

The Recorded Legacy— Reviews of Recent Releases of Interest to JBS Members

It's a full-time job these days to keep track of new releases of Björling recordings, with recent CDs coming from Scandinavia, Italy, Germany, the U.S. and Korea. Luckily we have some dedicated folk monitoring the scene: Kristian Krogholm in Norway, Lars-Henrik Österholm and Harald Henrysson in Sweden, Eric Wimbles in England, Yoël Arbeitman and Hal Sokolsky in New Jersey, Carlo Ceruti and Alessandro Sciocchetti in Italy and many others, with much exchange of information on the Bjorling@yahoogroups.com list. We'll discuss here just some of the recent releases of special interest and give some reactions to them, either from magazines like ARG (American Record Guide) or Gramophone, or from our internet experts. And at the end of this column, we'll have an announcement about this *Journal's* next Recordings Editor!

1. Naxos' Historical Series has released Vol. 1 of its "Jussi Björling Collection," CD 8.110722 ("Complete opera & operetta recordings in Swedish, 1930-38").
2. "Jussi & Anna-Lisa Björling in Concert in San Francisco, 1949, Naxos 8.8110142.
3. *Manon Lescaut* (Met broadcast, 1949), Naxos 811012324.

Note: To find many ways to order European-released CDs such as #3, check www.operaphile.com

There is a lot of satisfaction being expressed with the sound-quality of these releases. Kristian has written: "Naxos continues to give us a natural, warm and brilliant-sounding Jussi Björling in these reissues of legendary radio broadcasts from America. The San Francisco concert was released last year by Urania, but that sounded sharp [overly bright] as if they tried to add *squillo* to the performance. On Naxos, Jussi finally sounds natural, not hard-edged. In the two previous CD releases of this material, the incredible high C in "Che gelida manina" sounded just a bit sharp. But on Naxos there is nothing of the sort. The high C is superfocused and perfect in every sense.

The *Manon Lescaut* broadcast is certainly better than the Myto version, and Jussi sounds just right. Naxos is becoming a favorite of mine." (30 January, 2001)

And Lars-Henrik agrees fully: "The Naxos issues are better than the Urania and Myto."

[**Note:** There is a splendid review in *The Opera Quarterly's* Vol. 16, No. 2 (what we call "the Björling issue") by Andrew Farkas of the Met Opera's release of this *Manon Lescaut* performance as a Historic Broadcast Recording. Subscriptions and back issues of OQ can be ordered at 800-852-7323 toll-free in the USA and Canada, or +44 1865 267907 in the UK. Via E-mail, use jnl.orders@oup.co.uk.]

About #1 above, Kristian wrote: "I can assure you that the price is the only thing that is low here. This is so far the best issue of these recordings. This is Jussi Björling's wonderful, warm, sweet and brilliant voice. And the text is by Harald Henrysson, and that means that it is perfect. Apart from his incredible knowledge of Jussi's life and recordings, he always has a natural and charming modesty when writing about Jussi."

Toby and Karl Hekler agree: "The sound is substantially better than the EMI (4-CD JB Edition) and the Legato. The voice really pops and rings and pings on these recordings of the very young Jussi." (20 January, 2001)

Note: To complicate matters, Kristian wrote more recently of another CD with material overlapping that of #1:

4. History CD "Trumpets of Jericho," from Germany, more transfers of Jussi's recordings from 1930-1944 done with 24-bit remastering: "The voice sounds clear . . . and full, not at all dry (as with the EMI-Edition) and with great dynamics, and just a bit of surface noise." When I promoted him for a comparison with the Naxos CD (#1 above) he said that he thought the "Trumpets" CD "lacks the presence and the immediacy of the Naxos." On the other hand, this release contains remasterings of Jussi's 1940 lieder recordings not on the Naxos (although we can expect the Naxos series

eventually to cover all of his 78s), and he thought those to be particularly good. In fact, he quoted our Jussi- conoscitore in Ancona, Alessandro Sciocchetti, as having pronounced these transfers of the 1940 lieder as the best to date.

5. *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*, the 8 December, 1954, broadcasts from Stockholm Royal Opera, on Bluebell. Finally we have these performances in good ("relatively great" says Yoël, carefully) sound, in a release authorized by Operan management to commemorate the 9 September, 2000, anniversary. Of course, Jussi always sang Canio in Swedish (except for the commercial recording), but the performance has its own integrity and Jussi's vocalism and intensity is thrilling. (This can be ordered via allclassicalmusic.com for about \$25.)

6. *Il Trovatore*, the 12 May, 1939, broadcast from Covent Garden with Cigna, Wettergren, Basiola; Gui cond. This is available on Urania, Legato and Bel Canto Society. These recordings (and possibly a fourth version) apparently emanate from two different sources, and there will be a detailed review by Andrew Farkas in a future issue of *The Opera Quarterly*. I have tried to listen carefully to all three versions, and like them all, for the performance, not the sound. Yoël definitely prefers the Urania. This is the remarkable performance cited by both Stephen Hastings and Jürgen Kesting, elsewhere in this issue. The *London Evening News* wrote of this performance, "His singing appealed irresistibly with its easy flow of beautiful tone, its fine lines and delicacy." Paul Galbraith called to tell us about the Bel Canto #5000 set, which is available at \$20 from 800-347-5056 (USA) or www.belcantosociety.org.

