

Mama, Sing with Papa

by Herbert Kupferberg

The Bjoerling youngsters knew what they liked: a vocal duet by their famous father and their lovely mother. Today, concertgoers are discovering that they like it, too.

During his current joint-concert tour, Jussi Bjoerling, the Metropolitan Opera Company's great tenor, is facing what is probably the most satisfactory competition of his career. In bookings spread over North America from Montreal, Canada to Columbus, Georgia, he has been sharing the stage with a striking blond soprano—and although he has been losing a good part of the applause to her, he doesn't seem to mind at all. For the soprano is his wife, Anna-Lisa, who is making her first singing tour of America.

Bjoerling (pronounced Byur-ling) is the Swedish tenor who was selected to open this year's opera season singing the title role in the now historic revival of Verdi's *Don Carlo*. He has been an opera singer for some 15 years and a Met star since 1938; but Anna-Lisa, who married him just at the start of his career, saw that as a fitting occasion to put aside her own operatic ambitions so she could raise a family. Only the fact that their three children—Anders, fourteen, Lars-Olof, eleven, and Ann-Charlotte, seven—are now in school prompted her to resume singing.

Last April, before they took the family show on the road, the Bjoerling's tried it out at New York's Carnegie Hall. The enthusiasm of the audience, coupled with a good critical response, convinced the two singers that other American cities might like to hear their duets. Since then, bookings have poured in, and they have signed for several radio engagements. Their concert dates have been limited only by Jussi's schedule at the Metropolitan; as it is, he has to fly back and forth between the tour cities and New



Metropolitan Opera's great tenor, Jussi Bjoerling, and his wife, Anna-Lisa. At left, Mrs. Bjoerling puts the finishing touches to her husband's *Don Carlo* costume



(Below) The Bjoerlings at the family home in Sweden. The children, Lars-Olof, 11, Ann-Charlotte, 7, and Anders, 14, now attend school there. They have made two trips to the United States

York to keep his Met commitments.

Bjoerling, whom the San Francisco Chronicle has called "one of the truly phenomenal men of music," says of the new venture:

"I used to feel that one singer in the family was enough, but this joint tour makes me think I was wrong.

"At our Carnegie Hall debut, I was more nervous than my wife was. Maybe it showed, too, because they gave her flowers at the end. Me. I got nothing.

"Seriously, he adds, she has such a beautiful voice that it would be a crime not to let her sing."

Despite the applause she is receiving now, Anna-Lisa doesn't feel that her years of silence were wasted. "Sometime maybe I missed the excitement and glamour a little," she admits, "but having the children around me made up for it." It was a busy life and a

good one. I had my three little ones and my husband to take care of, and you can't do that when you're singing."

Having been happily married for many years, the Bjoerlings agree about almost everything except slenderizing diets and exercise. Anna-Lisa, voted the most beautiful girl in Sweden in a newspaper contest when she was sixteen, keeps her figure by doggedly exercising every morning and night in her hotel room; Jussi who is contentedly rotund, sits in an easy chair and clocks her. After the Met season, the Bjoerlings return to Sweden; when they go fishing near their summer home on an island in the Baltic Sea, he holds the line and she rows. With his husky physique and powerful, ringing voice, Bjoerling is a throwback to the old-fashioned opera singer, while his wife is more typical of the new streamlined version.

The Bjoerlings first met at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Stockholm during the early 1930s. Jussi Bjoerling was the school's most promising student, Anna-Lisa Berg its most beautiful. Jussi's older brother took care of the introductions; the tenor didn't find out until years later that the meeting was Anna-Lisa's idea.

The two singers were married in 1935, soon after Jussi had joined Stockholm's Royal Opera.

Then, while her husband was winning the European renown that led to his electrifying Metropolitan debut at the age of twenty-seven, Anna-Lisa stayed home. Her vocal teacher warned her that too many years away from public performances might ruin her voice, but Mrs. Bjoerling, willing to take the chance, confined her singing to lullabies.

However, the Bjoerling children were always after their mother to "sing with Papa." Three years ago, they coaxed Anna-Lisa into making a home recording of an operatic duet with Jussi—and then secretly took the record to the manager of Stockholm's biggest radio station. After the record was played over the air, everything seemed to conspire against the soprano's retirement. Early in 1948, the late Count Folke Bernadotte, an old friend of the family, invited Jussi and Anna-Lisa to sing the leading parts in a Red Cross benefit performance of Puccini's *La Boheme* at the Stockholm Opera. With the children beaming at them from the audience, they scored such a hit that they were signed up for a series of joint performances. That led eventually to their American tour.

