

An Interview by George Jellinek of Richard Mohr

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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 Plácido 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

(in May), with the understanding that you can return it for a full refund if you wish, send me a check for \$103 and I'll have one sent to you at once.

Your entrepreneurial Editor, Dan Shea (1007 Edgehill Dr., Madison WI, USA 53705)

P.S. Here're just some of the websites that feature Marika Somogyi's work (all these URLs are to be preceded by <http://www.>):

Sculptures-R-Us.com

stir.ac.uk/external/bams/somogyi.htm

artinthehand.com/somogyi.htm

amuseum.org/iahf/about/about1.html

asmamedals.org/Queensboro/Somogyi.jpg

usmint.gov/catalog (for Marika's Capitol Commemorative Coin just released).

Leonard Warren: American Baritone

Mary Jane Phillips-Matz

(Opera Biography Series, No. 13)

Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 2000

520 pages, \$40

I came to Mary Jane Phillips-Matz' life of Leonard Warren not as a stranger, having read her monumental life of Verdi only a year ago. As *Opera News* said (February 2001), her Verdi is "an account of composer and milieu more thoroughly *pondered, researched and understood* [emphasis mine] than any other biography." In the course of some nine hundred pages, I got to know Verdi, first, through her remarkable ability to gather and document literally thousands of sources. Not only did she amass this widespread and inchoate material, but she wove it into a seamless narrative which veritably flew by. Though she does not intend to be a stylist in the mode of, say Lytton Strachey or Oscar Wilde, in *Verdi* she is a stylist in the sense of producing sentences, paragraphs, sections, and chapters through which the reader moves effortlessly.

Such is likewise the case with *Leonard Warren*, her latest book. Though her scope is smaller, her achievement is commensurately successful. Guiding us from the history of Warren's Russian immigrant family background, through his struggles to establish himself, to his position at the pinnacle of operatic stardom, Mrs. Phillips-Matz furnishes as complete a picture of the singer as we are likely to have. With the cooperation of his beloved younger sister Vivien as well as access to family papers and photographs, she presents a portrait of the premier Verdi baritone of his era—a portrait which is no shallow hagiography but a full presentation of a complex man who rose to the top of the operatic world.

Before embarking on Warren's musical career, Mrs. Phillips-Matz offers a fast-paced and vivid picture of his Russian forebears and family, including the extended family's marriages, customs, and business successes. Then she presents Warren's musical formative years as a testament to the struggle of all creative artists who believe in themselves, when few others do. The family recognized early on that he had a remarkable voice, but his father wanted him to follow in the family fur business. Warren spent his years after high school fluctuating among fur industry jobs, taking business courses, and singing sporadically in the Catskills. The turning point came for him in 1932 when he viewed a partial performance of *Carmen* with Tita Ruffo: "This was one of the reasons that made me choose a career in singing," he says.

Mrs. Phillips-Matz engagingly traces Warren's first tentative career steps. His first steady employment as a singer was with the Radio City Music Hall Chorus. This experience, from the end

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