

The Jussi Björling Recording Survey — “Complete Opera”

By Walter B. Rudolph



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How many of you who submitted your list of favorite opera recordings with Jussi Björling have heard his recording of Verdi's *La traviata*? The recording is from August 29, 1939 (Stockholm). Here's an interesting note. This is the only opera which received *no votes*, yet today it is the most performed opera in the world. Yes, that's a comparison of no particular consequence for a variety of reasons. (1) It wasn't common repertoire for Jussi Björling; (2) the recording is not easily available in the United States, and (3) it was not *the* most popular opera during Björling's lifetime. There are other reasons, but this is sufficient.

I've often wondered what Björling's legacy might be today, had he sung Wagner like he sang his own repertoire? (I think that Sweden has contributed more Wagnerian singers to the Bayreuth Festival than any country other than Germany.) Perhaps the “not-Italian-enough” remarks would have been different? His “In fernem Land” aria (*Lohengrin*) surely puts the “what if” question in our minds about possible recordings

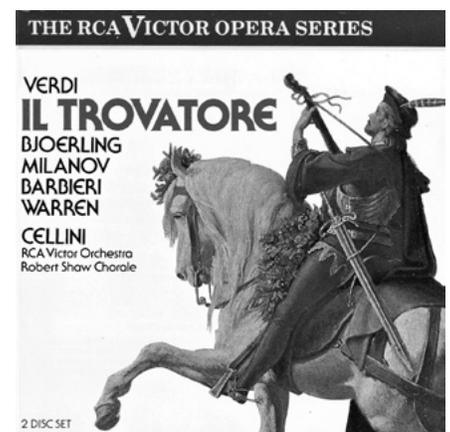
of both the Swan Knight and Walther von Stolzing in *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*. But conjecture gets us nowhere today, so let's see what we have learned from this survey.

Just off-the-cuff, I think most people would expect Verdi and Puccini to be considered the most popular opera composers. And they account for eleven of the fifteen operas receiving votes in this survey, with five being by Puccini and six by Verdi. But neither composer captured the number one spot! Of the fifteen titles, the Verdi *Requiem* is technically not an opera, although there are those who argue it is Verdi's best opera. The *Requiem* and *Don Carlo* occupy the last two spots in this calculation. Two composers are each represented by one opera, and they are Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. The only other composer on the list is Charles Gounod, who is represented by *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*.

One other possible wrinkle in this selection may be each person's own personal preference for any particular opera. For example, perhaps *Bohème* is not one of your favorite operas. But you still have great fondness for Jussi's version with Sir Thomas Beecham. Björling's *Aida* has always been one of the most highly regarded recordings of that opera. But one's own fondness for *Aida*, could change its position in the list, either up or down.

I've also chosen to provide the list of the most performed operas (worldwide) from 2015-16, even though comparing this list to our list of favorite Björling opera recordings is about as useful as comparing Handel operas to Beethoven symphonies. Still you may be intrigued. www.operasense.com/most-popular-operas/

The top 10 in the list were each chosen with the commercially recorded version as



the preferred choice. In several cases there is only one recording from which to choose. Otherwise, no particular recorded version of any one opera has a clear preference among entries, excepting *Cavalleria rusticana*. Here the favored recording was that with Zinka Milanov's Santuzza partnering Björling's Turridu.

And with that said, here is the list (yes, I know, you've already read ahead before reading this commentary.....). ■