

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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artists. I'm thinking about Walter Legge and a few others. But your description of the producer's function is very modest. I'm sure that you played a more important part than you would want us to believe. Did you have any input in selecting artists for the complete recordings?

RM: Yes, although at the time that Leonard Warren made the *Pagliacci* recording, we were fortunate at RCA to have what we called our operatic trio: Milanov, Björling and Warren. In more recent years, that was succeeded by Price, Domingo, and Milnes. When you don't have a basic trio like that, you had better not be recording opera. But in the case of Milanov, Jussi and Leonard, there was a whole section of operatic repertory that was tailored for them and that we were anxious to get onto records.

GJ: Interestingly enough, you mentioned two of this fantastic trio, Milanov and Björling. They sang relatively rarely together on the stage of the Met, and if it hadn't been for your activity or RCA's activity at that time, this legendary or remarkable partnership would have remained a partnership of fantasy.

RM: They got along well at recording sessions, but I wouldn't say that they were bosom buddies. They both had a certain amount of temperament. Jussi was more or less a stubborn, phlegmatic type, and Zinka at recording sessions was as nervous as a cat. If you looked at her crooked, she would go right through the ceiling.

[Milanov in "La vergine degl' angeli" from *Forza*]

GJ: That was a scene from Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* by the wonderful and temperamental Zinka Milanov

RM: One misguided RCA executive at a recording session once said to her, "Well, I don't know why you are so unhappy. You know London/Decca records Tebaldi morning, afternoon and evening on the same day." Well that was the wrong thing to say. She exploded and said, "Then go get Tebaldi and finish this recording." So then I was elected to placate her.

GJ: Now you see, there is another function for a producer.

RM: It's true. Producers do have to have the diplomacy that would qualify them for a U.N. mission. Another secret I always found is that when an artist is recording, they are not in their normal state; they are in their creative state. You can suggest things to them; you cannot argue with them. An argument will just make them more nervous, more stubborn. And so the secret I always found was to say "yes" to everything and do exactly what you knew had to be done.

GJ: It's a nearly always a very good policy but doesn't always work.

RM: No.

GJ: Tell me, Richard, what was your first venture as a record producer?

RM: I think that happened in 1950 and it started out very small. It was recording Susan Reed who played lute. She was one of the early folk song singers. She had a great rage, especially in New York City and throughout the nation. She toured for at least five or six years. Those recordings were made in the old 24th Street studio which no longer exists. After that I made a quantum leap and started recording Wanda Landowska.

GJ: But still, sticking to a single instrument and it's an even bigger leap to an orchestral realm. You must have also produced a number of symphonic recordings.

RM: In the last two years of his tenure with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, Mr. Toscanini recorded every Monday in Carnegie Hall, and it was my privilege then to produce those recordings. He was surprisingly not difficult to work with. There was sort of a mystique built up around Toscanini. I know that when he would arrive at the artists' dressing room on Monday morning prior to the session, there would be an entourage. There would be Samuel Chotzinoff of NBC; there would be Walter Toscanini; Mrs. Toscanini. She was the only one who was relaxed. It looked like a funeral

procession. Everybody was tense and nervous, but once Maestro got on the podium, he was easy to work with.

GJ: Is it true of his operatic productions as well?

RM: Yes. I know that when he did the actual live performances of *Aida*, there were several passages in the whole performance that he wanted to re-record for vocal reasons. I think that Herva Nelli's "Ritorna Vincitor", or some phrase where the whole orchestra comes crashing in on her ultimate phrase and Toscanini unleashed the fury of the NBC Symphony Orchestra and Herva Nelli might as well not have been there. I went down to him at the interval and said, "Maestro, here it is impossible to dig Miss Nelli out of this massive *tutti chord*. And with his nearsighted eyes he held the score up and said, "Mohr, it's Verdi's fault." But he did adjust it.

GJ: Why don't we hear something from the great *Aida* recording that you are talking about.

[music]

GJ: We heard the finale of Act II with the great ensemble conducted by Arturo Toscanini. The singers included soprano Herva Nelli, tenor Richard Tucker, baritone Giuseppe Valdengo. Any other Toscanini memories that stand out in your mind?

