

# 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

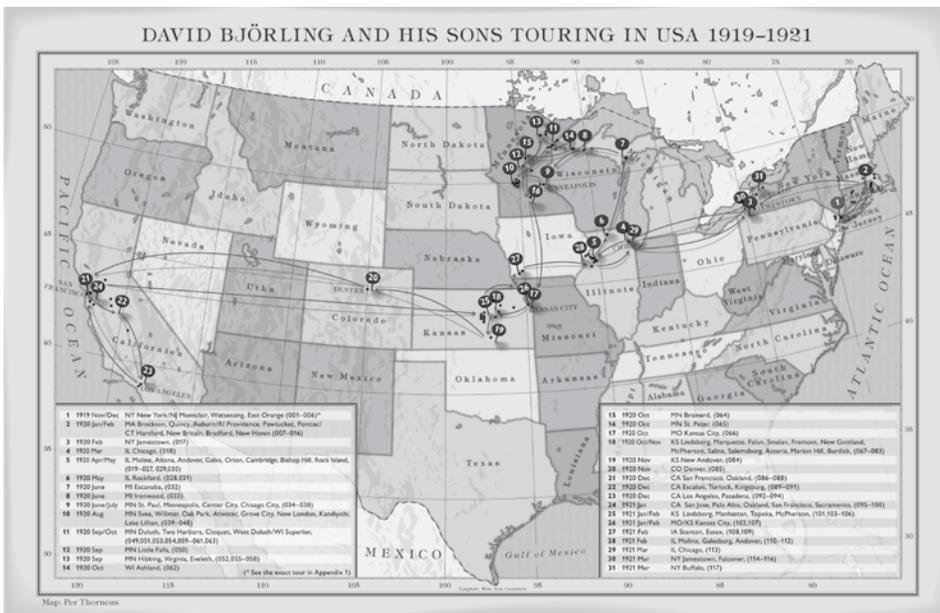
Pristine Audio has released on PACO158 the 1956 Met performance. Both, let me say, are in very gratifying sound.

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

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## 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. ■

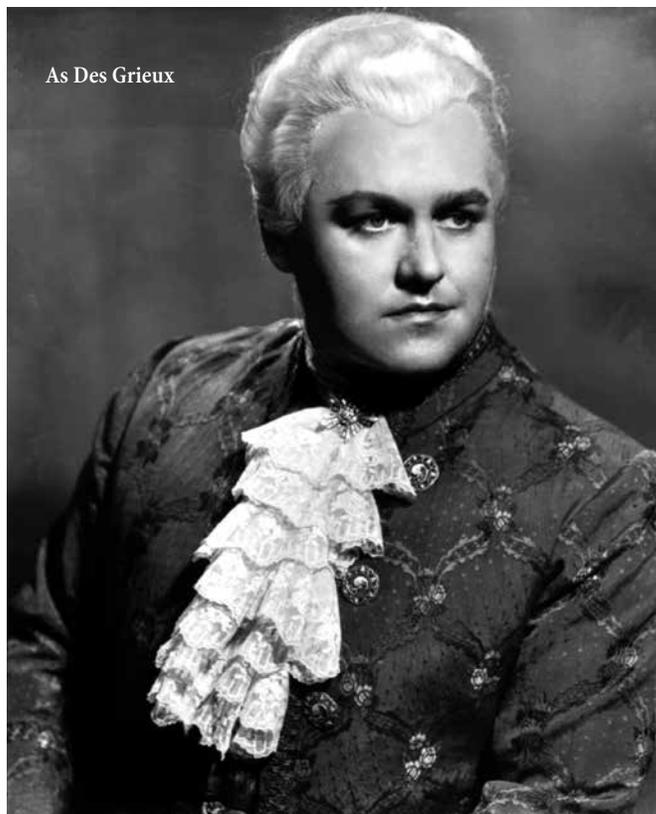
Order your copies from the JBS order form (included) or from the JBS web site. *Björlings in America: The Singing Begins David 1899-1908* David, Olle, Jussi, Gösta 1919-1921 Förlags AB Björnen \$20.00

