

Newsletter

of the Jussi Björling Societies of the USA & UK

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Peter C. Hammond, editor

Centenary of the Björling Boys Celebrated in New Book

By Sue Flaster

Björlings in America: The Singing Begins

A bilingual illustrated book by Harald Henrysson

Much of the story of David Björling in America, as well as his later misadventures with the Swedish Royal Opera, has been based on legend rather than actual history. In some cases, personal failings of a professional sort were replaced by failings of a more personal sort, with the goal of soothing wounded pride, it appears. Although David Björling seems to have been respected and admired as a singer, we have no recordings of his voice, and up to now, very few professional reviews of his singing.

The rapidly growing availability of digitized newspapers has allowed Harald Henrysson to seek and find a remarkable and startling amount of information which will be new to even the most enthusiastic followers of the Björling generational saga. David's own turn-of-the-century daring and the later cross-country tour with his boys are even more remarkable than we previously thought.

The traveling family

David's first, solo, trip to the US has come to us largely as folklore, including the notions that he was occupied both as a boxer and a gold miner. There have been almost no details about his period at the Metropolitan Opera School, nor about his other activities while in the States. Harald has been able to locate and provide many previously unknown details about David's own performance history in the US, both as a soloist and a choral singer.

In the same way, information about the period between David's two trips to the US has previously been sketched out only in vague recollections. We know that David did not join the Royal Opera, but not why: it will now be possible to draw some more probable conclusions than the dramatic gossip we've all read.

David's cross-country tour with his boys has received equally sketchy coverage over the years. Digitization has certainly helped the search, but Harald was also helped by being able to order microfilmed US newspaper during his time in Charleston SC, and we will now know about more than 150 concerts in 14 states.

CENTENARY OF THE BJÖRLING BOYS continued on page 2



Jussi Björling's Des Grieux in NEW CD Editions

By Kristian Krogholm

One of the two operas that Björling learned and performed on stage after he left the Stockholm Opera to join the Metropolitan was Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. He seemed to have just the perfect vocal gears for this opera, encapsulating both lyric brilliance and dramatic intensity in that unique musical instrument for the role of the lovesick Des Grieux. He sang the role between 1949 and 1959 and there are four complete recordings of him as Des Grieux, including the 1954 studio take in Rome.

In April 2019, no less than two recordings have been issued simultaneously. It is almost as if one's cup runneth over. Immortal Performances has issued on IPCD1110-2 the 1959 Stockholm performance, while

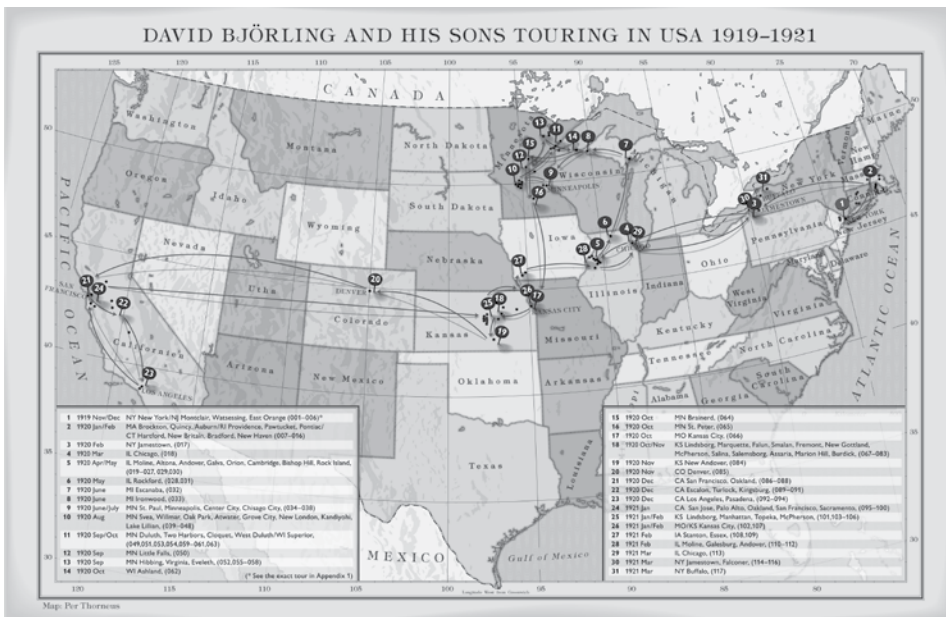
Pristine Audio has released on PACO158 the 1956 Met performance. Both, let me say, are in very gratifying sound.

For the 1959 performance, Immortal Performances (Richard Caniell) has had access to a supreme source made available by Stefan Johansson, who also contributes a very fine text. Stefan was actually there himself, and it's a satisfaction to have the description from someone who heard the singers in the flesh. Two separate recordings of that very performance were made, both in splendid sound. One was made by the Swedish Radio used for this release—of which Stefan Johansson had a copy—and another made privately. The former had been released before on Opera Depot

OD10190-2. Excerpts from the latter have been released on Caprice CAP22051. Jussi Björling's voice—I dare say—is captured extremely well on the Caprice CD. The miking is more distant than on the SR version, and the pure perfection and rich spectrum of overtones in Björling's voice stand out. "Donna non vidi mai" in particular is so heartbreakingly beautiful it almost hurts to listen to it. Still, the SR version used for IPCD1110-2 is not to be discounted.

You might hear a difference in the first act, where I think Björling's top notes sound more clear and free on Caprice. Then there is the matter of "Donna non vidi mai," where a technical mishap on the original Swedish Radio tapes distorted some of the singing; this was replaced entirely by the 1954 studio recording of the aria for the earlier Opera Depot release OD10190-2, whereas for the new Immortal Performances (IP) release Mr. Caniell explains in his notes how he has inserted a small portion from the 1956

CENTENARY OF THE BJÖRLING BOYS continued from page 1



A centenary book

Last summer, Harald was in the JB Museum in Borlänge where he saw an attractive, bilingual illustrated history of the town. The book prompted interest in the publisher,

Förlag AB Björnen of Borlänge, and its owner Björn Ericson. It occurred to Harald that 2019 is the 100th anniversary of the Björling family's adventures in the United States, and one of the last important anniversaries in the Björling saga. Harald and

Björn met and both immediately agreed that a book about these amazing performers would be a fitting monument to this anniversary. AB Björnen has produced a series of illustrated books so Björn didn't feel any special challenge in working with Harald to produce such a Björling book.

The text is nearly complete, and Harald is now hard at work finding the highest-quality copies of illustrations for the book. The current plan is to have finished books by the start of September, to have this extraordinary work available well before the holiday season. ■

Order your copies from the JBS order form (included) or from the JBS web site. *Björnings in America: The Singing Begins David 1899-1908* David, Olle, Jussi, Gösta 1919-1921 Förlags AB Björnen \$20.00