

Getting Personal . . .

by Dan Shea

When a few of us made our first steps toward forming this Jussi Björling Society back in 1998, we delighted in hearing from each new member—especially as we compared their ideas about Jussi (and other great singers) with our own. During the past three years we've continued to enjoy hearing from many of you. Certainly, our 1999 Conference enabled many of us to share our stories, and we can hope that our upcoming Conference at Gustavus allows more of the same.

But there are many more of us now, and we need some new ideas on how to maintain personal connections. If you'll write or email, we'll keep track of your suggestions and give them some circulation in this space. To help get started, here are a few ideas that I've heard about recently:

1. Increase the number of contributors to this *Journal*, and ask them to share their stories along with their articles. We're already begun to do this, as you can see from our column on the "Editorial We" early in this issue, and our "Spotlight" feature on Carla Ramsey. Do consider volunteering to join our staff: our hope is that if you let us put your name on our Masthead, you'll keep the JBS-connection in mind and possibly develop some story-ideas with us.
2. Initiate a regular column for, about and by members, with a minimum of rules: photos would be welcome. (And maybe these columns could be kept easily accessible by adding them to our website, jussibjorlingsociety.com, as they appear.) In any case, consider this an invitation to send your photo and your ideas about JB to me, for this Journal.
3. Add a Guestbook feature to the JBS website comparable to the very interesting one for Fritz Wunderlich (<http://webrum.uni-mannheim.de/bwl/praeefcke/www/counter/guestbook.html>). This "web-room" also does a fine job of reporting upcoming radio broadcasts and other news, recent CD issues, differently than JBS does with its "Jussi in the News."
4. Get together with other JBS members, or friends who should be members, in your area for some sharing of ideas about JBS: consider talking about where the next JBS conference could meet, possibly close to your area? And how can we get the word out about the existence of our JB Society? For instance, San Francisco area member Young So hopes to try this soon. And she is looking for good ideas for a JBS bumper sticker—a useful project that you could help us with.

A few words about my own obsession with J.B. and great singing.

Finally, here are some autobiographical words about myself to help explain where your editor is coming from:

It's not irrelevant for JBS that I was born in 1937 in Springfield, Massachusetts: after all, Jussi made his American concert debut in Springfield that very year. My mother's parents were Italian immigrants, from the northern *Piemonte* district, and it was in their home that I very early became fascinated with their windup phonograph and collection of Caruso records.

As a teenager I had a Mario Lanza phase, then I started checking out 78s from the city public library: There was no Lanza there, but lots of Caruso and eventually I discovered the voices of Peerce, Warren, Merrill, Ponselle and "Bjoerling." By 1952 I was a high school student in the journalism class that produced the school newspaper, and was writing reviews of local song recitals (Tucker, Schwarzkopf) and opera performances at the Bushnell Auditorium in Hartford (de los Angeles in *Butterfly*, Regina Resnik and David Poleri in *Cavalleria, Trovatore* with Stella and Warren, etc.). And I organized our school's first bus trips to Met performances (*Bobème* and *Faust* with L. Amara, J. Hines et al.), as well as to the NY City Center to hear Adele Addison's debut in *Bobème* (March 1955): she is an alumna of my school, Classical High.

A key fact about Springfield is that it's on the rail line to Hartford and New York City, so I traveled to the Record Hunter to get Swedish HMVs of Jussi Björling: what seemed thrillingly rare then is so easy to find nowadays! I managed to get to some Bjoerling performances: duets with Tebaldi at Carnegie Hall (Dec.'55, but Jussi had a cold), *Ballo* at the Met (Feb.'56), two Hunter

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College recitals (Nov.'56 and Dec.'59). I kept a scrapbook of clippings about singers, mostly Jussi, and noted the scary news about his heart problems in the late 1950s.

On September 9, 1960, *Todestag*, I was riding in DC with Paul O'Day when we heard a program on WGMS devoted entirely to Jussi: a thrill at first, until we learned the reason for the special program. Paul had heard Jussi with me at Hunter College in '59 and became a founding member of JBS.

The next years were devoted to picking up a doctorate in math ('65) at Syracuse University and a professorship at the University of Wisconsin. I met my wife Gail in Madison and we brought up our children, Darrell and Leslie, there. Gail enjoys opera but likes to say that she "won't cross state lines to go to opera," but she's making an exception for JBS' trip to Santa Fe in July. (Leslie has acknowledged her dad's obsession by giving her daughter the middle name Aria.)

Math has taken me to Sweden many times since 1975, where I studied the harmonic analysis work of the great Swedish mathematician Arne Beurling. I first met Harald Henrysson in Stockholm in 1982, and we corresponded sporadically over the years. When I met him and Bertil Bengtsson in Borlänge in 1996 they tried very hard to get me to agree to found a Björling Society in America, and I promised to attempt that after I retired in 2002.

By 1997 I was back in Borlänge with Harald and Bertil again, and this time they were able to convince me to get started with JBS: They came up with the names of Mickey Dove, Tom Hines and Andy Binns, committed Jussicologists who had between them all sorts of important expertises. And since Mickey lives minutes from two of my sisters, it was easy to get to meet her and her husband Bill to see if we could agree about how to proceed with some sort of JBS. Mickey's various organizational talents have been essential to our getting a quick and successful start, for instance in developing this *Journal*. And when our first Treasurer, Andy, needed to spend more time with his growing family, Bill Dove took over in a seamless way.

Besides the good fortune I've had in finding my JBS cofounders, I have to say that my own experience in working with opera-groups in Madison has been essential to me in working for our Society. Twenty years ago I actually helped found a short-lived opera company in Madison, and as a Board member and sometime officer of the support group for our University opera program I gained much information about nurturing student singers and their teachers, fundraising projects, getting incorporated as a nonprofit organization, etc. I also am a Board member of our Wisconsin educational "Opera for the Young" group, which brings short versions of classic operas to children aged 8-10, and I have worked for other local opera groups as well.

I know that many of you have had other sorts of experience with learning about the great singers, and supporting your local opera programs-do share your story with us!