

Jussi in the News: Media Notes of Interest to Our Members from Our Members

Edited by Dan Shea

When **Carla Ramsey** recently sent in some news items for this column, I asked her to consider helping as co-columnist: I'd been much impressed by her writing in the article on "Adelaide" published elsewhere in this issue, and her suggestions for this column were just the sort of thing I try to find for you. I'm glad to tell you that she accepted, so you can expect that future columns will carry both our bylines.

Sir Andrew Davis is the new Music Director at Chicago's Lyric Opera, and their Stagebill program this season carried a searching interview of Sir Andrew by Lyric's Editorial Dramaturg Roger Pines (who's also my old friend from his days with the University of Wisconsin Opera program). I thought you'd find the following exchanges especially interesting:

RP: Who have been some major artistic influences in your life as a musician?

AD: During my teens I was preoccupied with instrumental music. I was a pianist. There were specific pianists whom I admired, and they have affected the way I think of sound. I suppose the most important was Rubenstein—I loved the way he made the instrument sing. If you divide tastes in pianistic terms, there's Horowitz and there's Rubenstein, and I'm a Rubenstein fan, totally! The two conductors who influenced me the most were Sir John Barbirolli in the orchestral field and, for opera, Sir John Pritchard. "JP"'s way with singers was always exemplary: steadfast in his musical demands, yet always sensitive to their needs and respectful of their individual gifts. And in Mozart he was superb. Today, if I'm pleased with one of my own Mozart performances, I think to myself, "JP would have approved."

RP: Although opera conductors work with singers constantly, it's surprisingly seldom that they're asked if any of their major artistic influences have been singers.

AD: As a teenager, I fell in love with an old 78 of **Björling** singing the Flower Song from *Carmen* and the Dream Song from *Manon*. In fact, I wore it out. It wasn't just the beauty of the sound that so impressed me, it was the emotional immediacy in the way he sang. I also have marveled over the years at the artistry of Callas and the sheer sound of Tebaldi.

RP: What about singers with whom you have collaborated in performances?

AD: The singer who made a profound impression on me as a young man was **Elisabeth Söderström**. The first opera I conducted was *Capriccio* at Glyndebourne in 1973, in which she sang the Countess. A beautiful, charming, funny woman, and at its height her voice had a bell-like clarity and an expressiveness that were unique. Also, her commitment to the character she was playing was total. She was the first complete theater artist I worked with.

Note: The interview is too long to reprint whole, but if you'd like a copy just let me know. It concludes with a mention of Sir Andrew being knighted in 1999, and RP asking: Does the title help you in any way? He responded: When Neville Marriner got his knighthood, many years ago, I asked him: "What's the difference?" He said, "It's great for getting a good table in a restaurant." And it is!

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Polls and more polls! How should we react to these polls that keep appearing, on who are the greatest singers? I'd like to suggest that we not take any one of them especially seriously, but enjoy them (what's the harm?) and watch to see if there are any special trends that one can spot, over time. For instance, if you average them all, who's Number 1 overall? (I think I know the answer to that one!)

I heard about the latest one from Anders Björling—it appeared in January's *Classic FM Magazine* and reported the results of a poll of their station's listeners: Anders reported that he was pleased by the result, but was offended by some of the commentary provided by the article's author.

The article is called "Countdown: Ten Out of Tenors," and begins with this headline: "With their lung-bursting high Cs and offstage antics, tenors always grab the limelight. Here are the best of all time, as chosen by our readers and described by Jeremy Nicholas." Here's the result, in order from #1 to 10 (with their dates):

1. Jussi Björling (1911–1960)
2. Placido Domingo (b. 1941)
3. Luciano Pavarotti (b. 1936)
4. Enrico Caruso (1873–1921)
5. Andrea Bocelli (b. 1958)
6. Carlo Bergonzi (b. 1924)
7. Ian Bostridge (b. 1965)
8. Peter Pears (1910–1986)
9. Nicolai Gedda (b. 1925)
10. Beniamino Gigli (1890–1957).

The author's commentary begins interestingly: "Of the 83 recordings of the famous 'Au fond du temple saint' duet from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* currently on sale, one version, pressed by RCA more than half a century ago, beats all comers. The stirring affirmation of friendship as sung by Swedish tenor Jussi Björling with American baritone Robert Merrill has never been bettered. So what separates Björling from all the others? Of course, the quality of his voice, for one thing: a beautifully produced lyric tone with a fast, narrow vibrato and distinctive, instantly recognisable, silvery edge. There's a fresh, spontaneous, radiant quality tinged with a melancholic yearning that is highly affecting. But it's more than that. Björling sings with ecstasy, constantly driving the accompaniment along, anticipating phrases and never indulgent. It's that life-affirming exultancy which sends a shiver down the spine and, 40 years after his death, is still able to reduce you to tears."