RM: When he was doing the Fountains and Pines of Rome, and I believe that was still in the days of monaural recording, I told Lou Leighton the engineer that there are going to be some climaxes in this that will be just hair-raising. Toscanini made the first take, came up to listen to it, and immediately erupted, "The climaxes are not loud enough." When he calmed down, I said, "Maestro, the equipment will break if we tape anything louder than this." And he against burst into fluent Italian obscenities and then ended up in English by saying, "So break the equipment!" Somehow we managed to satisfy him and still not come home with shards of equipment.

GJ: I don't think that Toscanini really understood the mechanics of recording.

RM: I agree with you, and I don't think that he wanted to understand them. It's a great pity that he didn't live into the full age of stereo.

GJ: The producer may have one idea and the conductor another idea about balance. Did you have any clashes over certain perspectives?

RM: Not really on balance. The only thing that I had to watch was not with the conductor, but with Lou Leighton because Lou was mad for violins, and if you didn't watch him, why he would have violins all over the place. Fortunately I was mad for cellos and violas, so it worked out more or less balanced.

GJ: You have a very nice basic sound to your recordings.

RM: I was privileged to work with great conductors. I even worked with Koussevitsky in his last year at the Boston Symphony on the Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony and later that summer in Tanglewood when Eleanor Roosevelt recorded *Peter and the Wolf* with him. Koussevitsky always alarmed all of us because he was so red in the face and when he conducted he turned purple and the veins on his forehead would stand out. When he was listening to playbacks, he was always having vodka and chicken sandwiches, but he would smile and say, "Dat ist mein orchestra."

GJ: Richard, opera being our main concern, if you were to select one set during your first dozen or so years at RCA as a record producer, which one stands out in your memory as the one you are proudest of?

RM: There are several contenders for that. I would be torn between *Trovatore* with Milanov, Björling and Warren and also between the *Aida* with the same three principals. One was conducted by Renato Cellini, the other by Jonel Perlea. They were *totally de force* for all three. They knew those roles backwards and forwards, and they were those operatic characters at that time.

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GJ: Absolutely, I most certainly agree with you. I can't think after all of these years, and it has been certainly more than thirty years, of a *Trovatore* that I want to go back time and time again and hear more than this particular one with Milanov, Björling and Warren, an inspired trio. We are going to hear a portion of it.

[musical excerpt: trio from Act 1, *Trovatore*]

GJ: An unforgettable recording of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* produced by my guest Richard Mohr. Before I go any further, I recall that Renato Cellini, who is no longer with us, who was a sort of house conductor for RCA and I had a very high regard for his conducting, and I know that he got very rough treatment from some of New York's critics and I could not understand why. Granted, he was no Toscanini; he was probably not a conductor of totally first-rate credentials, but always a dependable conductor. How did you find his work?

RM: He did a good Italianate job on Italianate operas. He was never dull. He was never as driving as a Toscanini, but then he was not supposed to be a Toscanini. It's interesting, the first opera we ever recorded, *Rigoletto*, with Erna Berger and Jan Peerce and Leonard Warren wasn't assigned to Cellini, although he ended up recording it. It was assigned to Jean Morel. Some great brain at RCA had the idea of Morel "coaching" the opera first with Toscanini. Morel was delighted to do this, because he worshiped Toscanini. But when Leonard Warren heard about this he said, "Take a Toscanini conductor or find yourself another baritone. I am not going to change my performance." And so we had Renato Cellini, and I think that the end result was just as good, although I yield to no one in my high opinion of Jean Morel's capabilities. He was a marvelous conductor.

GJ: I think it was a remarkable recording also, and it also perpetuated the voice of Erna Berger on American records. That in itself was rare because she was then approaching the end of her career. She continued doing lieder recitals in Germany, but it is a remarkable example of her artistry.

[Final duet, *Rigoletto*]

GJ: We heard Erna Berger and Leonard Warren in the finale of the by now historical recording of Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Jan Peerce was also in top form in that recording conducted by Renato Cellini, a conductor in my judgment not sufficiently appreciated then. And neither was Jonel Perlea.