“Donna non vidi mai” to replace the few seconds where that distortion occurred. But in the last act, and especially in “No! Pazzo son!,” I prefer this new Immortal Performances version. Björling sings his best “Pazzo son!” on record here. It soars and rings. And still his voice has such a dramatic intensity and abandon that there is nothing else to be desired. Listen to the sound of “O immensa delizia mia” and try to name one tenor in the whole universe who can equal that glowing intensity. And the wonder of it all: he does it without yelling or shouting or howling. He sings with more fire than any two Italians put together! Also this new version highlights the contribution from the other singers, Schymberg and Hasslo in particular. It is a great performance, and the fact that Björling sings in Italian and the others in Swedish never for a moment distracts you from the ongoing drama.

The CD from Immortal Performances also has some nice bonuses: the 1959 London Palladium concert (released here for the first time), and two excerpts from the 1949 Hollywood Bowl concert in fine sound, including a “Nessun dorma” with a high B sustained for 11 seconds (the rest of this performance, including a superb “Che gelida manina” and beautifully sung duets with his wife Anna-Lisa, is archived at the Björling museum in equally good sound). Also worth mentioning is the Pillerdosan concert from 1954, given here more or less as it sounds on the original tapes. Very much recommended.

Moving on to the 1956 Met performance (PACO158), Pristine Audio (Andrew Rose) must have had access to first-hand tapes, because the sound is so crystal clear it could have been recorded yesterday. Björling sang this performance between other engagements in New York that season, including a TV show with Tebaldi, a recording of *La bohème* with Beecham and de los Angeles, and a *Tosca* at the Met with

Dimitri Mitropoulos, who also conducts this *Manon Lescaut* (a private recording of the *Tosca* performance was never released on CD but can be heard at the Björling museum). Pristine is famous worldwide for their restorations of orchestral recordings of yore, obtaining breathtaking results in upgrading the sound so that they sound as if they had been recorded 20-30 years later. If you adore Beethoven as I do, I recommend their restorations, for instance the



PASC488 where Furtwängler’s conducting of the wartime recording of the “Eroica” Symphony is absolutely magically restored with depth, clarity and dynamic power. Everything sounds mind-blowingly brilliant. Whether Pristine has been equally successful in restoring material with Jussi Björling is less certain. There is a tendency, also experienced in their releases of *Il trovatore* PACO134, *Rigoletto* PACO143, and the 1957 Sibelius Memorial PASC528, for Pristine’s restorations to invariably strengthen the middle and lower parts of the voice and not so much the top, which was indeed the most sensational part of the voice.

Björling’s expansive resources were in a class of their own. An English critic wrote in 1960 after his *Bohème* at Covent Garden that his top notes simply start off where other tenors’ top notes end. I treasure also the other releases of this 1956 performance at the Met: WHRA-6020 (Ward Marston’s restoration) and WLCD0267. In Marston’s restoration the voices are somewhat more distant. In the latter from Walhall the voices are—as in this new release from Pristine

—very close to the ear—and the Walhall also has bonus excerpts from the last act of the 1949 performance at the Met, which I strongly recommend. In great sound, and Jussi in absolute supreme voice, attacking the high notes with unrivaled ease.

Both new editions, the 1959 Stockholm performance on IP and the 1956 Met one on Pristine, are well worth having. Personally I prefer the 1959 Stockholm performance for the freedom of the top notes, the lyric sweetness of the voice, and the sound in general. I tend to prefer to hear Björling’s voice at some distance from the microphone. That usually, in my opinion, brings out the singular beauty and the shimmer and radiance of that instrument. The Pristine edition offers the legendary 1956 Met performance of a superb Albanese and Björling and has undoubtedly a sound which may seem more modern and to the liking of many, but I find the very close miking and

the emphasis on the power of the middle register to take something away in the purely auditive pleasure of listening. That is a personal view that can certainly be subject to debate. Any Björling fan should own and treasure both editions. ■

*Kristian Krogholm is the Recordings Editor for JBS-USA*

*Editor’s note: The Immortal Performances Recording is available for purchase using the enclosed order form or on our website.*