This man really can write, and we would be grateful if he had stopped there. However, his page on Jussi ends with these three sentences: "He was famously lazy and hated to rehearse, and in the last decade of his life his voice became unreliable. From the early 1950s he was drinking heavily, often before performing. He was already lost to alcohol when a final heart attack felled him aged only 49."

These are just the sort of careless statements that so many semi-knowledgeable music lovers like to throw out in conversation, who knows why! I have copies of two letters to the editor written in response, one by Anders Björling and another by Andrew Farkas. Since most readers of these pages have read the biography *Jussi*, they already know the appropriate responses to Mr. Nicholas' statements. I'll just quote Anders' undeniable point, that "music critics the world over did not seem to think [my father's voice had become unreliable during the 1950's]!" But if you would like copies of these two letters, just let me know - since Anders and Andrew have given me permission to copy them for you.

Three of the names on this top ten list might have surprised you: Bocelli, Bostridge and Pears. But let's agree with Mr. Nicholas that "Bocelli has been . . . mixing pop albums with classical and selling them by the cartload. . . . His is a honey-toned voice ideally suited to the microphone, but with none of the dynamic range and colour of an opera singer." To the extent that he (and Lanza and Jeanette McDonald before him) helps attract people to learn about the great singers and great music, then we can decide to enjoy him too, if we like. The other two singers are fairly described in the article as having special appeal to Brits and are both praised as "sensitive" singers. And so they are.

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How about **other polls**? Well, Harald Henrysson has made up a list summarizing results he's heard of since 1996. Here it is (with only the top 5 from each poll listed, to save space, and with names given in order of popularity):

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- ◆ Celebration Radio, New York (Dec. 1996), Greatest Singers of the Century: JB; Caruso; Callas, Sutherland, Tebaldi.
- ◆ WMNR Radio, Connecticut (Dec. 1997), Greatest Singers of the Century: JB; Callas, Horne; Caruso, Milanov, Sutherland.
- ◆ Classic FM (Britain, Dec. 1997), Favorite Post-War Opera Singers: JB; Callas; Domingo; Gobbi; Sutherland.
- ◆ Göteborgs-Posten (Sweden, May 1999), Greatest Swedish Opera Singers: JB (49% of votes!); B. Nilsson; Gedda; Lind; Winbergh.
- ◆ Classic CD (Britain, July 1999), Top Singers of the Century (critics' poll): JB; Fischer-Dieskau; Flagstad; Gobbi; Callas.
- ◆ Classic CD (Britain, Dec. 1999), Top Singers of the Century (readers' poll): Callas; JB; Domingo; Fischer-Dieskau; Caruso.
- ◆ Opéra International (France, Oct. 2000), Favorite Post-War Tenors: Kraus; Domingo; JB; Pavarotti; Bergonzi.

There's another 1999 radio poll, reported in the "Opera Fanatic's Catalog": WKCR-FM, Opera Fanatic's Favorite Tenor of the Century: Corelli (185 votes); Björling (177); Caruso (69); Gigli (50); Vickers (17); McCormack (14); Carreras, Melchior (7); Bergonzi, del Monaco, Zucker (host of the program) (5); Kraus, Pavarotti (4); di Stefano, Gedda, Lanza, Tauber, Tucker (3); Domingo, Lauri-Volpi, Rosvaenge, Schmidt, Shicoff, Slezak, Urlus (2).

There was a total of 600 votes cast, and we must make clear that host Stefan Zucker idolizes Corelli and featured him (sometimes in person) on his broadcasts. (Al Gore might be able to empathize with Jussi, in this poll!)

What fun! We leave it to you to make your own deductions from all this.