RM: Perlea was a superb conductor, and unfortunately his career was hampered at an early stage when he had a stroke. And I know some years later in Rome when we recorded *Lucrezia Borgia* with Montserrat Caballe, we had to engage somebody who spoke German to stand near Perlea because his stroke had left him only with a memory of the German language. This lady would translate his German comments correcting the orchestra into Italian and give them to the orchestra personnel.

GJ: Perlea was the conductor of one of the early productions which we critics in those days called the "dream *Aida*". It was really a dream come true, because we felt since Björling hardly ever sang the role of Radamès in New York, so the Metropolitan audience was unable to hear him and Milanov sang *Aida* all of the time. Here was an opportunity to see what those two could do, to say nothing of Leonard Warren and of course the Ramfis, Boris Christoff. It was really a fantastic cast. And then you became a regular visitor to Rome, and most of your sessions took place in Rome.

RM: Yes, during the summer months, and of course the Rome Opera house was hotter than the hinges of Hades at that time. The concertmaster I remember was a huge, fat man, quite short, and he wore a white handkerchief on his head just to sop up the perspiration. But it had wonderful acoustics, and we had a wonderful time during those years in Rome because I went there at the right time. I was still young, and to see Italy under those circumstances was like a dream come true.

GJ: You have already told our audience how tempers had to be respected during recording sessions. Were there any real flare-ups or controversies?

RM: In my long career, there was not a flare-up, but just an absolute unwillingness to meet on a mental level. It was Oralia Dominguez, who was doing the rag picker in *Il Tabarro*. It was La

Frugola, and she did a fantastic job. The only thing was that at one session the music ended at a spot where the soprano picks up immediately, and there is also an interjection from a *comprimario* tenor. So at the next session, I asked Dominguez, "Would you just repeat your last phrase for editing?" She wouldn't do it. She said, "You have that on tape." I explained it to her a thousand times and she wouldn't do it, and we managed then finally to cross-fade (*) it and get it right. It cost us two days of work. [(*) a recording term wherein one track is dubbed over another while varying sound-levels]

GJ: I don't suppose you engaged her again.

RM: No, that was her first and last appearance on RCA.

GJ: That's one way of uncreating a recording career. Other than that, you don't recall any real outstanding flare-ups or artistic disagreements among singers or singers and yourself?

RM: Not really.

GJ: You are too much of a gentleman.

RM: No, it isn't that I'm too much of a gentleman, but if you treat singers like ladies and gentlemen, you find that they are. I know one recording producer who once summoned back the chorus by saying over the loudspeaker, "Come on animals, we are ready to start again!" Well, that's not the way to handle a recording session.

GJ: Obviously, psychology is one of the elements that the producer has to consider because you are in charge behind your glass window, but the people who work for you or with you are under great pressures, and you have to respect that. Tell us about other memorable incidents that happened, perhaps unexpected elements that may have come out of a recording that you yourself had not anticipated, if there are any such things.

RM: Well, not that came out of a recording, but you had mentioned earlier recording in Rome, and our first recording there was Manon Lescaut of Puccini with Albanese, Björling and Merrill. Albanese, the Merrills, and I were there; the recording team was there, but Jussi hadn't arrived. We got a cablegram from Sweden saying he had decided not to come. So we cabled him back and said, "We're sorry to hear that, but if you don't come, all of these costs to date will be charged against you." Jussi was there the next day. He was absolutely delightful. He was such a stubborn little man, and he would stand sometimes like a child in front of you with his fists clenched and the tops of his hands showing and just say, "No, I don't feel it that way." When we did *Rigoletto* in Rome, that was the second recording of *Rigoletto*, he insisted that the quartet was his solo. I said, "It is your solo when the verses come in that are assigned to you, but when the other three voices come in, it is an ensemble." So he made the first take and then was very sheepish and said, "You are right, Richard. I'll do it the way you want me to do it." He was an absolute delight to work with. He had a rather robust sense of humor, and if he had one extra cocktail at lunch, he would have probably thought that was a great joke to play.