The Bjoerling children have made two trips to America to hear their father sing at the Metropolitan, but, this time, to the regret of the whole family, schoolwork has made it impossible for them to leave.

Family traveling is an old Bjoerling tradition. In 1920, Jussi made his first trip to this country, as a member of the Bjoerling Male Quartet. This flourishing ensemble was composed of Jussi, aged nine, his brothers Olle and Goesta, eleven and seven respectively, and their father David. Decked out in their national costumes—black shoes, white stockings, calfskin trousers,

blue vests and white shirts adorned with ribbons—they sang before Scandinavian societies and church groups across the country.

The senior Bjoerling called a halt only when it became painfully apparent that his sons were no longer sopranos.

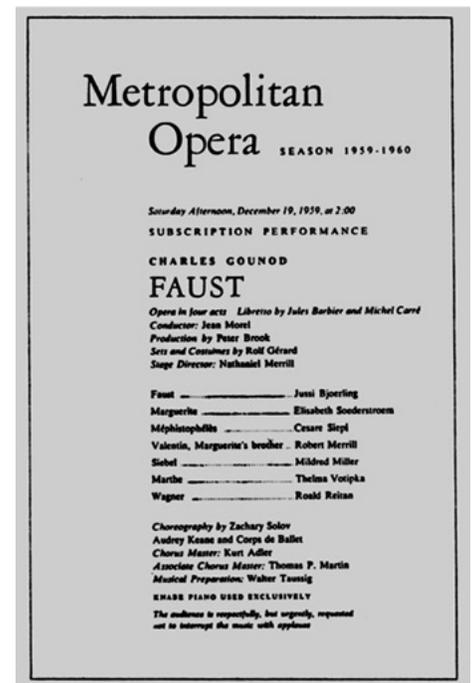
Once during this trip Jussi narrowly missed seeing the inside of the Metropolitan Opera House 17 years ahead of time. As the quartet was winding up its tour in New York City, the elder Bjoerling proudly told his family that he had managed to procure four tickets to hear the great Caruso sing. In his excitement, he failed to notice his sons' lack of enthusiasm as he dragged them past the movie palaces of Broadway toward the Met. Finally the boys plucked up their courage and informed him that their tastes for the evening ran to a horse opera starring William Hart.

So David Bjoerling sadly heard Caruso alone, and picked up his progeny after the movie. Jussi never did see the Metropolitan Opera House, until he sang there.

The above article appeared in Colliers, February 17, 1951, a few months after Jussi's debut in Don Carlo (Nov. 6, 1950), followed by several performances of Faust with Dorothy Kirsten; Manon Lescaut with Eleanor Steber, Dorothy Kirsten, and Licia Albanese; and the now legendary studio recordings at the Manhattan Center with Robert Merrill. On January 16, 1951, Jussi and Anna-Lisa resumed their joint recitals, performing in Portland, ME, Quebec, Montreal, Denver, and Columbus, GA, before returning to Stockholm. Later that year, they appeared on two broadcasts of the Edgar Bergen – Charlie McCarthy Show in Los Angeles, performing "Ange adorable" from Gounod's Romeo et Juliette and "Will you remember" from Sigmund Romberg's Maytime, as well as comic dialogue with Edgar and Charlie, which are preserved in audio.

Memories of Jussi in Performance

by Robert B. Ardis



If memory serves, I was privileged to see and hear Jussi Björling in person five times at the old Met: once in *Manon Lescaut*, twice in *Tosca*, once in *Faust*, and one last time in *Cavalleria rusticana*. I also saw and heard him twice in recital at Carnegie Hall and several times in recital at the Hunter College Auditorium. I think there was also an appearance at a Swedish Seaman's benefit at Carnegie Hall.

I first discovered Jussi, of course, through LP phonograph records, beginning with that great and justly famous RCA recording of *Il trovatore* with Zinka Milanov and Leonard Warren and an RCA solo recital disk shared on the other side with Robert Merrill. From then on, I made sure I didn't miss anything Jussi managed to record. The non-commercial stuff came later, and it was thrilling to find it available. The single most thrilling Björling recording track of all: for me, it has to be the "oath duet" from *Otello* that he recorded in the early 1950s with baritone Robert Merrill. I've never heard anything quite like it and I've been