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Classic Record Collector is the elegant new quarterly "Review of Historic Recordings" from Britain, replacing the ICRC magazine. Their Spring 2001 issue features a full-cover photo of our tenor and a 7-page story "Song of Sweden—Jussi Björling's Finest Hours" by Stefan Nävermyr, a music writer and producer of historic recordings in Sweden. This is a truly beautiful article, built on familiar pages from *Jussi* but supplying some new information on Jussi's last studio recording sessions in Sweden. Here are a few excerpts, which should be contrasted with Jeremy Nicholas' description of Jussi's last years:

[In early 1958, Jussi] "suffered from deteriorating health, probably caused by overwork and stress. In March he had a second attack of stomach bleeding; in May he traumatically lost his voice in the middle of a performance of *Tosca* with Birgit Nilsson in Stockholm; and in September he had his first heart attack, which forced him to rest for a few weeks. He did sing opera [15 appearances in Chicago and California] during the autumn, however, and amazingly his health improved remarkably. In November his wife wrote: 'Jussi is in top form and he has never been in better humour.' After the turn of the year he was ready for more song recordings.

"The sessions on January 8, 1959 in the Stockholm Concert Hall were quite dramatic. Björling was in top form and every possible technical preparation had been made, but catastrophe was not far away. Two mono tape recorders were used, as well as an experimental Ampex stereo machine that had been flown in from the USA just prior to the sessions. . . . After the warm-up and sound check the red light went on, but the stereo recorder did not function. Panic ensued in the control room while Björling continued to sing. . . . By lunchtime they had taped three songs new to the tenor's discography: Söderman's 'Trollsjön,' Beethoven's 'Guds lov i naturen' and Adam's 'Julsång.' This last song, once recorded by Björling's hero Caruso, has since become the Swedish tenor's most popular record in his native country, played every Christmas and occupying its own place in the seasonal celebrations. Many singers have tried but few have managed to sing the last fortissimo leap with the ease and power of Björling in this, his only [commercial] recording of it."

[Luckily, one of the three recording machines was working in the morning session, and by afternoon the Ampex machine was ready.] "This circumstance we should be grateful for, because that afternoon was arguably the most magnificent in the singer's studio career. Björling recorded four of the five songs for the first time—only Sibelius' 'Säv, säv, susa' had been done before, . . . in 1940. . . . The quality of the stereo recordings was amply demonstrated when the master tape, a modest ten-inch spool in a brown cardboard box, was recovered

a few years ago from its almost 30-year sleep in the archives. A suitable tape machine had been found at the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation and we who were lucky enough to be present at the transfer session were astounded by both the singing and the recording. Björling's voice emerged full, clear, powerful and totally in focus, on a recording both detailed, colourful and lifelike, with astonishing presence."

"The last song to be recorded that winter day was also an Alfvén number, the Danish setting 'Jag längtar dig.' It is clear why it was placed at the end of the programme - the song demands all of the singer. As expected, Jussi Björling performed it to perfection, crowning it with a truly powerful crescendo, with the accompaniment shaped in masterly fashion by Nils Grevillius.... Even though Björling made other important recordings before his death... these last Swedish recordings are the epitome of his art, performances essential to all music lovers."

[Now please recall our request that you contrast this description of Jussi's last years with that of J. Nicholas.]

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A CD containing the music (and as a CD-ROM, also texts, photographs and part of the story told by Nävermyr) from these recording sessions and others during 1957–59 (Swedish Society Discofil SCD1100, "Romantic Songs") is also reviewed in this issue, but the review is useless for most of us: The reviewer is Tully Potter, now Editor of this CRC magazine, and still trying to justify his 1997 attack on Jussi in the now-defunct IOC magazine in which he concluded "I don't rate Jussi Björling as the best Nordic tenor of the century or even the best Swedish tenor—both Torsten Ralf and Nicolai Gedda, especially the latter, have left us more interesting and consistent discographies. . . . He belongs with those such as Lauri-Volpi, Di Stefano and Corelli who can be appealing and appalling in equal measure. . . ." You get the idea—and if you'd already had more than enough four years ago, I apologise/apologize. As Harald Henrysson said in his Feb. 27 Bjoerling@yahoogroups review of the two CRC articles, "after having read [Potter's] 1997 article with its very strange argumentation, I care little about what he writes." Amen.

