

THE SUNDAY TRIBUNE. AUGUST 29, 1954

**Jussi Björling's 1954 Tour of South Africa***By Alfred Gardner*

With an occasional insight into the role of a tenor's wife on tour!

On the thirteenth of August 1954, at the end of a forty-hour plane journey, Jussi and Anna-Lisa Björling arrived at Jan Smuts airport, Johannesburg, to begin what was to be a highly successful tour of the Union of South Africa.

Jussi's schedule was for six recitals with Ivor Newton as his accompanist and two concerts with full orchestra.

1. 15th August 1954: Plaza Theatre, Johannesburg  
Recital w/Ivor Newton, piano
2. 18th August 1954: City Hall, Johannesburg  
Recital w/Ivor Newton, piano
3. 22nd August 1954: Plaza Theatre, Johannesburg  
Recital w/Ivor Newton, piano
4. 24th August 1954: City Hall, Durban  
Recital w/Ivor Newton, piano
5. 26th August 1954: Alhambra Theatre, Cape Town  
Recital w/Ivor Newton, piano
6. 29th August 1954: City Hall, Johannesburg  
Concert w/South African Broadcasting Corporation  
Symphony Orchestra c. Jeremy Schulman  
(Broadcast)
7. 1st September 1954: Alhambra Theatre, Cape Town  
Concert w/Cape Town Municipal Orchestra  
c. Frits Schuurman
8. 3rd September 1954: City Hall, Pretoria  
Recital w/Ivor Newton, piano



Leyden's impression of Jussi Björling, the celebrated Swedish tenor, and his accompanist, Ivor Newton.

The first of the two concerts, on 29th August, was to be broadcast "live" throughout the Union, so giving the vast South African audience a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to hear him, for he was destined never to return.

Over the years, South Africa had attracted many of the most famous tenors from Europe and America. In 1928 Joseph Hislop had performed there in recital, and 1933 brought John McCormack to delight huge audiences with his incomparable singing of Irish ballads. In 1938 Richard Tauber paraded his varied repertoire, but seems to have been best remembered for just one song—"You are my heart's delight". The renowned American tenor

Richard Crooks had toured the Union just before the war, and during the war Tauber returned with "The Land of Smiles". Then followed Nino Martini (1948), Melchior (1949), Schipa (1950) and finally the veteran Gigli in 1951.

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Björling himself had been invited to South Africa as early as 1949, and a tour planned for 1953 was dropped when Jussi's UK agents secured for him engagements associated with the Queen's Coronation celebrations.

These were great days for South Africa's music-loving public in the summer of 1954, for besides JB's tour, the distinguished Dutch baritone Laurens Bogtman was giving recitals in Cape

Town, as also was Björling's old friend and admirer the tenor Marcel Wittrisch. He and Björling had been friends for some 15 years and Wittrisch was staying at the Björlings' hotel in Johannesburg.

The night before Jussi's concert at the City Hall, he and Wittrisch were guests at the same party. Björling and Tauber were the two singers that Wittrisch most admired and during the interval of JB's concert the following evening, Wittrisch, who was in the audience, was heard to remark "What a beautiful concert . . . What timbre!"

It was perhaps bad planning on someone's part that JB and Laurens Bogtman both gave recitals in Cape Town on the evening of 26th August. However, press reports make it clear that it was the baritone's audience that suffered from this clash. A ferocious hurricane had raged about Cape Town that night, but it did not affect the attendance at Björling's recital at the Alhambra Theatre where all tickets were sold; the unfortunate Bogtman could only muster a small but enthusiastic audience.

There was some concern about whether Björling had allowed himself sufficient time to get acclimatised to the high altitude for his first recital in Johannesburg on 15th August, for he had only been in the country for two days. Although his breathing must surely have been affected, there was absolutely no sign of any stress during the recital. The voice was in superb shape. After his triumphant debut, his tour went from success to success, thrilling his audiences everywhere.