GJ: Well, Richard, thank you very much. We have covered quite a bit, and I know that I would like you to come back on a later occasion and regale us with more wonderful stories and more behind-the-scenes episodes in the life of a busy record producer. Thank you for visiting us. I wish you further successes as producer of the Metropolitan Opera intermission features. Thanks again.

RM: Thank you very much. I enjoyed it.

GJ: This is George Jellinek on The Vocal Scene.

Our thanks to Allan Wilkinson for making the tape of this program available to members of the Björling Yahoogroup, and to Stuart Kaufman who made the transcription. That version contained a short gap, and

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we turned to Hal Sokolsky who located Nick Fanto on the internet, who had the complete tape. Nick had only recently joined the Yahoogroup and wasn't sure what the JB Society was (he guessed, cheekily, "Jane & Ben?" as in Eaglen & Heppner), then admitted that Jussi Björling is one of his favorite singers. He also stated that he and a friend are real Jellinek fans, have taped many of the "Vocal Scene" programs and recently have enjoyed WQXR's rebroadcasts of some of those programs, on Sunday evenings, as "Vocal Gold" repeats. Nick also clarified some other obscure points for us. Hal's comment, after all this heavy use of email, was "what a community we have"!

A New Björling Silver Medallion by Artist Marika Somogyi

Consider this scenario: You've gotten to know and respect Andrew Farkas, not only for his work in opera scholarship but also for his energetic and creative support of the Jussi Björling Society. He tells you of his friendship with a superbly talented graphic artist, Marika Somogyi, who specializes in medals and whose work has received wide international recognition. She has created the medallion for the annual Placido Domingo award as well as medals honoring Leonard Bernstein, Irving Berlin, Benny Goodman. And many more. Thanks to her friendship with Andrew, and her own love of opera and Jussi, she'd be willing to produce a Björling medal that would be a real work of art, and at a minimal cost, thus creating the possibility that sales of this medal would eventually produce some income for JBS. Would you want to learn more about this artist and her work?

This scenario did occur to me in autumn 1999, and I did want to hear more about Ms. Somogyi's work. I knew that not just Domingo but also Wunderlich, Caruso and other singers have good quality medallions dedicated to them, and that these can be sold at museums, opera shops and via websites to devotees of the singers. Also I knew of no comparable medal for Jussi. I checked some websites and found that Andrew's artist friend had impeccable credentials: She's won a host of commissions designed to honor the names of Raoul Wallenberg, Eleanor Roosevelt, Agatha Christie, Charlie Chaplin and many others, and her works are on exhibit in the permanent collections of the Swedish Royal Museum in Stockholm (seven medals) and other museums in London, New York, Chicago, Berlin, Lisbon, Budapest, etc. Additionally, she has designed, by invitation, the Mount Rushmore Commemorative Silver Dollar and the U.S. Capitol Commemorative Silver Dollar (2001) for the United States Treasury.

I agreed with Andrew that JBS should undertake a project like this, and brought the idea to the JBS Board. The members were intrigued but felt that JBS had no financial reserves to commit to this project; further, we were busy enough just with taking care of basic business: *Journal*, website, conferences. Since Andrew and I were convinced of the value of Ms. Somogyi's offer, as well as the basic project itself, we decided to underwrite the project ourselves. So we commissioned Ms. Somogyi to proceed with her design, for a 2.25 inch coin (slightly larger than a Kennedy half dollar), in the Jussian metal: silver. What she produced has one side with Jussi in formal dress, the other side is the seated Riccardo from *Ballo*. It is being minted right now (April 2001) and will be available for your inspection at our June conference.

Andrew and I have ordered 100 of these medals. They'll come in a special presentation box and will sell for \$100 each. Once Andrew and I have recovered our basic investment, we intend to turn over all subsequent profits to the Jussi Björling Societies. The initial run of medals would produce some \$4000 in funds for our Societies, and a subsequent run would produce much more (since the costs involved would be less, with artist's fee and stampers already paid for).

We will offer these medals to the Borlänge Museum for sale there, to the Met Opera Shop and similar stores, and to the Björling Societies themselves: they can consider offering the medal to their members via their webpages and publications. If you'd like to get the medal as soon as it's available