

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.

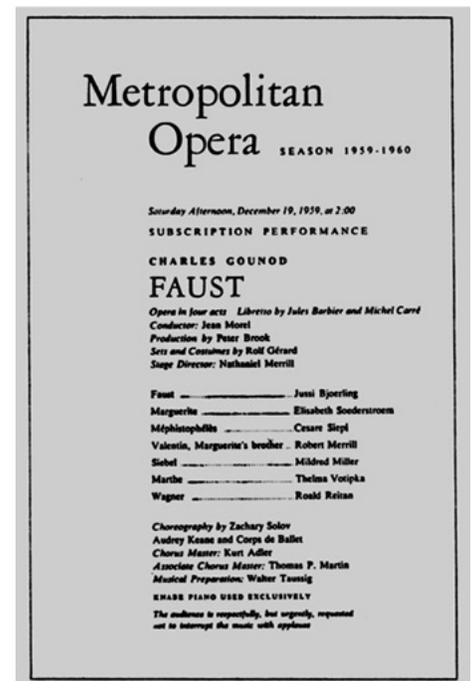
Once during this trip Jussi narrowly missed seeing the inside of the Metropolitan Opera House 17 years ahead of time. As the quartet was winding up its tour in New York City, the elder Bjoerling proudly told his family that he had managed to procure four tickets to hear the great Caruso sing. In his 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

privileged to see and hear some really great performances of the opera with the likes of Plácido Domingo, Jon Vickers, and James McCracken.

I was even able to meet Björling in person once in November of 1959. He sang in two performances of Gounod's *Faust* that year, first in a weeknight performance and second in a Saturday afternoon broadcast performance. I managed to attend the weeknight performance and had a seat up in the Grand Tier of the old house. During the first intermission, I was chatting with a lady sitting next to me and I guess it became obvious to her that I was very much a Jussi Björling fan. During the next intermission, she asked me if I would like to go backstage after the performance and meet him in person. Would I ever?

It turned out that the lady was a friend of Anna-Lisa Björling's. After the performance, I went around with her to the stage door entrance, where a small group gathered to wait for Mrs. Björling. When she arrived, she led the whole group through that rabbit warren that was the old Met backstage to the Björling dressing room. When it became my turn to be introduced, I knew that he had already had at least one heart attack, so all I could think of to say to him was "Please take care of yourself, Mr. Björling." Sadly, he had less than a year yet to live.

The performance itself is still the most thrilling performance of *Faust* I've ever heard. Other featured performers were Elisabeth Söderström, Cesare Siepi, Robert Merrill, and Mildred Miller. Pretty hard to beat that line-up. I have a Myto recording of the broadcast performance which I still manage to listen to from time to time.

Robert B. Ardis graduated from the College of Engineering of the University of Michigan in February of 1946, courtesy of the United States Navy, and from the School of Law, evening division, of New York University in May of 1951. He was a member of the patent staff of Bell Telephone Laboratories from 1947 until retiring in 1988 as Patent Attorney Director. He also retired as Captain, United States Naval Reserve, in 1978.

Mr. [David] Björling's Concert

A Review by Eric Westberg, *Hudiksvallsposten*



David Björling with (left to right) sons Olle, Gösta and Jussi, circa 1916.

Though DB's concert belongs to a form of art which does not deserve public mention, I am grateful to give my opinion about it due to the pretentious way in which Mr. Björling's family appears.

Since there is no law forbidding false indication of origin, as far as the title of a performer is concerned, one has to accept the label "opera singer," but my strong conviction is that Mr. Björling has hardly even from a public seat been acquainted with our royal opera stage, surely he can not bring with him this proud title from any foreign opera company. A modest role in a third class touring operetta company could possibly be the defense for such audacity. Method of singing, diction, musical culture, all which might defend appearance in a city (what city Mr. B calls his native one has nothing to do with music), is to him as foreign as his ear was foreign to the concept of purity.

One can only pity the three little boys. To be forced to howl with convulsive tension, which even destroyed any pronunciation of the words, cannot be any pleasure even for a father, whatever confused ideas he has about education, breathing, etc. As beautifully as a well schooled treble voice can sound, for instance from the boys in the Berlin Cathedral Choir, as deplorable it was to hear these constricted yells. Far from making the voice hardy, this is probably the most effective way to entirely destroy any talent. I dare even claim that the propaganda Mr. B makes with his children is extremely destructive. If Mr. B means that this should be an example worth following as far as juvenile singing is concerned, I must most definitely warn against doing that.

Mr. B, when three people sing the same tune, that is called unison singing, not trio. The compilation of the program is unforgivable, but says enough in its naivety. Three things were first-rate: the entrance fee, the well-fitting tail-coat and the promotion that preceded the so-called concert.

If I have with these words put Mr. B out of action in northern Hälsingland, I consider myself to have done a good and blessed work.

Editor's Note: Eric Westberg was manager of the Stockholm Concert Association 1919-27, one of the founders of the Swedish Performing Rights Society and its manager 1923-44.

This review, of a June 1918 performance, was read aloud by Harald Henrysson at dinner at the Quality Hotell Statt on Friday, Aug 31, 2018, for the amusement of members of JBS-USA during their trip to Sweden. It is not known, but assumed, that Mr. Westberg lived to regret his predictions!