7. "Björling Rarities," VAIA 1189. Here are some excerpts from George Jellinek's review in *Opera News* (Jan. 2001): "Although Jussi Bjoerling's repertoire of arias and songs was quite large, only a fraction of it found its way into his substantial recorded legacy. He had a habit of re-recording his favorite recital pieces . . . sometimes frustrating his legion of enthusiasts eager to discover hitherto undiscovered riches. They will find partial solace in this collection of rarities lovingly assembled and knowingly annotated by Cantor Don Goldberg, a Bjoerling scholar. . . . Of special interest is a 1938 sequence that contains Bjoerling's first "Salut, demeure" (in Swedish; the French version followed a year later), with a stunning high C, and his first recording of Des Grieux's "Le Rêve," with a marvelous diminuendo. The same remarkable diminuendo is on display in Don José's flower song (1939). . . . The uniquely ringing brightness of Bjoerling's tenor and his admirable limitless legato are everywhere evident. . . ."

8. *Verdi Requiem*, with Price, Elias, Tozzi; Reiner cond. London Legends. This is the 1960 version (JB's last complete set) previously available on Decca Jubilee (and RCA LPs), but with modern re-engineering. Kristian, Sue F. and Tom H. admired the sound (Tom states: "For the first time I was able to hear Jussi just as he sounded [live], the previous year when I heard him in concert . . . His voice is crystal clear and ringing in the other passages; the Hostias sent shivers up my spine (and I have listened to that segment several hundred times in the past); the Lux Aeterna is a marvel of vocal art from all three participants.") Tom agrees that Price, Elias and Tozzi all benefit from the improved sound. But Hal S. found that the sound "blew me out of my chair...an abuse of engineering . . . The quartet is a great one, and the performance is part of the Björling legacy." (18 Nov., 2000)

9. One of my favorite recent CDs was provided by JBS member Barnett Mitzman, his "J.B. Live Performances of the 1940s" contains some spectacular singing: Two performances of "Ah, fuyez" from *Manon* (4301a and 4801d in the H. Henrysson Phonography lexicon), both currently unavailable commercially according to Sue F., as are also HHP 4602c (Pearlfishers aria) and 4902d,e,f (songs by Söderman, Alfvén, Sjögren). The recently discovered English-language "Die Allmacht" from a 1946 Firestone Hour broadcast also fascinates. (That also is available on a CD of rarities produced by the Vocal Record Collectors Society, and probably available via allclassicalmusic.com.) For information on Barnett's CD, write via barnett@infohouse.com

cont. on p. 54

The Recorded Legacy

(cont. from p. 55)

10. Monopoly 2053 and 2054 are two 2-CD sets from Korea with considerable overlap with #4 and #1 above. Sue Flaster has been impressed with 2053, she believes it may replace Radio Years CDs I and III "which is a great thing, since those are hard to find and the January 1940 NY lieder session is so important. The sound is splendid - better than the Radio Years, to my ears." The sound of the 1939 Hilversum concert on 2053 "is really excellent—it may be the same source as the Bluebell issue, but with better sound and the 'burbles' at 'quoque' and the climax of the 'Ingemisco' handled better." For owners of the Henrysson bible, here are the HHP numbers describing 2053: 10, 22, 32, 36, 55, 67, 69, 91, 124-133, 149, 150, 3703c, 3707b, 3708a,c,d, 3902, 4002b1, d2, 4201a, c, 4303c.

On the other hand, 2054 seems simply a reissue of standard studio recordings, like those on earlier Grammfono CDs and on Naxos #1 above.

11. Caprice CAP 21620 contains a most rare fragment of *Faust*, sung by Jussi in Stockholm, 1944. Harald Henrysson wrote about this on 24 August, 2000, to the Bjorling egroup with the heading: "For the *really* complete Jussi CD collection." Here is what he said: "It is now possible to obtain on CD a fragment of Jussi's singing in *Faust* in Stockholm on 25 September, 1944 (JB Phonography 4401), a fragment (1'55") which has never previously been issued in any form. It is the beginning of "Salut demeure." Jussi sings in French and gives the aria an unusually contemplative, beautiful rendering. Since the whole aria was not recorded, the end with the famous C is most regrettably not included.

"The aria fragment is included in a splendid 4-CD box with Swedish pupils and colleagues of the French-Swedish violinist Henri Marteau, which is available from the Museum. The reason this appears in that set has to do with Jussi's relationship to Giovanni Turicchia, leader of the Royal Orchestra."

* * *

In putting together some of these notes, I often found myself relying on the experience and resources of **Harold Sokolsky**. Hal has a large library of books, records and periodicals of all kinds, and he is generous with his knowledge. Further, he's an active contributor to the Bjorling@yahoo.com discussion list, and thus is aware of the opinions expressed there. Who better to serve as Recordings Editor for this *Journal*? We asked him, and he kindly has agreed. Thus, you can look forward to his contributions in future issues of J.JBS. By all means, please share your news and opinions about JB-related recordings with Hal at www.operaphile.com, or c/o 17 Shelburne St., Burlington, NJ 08016. Welcome, Hal!

—Dan Shea, ex-Recordings Editor

Speaking of Jussi's Birthday . . . Meet the Newest Jussi!



Anders Björling has proudly announced the birth of his newest grandchild, little Charles Anders Jussi, the son of Jennifer Björling, born December 11, 2000. You can expect Charlie and Jennifer to be in attendance at the Gustavus Conference in June, along with Mormor Janet, as well as Anders and Janet's other daughters Lisa and Susie, and some of the rest of the family: Ian, Steve, Peter and Erik.