The Johannesburg concert on 29th August, broadcast "live" over the radio, was a tremendous success, great excitement being aroused by Jussi's singing of two arias that he had not yet sung on this tour, *Una furtiva lagrima* from Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'amore* and *Come un bel di di Maggio*, from Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*. His heart-rending *Addio alla madre* (*Cavalleria Rusticana*) seems to have sent his audience into a wild frenzy of stamping, shouting and whistling! "Never has there been such an ovation in this hall, never, never" declared the radio announcer, and the electrifying volume of applause echoed from loudspeakers from Natal to Namaqualand! Unfortunately for the vast radio audience, they were denied hearing Björling's encore when, at this most popular musical event of the year, they were switched back to the studio at the end of the published programme "because there was no further time left for the relay of this red-letter concert". Then came a calm, mild voice from the studio saying, "As there are 15 minutes before the next item on our programme, some piano records will now be played" So much for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!

Between Jussi's recital and concert dates, he and Anna-Lisa took the opportunity to see as much of South Africa as they could. They visited the Johannesburg Zoo and spent two days at a game reserve. JB spent one morning at a local record shop, autographing records for his eager fans. He also planned to do some fishing, if time permitted, and a game of billiards would have been welcome had he been able to find a smoke-free room. "That's my only trouble with billiards," he told one reporter, "so many players forget a singer's throat. I wish they would take the right cue". (Do we detect a Swedish joke here?).

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Throughout this tour reporters pursued JB, but he remained as reluctant as ever to give interviews. Years of being asked endless, irrelevant questions such as "Do you enjoy singing?" "What is your chest measurement?" or "What is your favourite food?" had forced him to take steps to avoid speaking to the press.

He would occasionally speak to a newsman if he was in the mood, but in many instances the interviews seem to have been left to his lovely and ever-patient wife Anna-Lisa. And so it was from her that the South African public learned a little about her famous husband and their family.

One newspaper report suggests that on this occasion JB dispensed with encores altogether. This was most unusual for in recital he would often sing more encores than there were items in the printed programme!

8.45 Concert from the Johannesburg City Hall by the celebrated tenor Jussi Björling and the SABC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Jeremy Schulman  
Konsert vanuit die Johannesburgse .Stadaal deur die beroemde tenoor, Jussi

cont. on p. 48



THE NATAL MERCURY, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 25, 1954.

## Durban Gives Singer A Great Ovation

A PACKED house in the Durban City Hall last night gave Mr. Jussi Björling, the Swedish tenor of international fame, a great ovation.

If it be true that Durban music lovers are phlegmatic folk they must have forgotten themselves in their enthusiasm, for twice, after two operatic arias, they crashed in with bursts of applause before the singer had completed his climatic note.

It was bad manners, no doubt, but it was an indication of the singer's tremendous artistic appeal.

### GENEROUS ENCORES

Generous encores marked the programme throughout and at its close. It began with the old-world charm of "Dies bildnis" from Mozart's "Magic Flute" and passed on to five delightful and contrasted lieder of Schubert and Brahms, followed by the "Celeste Aida" from Verdi's "Aida" wherein the audience received in full measure the rich flavour of Mr. Björling's vocal genius.

Beauty of tone, the clearest articulation in the most strenuous of passages, and unfailing flexibility of phrasing were the outstanding characteristics of all that he did. The "Aida" brought him resounding acclamation, and he replied with the impassioned "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's "Turandot."

### IN ENGLISH

In the second half there were delightful things in English, such as the popular yet unbackneyed "I Dream of Jeannie" (Foster), "Will o' the Wisp" (Spross), and the exquisite "Lilacs" and "In the Silence of the Night" of Rachmaninoff.

These were succeeded by two operatic arias, "E lucevan le stelle" from Puccini's "Tosca" and the Flower Song from Bizet's "Carmen," two contrasted gems which brilliantly manifested afresh the singer's capacity in dramatic and lyrical utterance. Three encores were the final result before the audience would let him go.

