

Our longtime member Phyllis liked to speak of being introduced to classical music and live concerts by her husband Harold “Hal” Josell, who deeply loved the singing of Jussi Björling. They accumulated a collection of LPs together while bringing up their kids, working and enjoying friends, in New Jersey.

audience chuckled, and Jussi conferred with his accompanist Fred Schauwecker, who shuffled his music and then commenced to play the introduction to Hal’s aria!

Luckily, this fine concert was recorded by RCA, but then somehow the tapes were ignored in the RCA vaults for some 34 years, and finally released on CD in 1992. (*For the*

move to southern California, where she would be near daughter Sari and her family. In the meantime our JB Society was being organized, and by 2002 Phyllis had learned of a JB Society conference to take place in New York City that October.

With many friends and family still living near NYC, she decided to attend that 4-day event—it would allow her to hear and possibly meet Jussi’s sons Anders and Lars, and other family members and speakers: the founder of the JB Museum in Sweden Harald Henrysson; radio host George Jellinek of “The Vocal Scene”; the co-author of Jussi’s biography, Andrew Farkas; at least four Met stars who had sung with Jussi; and many others, from RCA records, *Opera News*, and the Met Archives. This was not to be missed!

And indeed Phyllis definitely enjoyed herself at that NY conference. As she entered the hotel ballroom, board member Wally Rudolph greeted her and soon learned her stories about Jussi B. at the 1958 Carnegie Hall concert. (Subsequently, Wally produced a 90-minute radio program built around that concert, with remarks provided by Phyllis and Lars Björling.)

After the conference, we asked members for their reactions and here are Phyllis’s: “The conference was my first. It exceeded all my expectations. Meeting so many people I have come to know via email was a wonderful experience—as was being with so many warm and interesting people who share this love for Jussi and his singing. An emotional plus for me was meeting the Björling family—and high-fiving with little Charlie, and of course hearing Lars sing. Regina Resnik was incredible at the Gala, following the wonderful panel in the afternoon with Resnik, Amara, Merrill and Albanese responding to George Jellinek’s questions relating to their career experiences with JB. I am still ‘high’ from this conference!” (*JBS Journal #14, Spring/Fall 2003, p. 22*)

Needless to say, Phyllis attended other Jussi-conferences as well, with a 2005 weekend at Los Angeles Opera and the 2011 Björling Centennial event at Gustavus Adolphus College being other highpoints.



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Remembering Phyllis Josell

By Dan Shea

Early on in their life together, Phyllis and Hal got tickets to go to Björling’s March 2, 1958, Carnegie Hall concert. This would be their first time at one of the tenor’s live recitals, and the experience made a big impression on them both.

The recital was highly praised by reviewers, who noted the great enthusiasm of the big audience (see *Anna-Lisa Björling, Andrew Farkas: Jussi, Amadeus Press, 1996, p. 303*). Towards the end of the concert, after an especially fine performance of Grieg’s “A dream,” Jussi clearly was preparing to deliver an encore; to Phyllis’s surprise, Hal loudly shouted his request: “Nessun dorma!” The

full story on that errant CD, see Don Goldberg’s article in JBS Journal #13, Fall 2001.)

Sadly, Hal had died in 1977, but during the early 1990s Phyllis had picked up several CDs and brought them home. For a while those CDs went unplayed, but she was alone at home one day during a major snowstorm and looked for the CDs to play. While enjoying Jussi’s singing on one of them, she was shocked to hear Hal’s voice shouting for “Nessun dorma,” and memories from that 1958 night came flooding back. She realized that Jussi’s singing had become, even more now, a connection to Hal.

In the late 1990s Phyllis decided to

She and I attended a very fine performance of *Tristan und Isolde* at the LA Opera in 2007, and spoke afterwards with the Marke, Icelandic bass Kristinn Sigmundsson.

During these years Phyllis was teaching classes on opera at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo CA, and she may have brought more new members to the JB Society than any other individual. One testimonial comes from current JBS member David Lewis, whose mother was in Phyllis's opera study group back in New Jersey during the 1980s. Since he appreciated JB's singing too, he met Phyllis and they began trading tapes —here is his recent comment to the Björling Yahooogroup:

“Phyllis Josell was a dear, dear woman. I got to know her because, coincidentally, she was a good friend of my late mother's in New Jersey. Of course, we got together over our passion for Björling. She was kind enough to make a substantial collection of cassette tape copies of rare Björling performances, like the 1937 Björling-Jeritza duet in *Cavalleria rusticana*, which I still have. ... She was a sweet woman, kind, cheerful and enthusiastic, when it came to life in general and especially when it came to Jussi.”

By 2014, Phyllis had developed dementia, which had progressed enough so that she had to move to memory care housing in Mission Viejo. I was living nearby in Carlsbad that February and arranged to take her to dinner in Costa Mesa and then we attended a pretty good performance of *La traviata* at Segerstrom Hall. We didn't meet again unfortunately; her memory got worse and she needed constant care. This very independent woman no longer could make the basic choices that had made life such a pleasure for so many years.

We lost Phyllis in January 2019. In a final generous act, her daughter Sari shipped Phyl's Jussi-related CD collection to Janel Lundgren to add to the Society's historical and promotional resources. We will continue to remember Phyllis for her many best days, with gratitude for this gift and for the enthusiasm and fun she brought to us! ■

Interpreting Björling's Grave as a Symbol of Swedish Patriotism

By Marc Nicholson

In August 2017 I undertook a guided tour of the Baltic States, but thereafter I spent a week on my own in Sweden for the primary purpose of visiting the Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge and placing flowers on Björling's grave. I owe him a great deal, because he introduced me to opera as a 12-year-old boy in 1962 through his recording with Victoria de Los Angeles of *Madama Butterfly*, and still more because his beautiful and plaintive voice has accompanied and moved me over my ensuing 57 years. Björling is NOT entertainment. He is existential to us. So I had to travel to Sweden and express gratitude by standing in front of and placing flowers at his burial site.

That grave in the understated Swedish way is a symbol and paean to the Swedish patriotism which infused Björling's life. The stone is roughly cut and uneven, like the glacial rocks which populate Swedish fields and helped propel major Swedish emigration to the US, including my own grandparents, during 1880-1910. The lettering on the gravestone of Jussi's name and the dates of his birth and death is in the Roman alphabet, but it is oddly angular in a way clearly intended to evoke ancient Nordic rune script. And that lettering is painted with the same rusty red color used on most Swedish rural homes and barns. That paint contains copper, which was abundant in Sweden and which earned the country great riches for several centuries. A friend of mine who is a retired professor at the University at Uppsala told me that this copper-based paint was favored by Swedes because its chemical composition helps to preserve the wood of which most older Swedish houses and barns are constructed. Finally, the permanently planted flowers in front of Björling's grave are blue/purple and yellow in color—the closest one can come to the blue and yellow colors of the Swedish national flag. It is all a well-designed tribute to Swedish heritage.

Jussi was a patriot in life and his gravesite reflects that fidelity, as does his career. The Björling Museum in Borlänge offers cumulative totals of his performances, and the majority took place in Sweden, not internationally. Even given his earlier days laboring for the Stockholm Opera, that figure amazed me. Björling became an international star, but he never forgot his roots. Just another reason to admire the man. ■

Marc Nicholson is a retired US diplomat (Foreign Service Officer) living in Washington, DC.

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