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Verdi was featured in the Arts section of the NYTimes on January 26, the eve of the 100th anniversary of his death. In addition to giving a long list of performances of Verdi's music close to NY City, the paper's six fine classical music critics discussed their favorite Verdi recordings, at most five of which each could list. Here are some comments from that article, especially relevant to this column:

- Anthony Tommasini chose recordings of *Falstaff*, *Aida* (L.Price, Gorr, Vickers, Merrill; Solti), *Otello*, *Don Carlos* (Giulini), *Trovatore* (Callas, Barbieri, di Stefano, Panerai; von Karajan). Regarding *Trovatore*, he mentions that "There are some rewarding historic recordings of *Il Trovatore*, like the live 1939 Covent Garden performance with the young Jussi Bjoerling in the title role. . . . But I've always been especially affected by the noble Karajan performance from La Scala in 1956. Maria Callas lacks Ms. Price's vocal elegance, but her performance is compellingly sung and movingly vulnerable. Giuseppe di Stefano is an excellent Manrico. . . . I say, buy them all. What true Verdian would want only one *Trovatore*?"
- Allan Kozinn, Bernard Holland and Paul Griffiths didn't seem to enjoy their assignments (they spent a lot of time on Verdi's *Requiem* and *Quattro Pezzi Sacri*), clearly not "true Verdians"!
- James Oestreich also seemed to lack Tommasini's enthusiasm, but he did recommend the 3-CD set "Met Stars Sing Verdi," which includes Jussi's 1939 EMI "Di quella pira!" and the *Don Carlo* duet with Merrill.
- The *Times'* newest critic, Anne Midgette, embraced her opportunity: "What flesh was to Rubens, the voice was to Verdi." She chose five opera sets: *Traviata* (Sutherland, Pavarotti, Manuguerra; Bonyngge), *Simon Boccanegra* (Freni, Carreras, Cappuccilli, Ghiarov; Abbado), *Falstaff* (Gobbi; von Karajan), *Trovatore* (Milanov, Barbieri, Bjoerling, Warren; Cellini), *Aida* (Callas, Dominguez, del Monaco, Taddei; di Fabritiis).

"The last two sets, from the early 1950s, are all about voice. That Renato Cellini is a wishy-washy conductor of *Il Trovatore* hardly matters when the singing is this glorious: Zinka Milanov, limpid; Jussi Bjoerling, ringing; Fedora Barbieri, fiery and chesty; and Leonard Warren, the sweetest, gentlest Count di Luna on record, someone a woman could really fall for.

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"The Mexico City *Aida* is not for audiophiles or the fainthearted: . . . But it captures the glories of the young Callas (of whom Milanov once said, 'She's so wonderful, this girl, she sounds like a young me') and Mario del Monaco before their commercial recordings. . . . Cooler heads might label it—specifically del Monaco's performance—an example of vocal excess. But I would argue that this thrilling live performance captures an important aspect of the Verdian spirit, and that excess, too, is part of the package."

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Elsewhere, in our record review column "The Recorded Legacy," we mention what we call "the Björling issue" of *The Opera Quarterly*, i.e. Vol. 16, Nbr. 2. The Autumn 2000 issue (Vol. 16, No. 4) should be regarded as a sequel and is highly recommended to all Jussi-fans. There are three useful letters specifically dealing with Andrew Farkas' articles on Björling in *Ballo*, and Andrew gives interesting responses to two of them.

Twelve OQ Editors celebrate the turn of the century with this issue by choosing operatic high points of the past 100 years, and we survey the Editors' surveys from our special JBS point of view! Thus, let us note that **William Albright** chooses the 1952 RCA *Trovatore* (Björling et al.) as the key recording of the 1950s. He also mentions the final appearance in opera of **Birgit Nilsson** as his top event of the 1980s, referring to her "seemingly extinct blend of boundless resources and rock-solid technique".

Raymond Beegle's choice of key recording of the 1950s is RCA's *Aida* with Milanov and Björling. In his discussion, he celebrates opera but cautions that "This most precious art, . . . with the power to speak of the deepest issues of the human heart, demands the utmost discipline and devotion from both performer and listener."

Bruce Burroughs similarly presents his opinions within a philosophical frame, stating about his choice of operatic recordings that "The singing must be peerlessly revelatory of the beauty and/or power of the music sung, close to definitive in surmounting a role's technical requirements without recourse to vocal compromises or subterfuge, and able to convey credibly the emotions of the characters represented through tone, dynamics and phrasing while maintaining absolute stylistic integrity." For the 1950s, he chooses as key recording the RCA *Aida*, and mentions that C. L. Osborne, having to choose the single finest *Aida* on disc, had "no hesitation" naming this one. Burroughs' runners-up for key recording of the 1950s include the 1952 RCA *Trovatore* and the 1956 EMI *Bohème*, both Björling's, as well as two others (*Peter Grimes* and *Don Giovanni*, as conducted by Britten and Giulini).

