

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 Jelinek would replay his 1997 "The Vocal

Scene" interview of Andrew on WQXR February 1, and many of our members heard this on their local stations or via the internet. In fact, member Carol Pozefsky taped the show and made it available to many of us - many thanks to her! [We will be able to provide further copies to interested members - later this year (read *after* the June conference), just let me know.—DS]

3. The WFMT national network based in Chicago carried the special 25th anniversary program of Andy Karzas' "From the Recording Horn," and it began with Jussi's 1938 "Au mont Ida" from *La Belle Hélène*. Yoël Arbeitman and Toby Hekler were pleased with Sandy Steiglitz' WPRB tribute from Princeton NJ, which included playing the complete 1956 *Bobème* and an hour of Jussi in duets with his leading ladies Cigna, Sayão, Kirsten, Barbieri, de los Angeles, Milanov and Peters. (For Yoël's commentary about this program helping break the "taboo" against playing 50-year-old Met broadcast transcriptions on the radio, see <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bjorling/message/3307>.) And Wisconsin Public Radio played "Adelaide" ('39), the *Pearlfishers* duet, Söderman's "The Enchanted Lake" and "Ingemisco" ('38) between Saturday and Monday.

Do let us know about other special anniversary programs you heard! —Ed.

Anniversary Tributes to Jussi from Around the World, February 5, 2001—Internet Comments

Here are some of the key birthday salutes to Jussi on the Internet, February 5, 2001:

1. From Karl Hekler to the Bjorling@ yahoogroups list, 4 February 2001: [I recently came across some biographical notes of the the actor and director Charles Nelson Reilly, which] mentioned that his boat is named "La Boheme." This triggered my memory of a Reilly appearance on the Tonight Show many years ago. Johnny Carson asked him what first got him interested in theater. He replied that when he was very young, he saw *La Bohème* at the Bushnell Theater in Hartford CT (25 Jan. 1951) with Jussi Björling and Bidù Sayão, and that fantastic performance made him determined to make his life in the theater.

That particular performance in Hartford always has been a thorn in my side. My friend Dotty Orrick had asked me if I wanted to go up to Hartford with her. I was a sophomore in college with term papers due, and I was afraid to take the time. I figured I'd have plenty of opportunities to hear Jussi sing *Bobème* in NYC. Dotty told me later that the performance had been fantastic, and that a group of people had got on the "milk train" back to NYC all excited and talking about the great performance. The young baritone who sang Marcello said what a thrill it was to sing with the great Jussi Björling and how considerate and helpful he was. Just then, who should board the car but Jussi himself, carrying a satchel. Everyone burst into applause, and started trying to ask him questions like, "are you going to ride back to New York with us?" Jussi looked overwhelmed, smiled politely and left. I guess some singers would love to ride in a train full of adoring fans from Hartford to NY, but the basically shy, reticent and undoubtedly tired Jussi Björling opted not to.

My live Björling *Bobème* had to wait until February 1, 1954, at the Met. (I had got tickets for an earlier *Bobème* with Jussi but he had been indisposed and we got a young di Stefano instead. I look back with embarrassment at how bitterly we complained!) The days leading up to the February 1 performance were a complete nervewrack for us: At his last performance at the Met in December, a chronic throat infection had forced Jussi to leave a performance of *Faust* after the first act [Karl's report of that event is in issue 4Q99 (#8) of this *Journal*], and subsequently to cancel an NBC Symphony *Ballo* broadcast which was Maestro Toscanini's farewell to opera. Jussi had been convalescing in Sweden during January.

On January 31 I called the St Moritz Hotel and asked whether a Mr. Jussi Björling was staying there. The operator immediately said "Yes, Mr. Björling IS here and he WILL be singing in *La*

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