immediately that he was going to go back on our agreement. This was no prima donna standing before me—it was an ordinary man with microphone anxiety. He wanted to cancel the interview. I said that that was impossible as it had already been announced in the newspapers. He then wanted to put it off until the following day. I tried to make light of the whole thing, saying that it really wasn't anything to worry about and that if something went wrong we could always do it again, and so on. He searched for arguments and excuses—had he been a prima donna he would have told us to go to hell and said that he really didn't need to curry favour with us. His wife, the eternal mediator, stepped in, saying that it would be just as well if it were all done immediately. He became a little irritated and said that he wanted to do it the next day. Wouldn't it be best, I suggested, if we brought a microphone cord from the recording van through the window now so that it would be all set up for later on. He immediately seized upon the idea of the window having to be open and said that he had to be careful with his throat and a draught from an open window wasn't good. My engineer replied like a shot that he could drive back and fetch some portable recording equipment and record it all without having to open the window—the whole episode at the front door reminded me a good deal of the quartet from *Rigoletto*. Finally he just declared that it was impossible on that Friday and he offered to come to our studios the following day - that was the day before the broadcast.

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I had no choice but to accept. We were to meet at 5 p.m. At 5:20 I was still waiting with two technicians. I had already started to think about the formulation of the press release advising that Jussi Björling would not be giving the promised interview. I could already imagine all the snide looks with their vulgar insinuations about the classic Björling cancellation.

At 5:25 he came hurrying energetically up the stairs in the cold, fluorescent-lit corridor of the old studio building. He arrived hat in hand, looking very cheerful. We were a little embarrassed towards each other at first—he had, as I've said, all of a singer's inhibitions before an interview microphone. "I always sound so stupid when I talk . . ." Nevertheless, the result was an interview of eighteen minutes and twenty seconds duration in which he related, in an ever-more relaxed manner, episodes from his extraordinary career. He searched for words from time to time, required prompting, and all the time one could hear, in spite of the international career, that undisguised *dalmål*, culminating in the boyishly mocking but no doubt deeply felt statement: "Yes, I'm Jussi Björling from Stora Tuna . . ."

One year later we would only have his recordings.

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*Bo Teddy Ladberg (1920–1977) was active at the Swedish Broadcasting Corp. from 1946 until his death. At the beginning, he both wrote for the radio magazine Röster I Radio (Voices in Radio) and made radio programs on social subjects, but 1952–58 he was banned from making programs due to communist activities. In 1958 he came back as a producer of much appreciated music programs and also became a popular host on TV programs.*