Andrew Farkas emphasizes the magnitude of the loss suffered by opera with the early death of Caruso, just a few years before the advent of great technical advances in audio recording and sound films. **Tom Kaufman** also cites Caruso's early records as well as those of Gigli, Lauri-Volpi, O'Sullivan, Piccaluga and Björling (aria from *La Belle Hélène*). And so it goes on, a cornucopia of extravagant opinion, philosophy, personality and above all, knowledge and deep regard for the art form of opera. I'm very much impressed with the way this fine journal manages to treat its subject seriously without forgetting the enjoyment that kindled the interest.

Finally, and best of all for Björling-fans, there's another appreciation of great singing by **London Green** (whose three-page *Remembrance* of Jussi in issue No. 2 was extensively quoted in this Journal, No. 10). The first of two installments, this one offers some philosophy and analysis based on the careers of Kathleen Ferrier, Enrico Caruso, Mario del Monaco, Eleanor Steber and Rosalind Elias, Kirsten Flagstad, Jussi and five others. Here's a bit from the page on Jussi: "Among the most touching of Björling's recordings are those of Vladimir's romance from Borodin's *Prince Igor*. He recorded it at least twice: in 1933 and 1957. In both the voice is superbly fresh and vibrant. In the first, the twenty-two-year-old artist sings a little less commandingly; there is no less control but a touch more of vulnerability in the Björling tone. Both are filled with amorous yearning for the hero's distant beloved and a certain shy reserve typical of the singer. Everything is bent toward these expressive aims. And in both performances the pianissimo at the end seems for once the spontaneously tender result of what has gone on before, and not just an admirable, painstakingly planned

event. That happens, of course, because it is so expertly planned. Best of all, both recordings demonstrate as well as any the effect that the Björling voice could have in the opera house. He never blasted, but filled the ear. If the house acoustics were right, the result could be deliciously paralyzing for the listener."

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As usual, we have more material than we can use for this issue, but please continue to keep us in mind; as you see good material for this column, please pass it along either to Carla Ramsey (carlaramsey43@hotmail.com, or at 2501 Cisar Ct., #1E, Glenwood Springs, CO, 81601) or to me (see Masthead on p. 2).

From "The Vocal Scene":

An Interview by George Jellinek of Richard Mohr, first broadcast on WQXR on February 5, 1987

[Music: Introduction to *Pagliacci* Prologo]

GJ: We are listening to a historical recording of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* with the illustrious cast of Jussi Björling, Victoria de los Angeles, Leonard Warren and Robert Merrill. Renato Cellini conducting. The year was 1953 and the place New York City. Yes, in 1953 it was still possible to produce complete recordings of operas in the United States. The producer of this *Pagliacci* and many more to come was Richard Mohr. After his retirement from RCA, Mr. Mohr became the producer of the Metropolitan Opera intermission features that are heard Saturday afternoons each season. Mr Mohr is my guest today, and he will make his appearance soon, but we will let Leonard Warren make his first.

[Warren in *Pagliacci* Prologo]

GJ: What a Tonio! Leonard Warren in a complete recording of Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* produced in 1953 in New York, and the producer is right here with us. Richard Mohr, welcome! Now for the benefit of our listeners, would you be good enough describe just what a producer is.

RM: Let me approach it first negatively. A producer is only as good as the engineers with whom he works, and in those early days of my career I was so fortunate in having Louis Leighton as the engineer. He was a marvelous man, a tiny little man and very modest and at the end of a session you would say, "Louis it was just sensational" and he would give you that quirky little grin and say, "Well, I don't think that we are far off." But also what a recording producer is, is a medium, not the spiritualistic kind. I think today especially that there are too many recording producers who think that they are the stars and they are not. They are not the artists; they are the artisans. After all, music doesn't exist until somebody performs it; it's just a collection of blots on a piece of paper. And it's the artist's capability of making something out of that, that is the responsibility of the record producers to transmit onto tape.

JG: If I'm not mistaken, the term itself is of relatively new origin insofar as it applies to our type of business. Weren't you originally called a recording director?

RM: I'm not totally certain. I think that the original term was recording producer and then when, instead of giving raises to them they decided to make them recording directors, it sounded more grand and dignified.

GJ: I see. In lieu of raises, they became titles. Well, you are right. There are a number of, well by now we can call, legends in this business, and they have been responsible certainly in discovering

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