And who shall blame them for their greed, seeing that this was the singer's one and only recital in the city?

In Mr. Ivor Newton, Mr. Björling had an accompanist of rare co-operative instinct.

R.T.D.

## Jussi Björling's 1954 Tour of South Africa

(cont. from p. 48)

Eric Wimbles adds:

I find it odd that Ivor Newton in his biography 'At The Piano' does not refer to the trip to South Africa as a tour and mentions it only as a concert in Johannesburg. But then it was Newton who *inter alia* also mentions in the book Jussi's reluctance to rehearse and then gives an example of Jussi actually doing so! Anyway, Newton's comments are as follows:

'... His obstinacy (JB's) was never more perfectly exemplified than in South Africa. He had agreed, in his contract, to arrive in Johannesburg four days before the concert there in order to acclimatise himself and adjust his breathing to the conditions of a city six thousand feet above sea-level: the clause requiring him to do so is a commonplace of South African agreements. Characteristically, he ignored the clause and arrived only a day before the engagement. Naturally, the altitude affected his breathing. On arrival in Johannesburg his wife, Anna-Lisa, who had herself been a singer and was both unusually beautiful and apparently eternally young, said to me, 'Please don't ask Jussi for a rehearsal.' She explained that he was extremely nervous about the outcome of the concert, and in the dressing-room he said to me, 'Don't expect me to breathe after every word—I shall find myself breathing after every syllable.' He had reached Johannesburg in millionaire style, with every possible luxury, even a sleeper on the plane. The press were waiting at the airport for him, but he refused to talk to them for his natural taciturnity always made him awkward with journalists. One woman reporter got through with a tabulated questionnaire which eventually appeared in print under the headline, 'The Tenor who can only say "NO"', for 'No' was the only answer he had given to every question she asked. Determined to get one reply in the affirmative, the journalist eventually asked, 'Do you enjoy singing?' 'Tonight—No!' Björling replied firmly.'

## Anniversary Tributes to Jussi from Around the World, February 5, 2001—Radio Programs

There were special radio programs around the world, here's a sample that we heard about—and we would be glad to learn about others, from Sweden, South America and especially the UK.

1. Very significant for many reasons was Mati Zeiti's two-hour program over the Israeli State Music Station. Of course, tensions were high (so what's new?) since national elections would take place the next day, February 6. Here's member Ellie Kett's reaction, from Holon:

"I am now 'recuperating' from Mati's program tonight in memory of Jussi Björling. Apart from the wonderful selections Mati chose to demonstrate the beauty of Jussi's voice, he designed the program to present the development of this artist from the early age of nine . . . I can't describe the thrill I felt when I heard Jussi sing with his brothers . . . [Then the] Neapolitan song we hear Jussi sing at the age of 18 ["Torna a Surriento"] reveals a finished artist to me. It's the same voice and beautiful singing one hears practically until Jussi's death. It's just amazing how he maintained this special sound without any apparent wear and tear.

"Another highlight was the Act I love duet from *La Bohème* (1949, San Francisco) with Anna-Lisa. What a surprise to hear what a wonderful singer she was. Bravo Mati for an absolutely superb program.

"Happy Birthday Jussi and thank you for all the beauty and joy you have given us."

Mati's comment in return: "I am glad to tell you that I am getting all the time fantastic reactions from music lovers all over Israel, from Kibuzim and cities, to this program. Thanks to Harald, Dan, Enrique, Mickey and to all those who helped me in some essential details to build the "story" of this program. "I do hope that this will be the starting point for our Israeli JB Society."

2. There were other radio programs around the world. Kristian Krogholm mentioned that Norwegian Radio featured Jussi during the weekend preceding February 5, and quoted one listener calling in: "There is something supernatural about his voice, as if he stands above all physical laws of nature." We learned from Andrew Farkas that George Jellinek would replay his 1997 "The Vocal