

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*

Anniversary Tributes to Jussi—Internet

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Bobème tomorrow night." Apparently mine was not the first nervous call. When the opera began and Jussi sang his first line, there was a sigh in the standing room crowd. He was in great voice! He clowned around with Merrill, Siepi and Cehanovsky. Albanese also was in great voice, and by the end of Act 1, the Met audience was delirious. In the Act 2 ensemble at the end of Musetta's waltz aria, he let out a brilliant high note that sailed out of the ensemble. In Act 3, he and Albanese were spinning magic with their parts, singing crescendos and decrescendos like I had never heard before. His Act 4 duet with Merrill was classic, very poignant. The death scene was shattering. After Mimi died, Jussi turned to Merrill, Siepi and Cehanovsky, desperately looking for help. They quite naturally looked helpless, and Jussi turned around to his Mimi and his back and shoulders were shaking as the curtain closed.

It was one of the greatest performances I ever heard, and everyone there agreed. The late Bert Wechsler, an old friend who went on to write reviews (for *Opera News*, etc.), was at that time working backstage. He told me that the chorus always went home as soon as they finished, since they were there almost every night and had rehearsals during the day. This night nobody left. They were packed in the wings to watch and listen, Bert told me.

Afterwards backstage, Robert Merrill burst into Jussi's crowded dressing room and joked, "How did you like that sensational 'Che gelida manina' I sang tonight?" We all cracked up, laughing. They waved and grinned at each other, and Merrill left. Conductor Emerson Buckley, who had been in the audience that night, got near to Jussi and asked what key he wanted for "Di quella pira." Jussi said, "The original." Buckley asked, "The original?" Jussi repeated, "The original." Buckley said, see you on the—(I don't remember the date). Somebody asked what that was all about and Jussi said they were going to Miami for *Trovatore*, and then to some Caribbean Island (I don't recall which one) for some deep sea fishing. At that, Jussi imitated the motions of a deep sea fisherman trying to land a large marlin. He was absolutely charming.

Please forgive the length of this post—think of it as some of the most precious memories of an older guy, celebrating the birthday of someone who changed his life [as Charles Nelson Reilly also had tried to explain].

2. George Topinges wrote this post to Opera-L: Hello List, Happy Birthday to our beloved Jussi Bjoerling. He would have been 90 today.

The first time I ever heard his voice was on a 78 record that I won on a Met quiz. In those days a 5-record 78 album was your prize. It was "Celeste Aïda" and "Che gelida". I was immediately hooked. After WWII, he was one of the first European stars to return to the Met. The first time I met him was in 1946 in Cleveland with the Met on tour. They added an extra performance and it was *La Bobème* with Jussi and Licia. I was absolutely carried away by the beauty of his voice. The Municipal Auditorium there seated 9000, an old barn that had to be amplified. In the same venue, one year later, he did *Trovatore* with a super Azucena—Cloe Elmo.

In Miami, I heard him in *Trovatore* with Astrid Varnay, Claramae Turner and Robert Weede. Turner also was a great Azucena. [Note: this is the 27 February 1954 performance at Miami Beach, conducted by E. Buckley and mentioned in Karl's posting above.]

I also had the pleasure of hearing Jussi in two concerts in Miami. After one of those, I went backstage to speak to him, and told him that I was studying for opera and he said "oh." There was a dear lady standing there whom I didn't know, who spoke up and added, "yes, and he has a beautiful voice." Then Jussi said, "OOOH." If by chance you think that that doesn't make you feel wonderful, please guess again!

3. In a posting by Roy on opera-L, we read: It's the anniversary of Jussi Bjoerling's birth, so today I highlight websites which honor the Swedish tenor. I'm going out on a limb here, but I'll bet that next to Callas, Bjoerling has more webpages devoted to him than any other opera singer whose career was over before the WorldWideWeb began (i.e., in "the Dark Ages"). Here's a list of sites for you to visit:

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- www.jussibjorlingsociety.com/
- www.best.com/~els/Bjorling/bjorling.shtml
- members.nbc.com/jussi_list/
- www.geocities.com/Vienna/4315/ [check under "Misc" postings from Opera-L for Bjoerling]
- utenti.fastnet.it/utenti/sciocchetti/

Forty years after his death, it is a testament to Bjoerling's talent that he is remembered so fondly still by his fans.

4. Bob Dilley of Opera-L also provided an especially memorable posting. (We owe to Toby Hekler the information that Mr. Dilley posts every day the birthdays and death dates of famous singers, and he ends his posts every day with JUSSI LIVES AND RULES!)

I wish to pay tribute to our beloved Jussi for just a moment. What can one say about his peerless, gorgeous voice? [Jussi already has been canonized by gifted critics.] I can only tell you that when I first heard Jussi on the radio (I was about 11 or 12) I could not believe what I was hearing. To this day, I can call up and hear in my mind that beautiful, gorgeous "ring" in his voice. Besides the ring, two other attributes of his voice left me imprinted—the "purity" of his tone, and a crystal clear true tenor sound. From that point on until this day, I have been a devout Jussi Bjoerling lover. For me, Jussi set the standards in opera for all other tenors, both before him and those who followed.

(Bob makes further remarks, and ends with a list of Jussi's roles that he never recorded commercially, as well as his traditional mantra: JUSSI LIVES AND RULES!)

5. And Jerry Waldman's post on Opera-L was especially enthusiastic, here is part of that one: One is always awestruck not only by the plangent beauty of his voice, but also the immaculate control and exquisite shadings with breathtaking *diminuendi* and *pianissimi*. How fortunate we are to have had his special artistry grace our stages and enrich our lives. It would be wonderful to hear from older folks who were privileged to see Jussi at his peak in live performances. [Now, for this, we refer you back to postings #1 and 2!—*Ed.*]

The Smithsonian Presents . . . Bertil Bengtsson

En route to his talks at the Gustavus JBS Conference, Bertil Bengtsson will speak in Washington DC under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution. This talk is titled *Jussi Björling: A Swedish Tenor Who Became an American Favorite* and will take place at 6:30 PM on June 26 at the auditorium of the Hirschhorn Sculpture and Art Gallery, 7th and Independence Avenues, with a reception following.

Here's a publicity blurb that appears in the Smithsonian Associates Bulletin for April:

Sweden has produced many great singers, but during the century just passed none was so widely admired as tenor Jussi Björling. His extraordinarily beautiful voice and impeccable musicianship earned him critical acclaim and enthusiastic audiences right from his professional debut, in 1930 at age 19, until his untimely death in 1960.

Swedish musicologist Bertil Bengtsson will use rare recordings, slides, videos and archival material to describe this fascinating tenor's career by presenting an intimate view of Björling's 40-year-long odyssey as a Swede on the American stage. Bengtsson also will include a short survey of Swedish opera singers in the US, from Jenny Lind to the present, putting Jussi Björling into a historical context, and helping justify the old saying that Sweden has exported three things above all: wood, steel and singers.

This event is co-sponsored by JBS-USA and the Embassy of Sweden. We are grateful to Bea Bobotek for her enterprise in suggesting this idea and pulling together many strings!