

Anna-Lisa on their journey to Tammerfors on 20 January: “On Thursday Jussi gave a concert in Tampere (Tammerfors). A shaking, none too comfortable train—where the lunch symbolically was an ‘opera sandwich’—brought the tenor and company in a northwestern direction in three hours up to Tammerfors, the town where Jussi’s Finnish grandmother met and married his Swedish grandfather. Jussi sang in the theatre of the town and donated the proceeds—10 000 SEK—to the war crippled.” In the local paper one could read that the theatre only takes 600 listeners and added: “That interest was great for Jussi’s visit can be concluded from the fact that thrice as many queued for tickets.”

On 23 January Jussi was back in Helsinki and sang at the Finnish Opera. On the programme was—*Tosca!* But the reviewers were all sunshine. The performance was conducted by Jussi Jalas—son-in-law of Sibelius—chief conductor of the opera, and he was highly commended. The reporter of *Hufvudstadsbladet* wrote about Jussi: “From the warm applause at his first entrance to a good half-dozen curtain calls after the final chord the audience were in a state of expectant excitement. And there were reasons for that. The first act didn’t give full proof of more than that the singer has an ideal voice with all that schmelz one can demand in a grateful role, but in the second act the stage was all aglow. Such intensity of expression, such intoxicating flush of victory in the freedom song one has almost forgotten that it can exist, and for natural reasons it can rarely be heard on the concert platform; but in the last act’s farewell aria and the song to Tosca’s soft hands (“O dolci mani”) the singer presented his warmth and his softest tones. It was, in other words, an all-embracing exposition of his eminent capacity the singer generously offered. – One could criticize Puccini for not anticipating a Jussi Björling and writing a longer tenor role” The reviewer also praises Elli Pihlaja in the title role and Lauri Lahtinen as Scarpia—both evidently inspired to great achievements by Jussi’s presence. “We have to be grateful to Jussi Björling for this visit,” he finished his review, “and that he by no

means regards this little stage as something inessential: he delivered to the full and shared the ovations generously with his moved and curtseying prima donna.” This was also something the reporter from *Stockholms-Tidningen* had observed: “[Jussi Björling’s] popularity was further increased when he chivalrously shared the profusion of applause with Elli Pihlaja, who in spite of commendable attempts to escape was resolutely captured by Jussi.”

With that, the Finnish adventure was over this time, but Jussi was already booked for a couple of performances at the Finnish Opera in March the same year. Back in Stockholm there was a new challenge at the Royal Opera, Verdi’s *Aida* on 27 January, and this time Lennart Swahn had changed his tune. Listen:

“The Royal Opera took out the Crown Jewels on Thursday night. *Aida* was furnished with four Royal Court Singers, besides the fact that the opera itself has two kings and two princesses. It was in other words a vocal feast with few equivalences lately and which may be written on the few golden pages the present opera management seems to get in the annals.

In the Court Singer Quartet was Jussi, a visiting glorious Radamès but slightly baker-like as the bold commander of the Egyptian armies. His natty rotundity takes away the illusion a great deal—no doctor can help that—but instead we have one of the freshest and most alluring voices to admire. The vocal perfectionist Jussi is one of the wonders of today, and when he is matched with the loyal Birgit Nilsson one is not far from the seventh Heaven of Song. Is

there any vocal stage in this world that can display a better *Aida* constellation than this pair? Leon Björker’s Pharaoh is mighty as—yes, exactly as Pharaoh himself and Sigurd Björling has everything one can ask for from Amonasro: wily, just dramatic enough and big-voiced. He catches interest as soon as he comes in and glares angrily at the crowd in the triumphal act—It isn’t easy to be a world tenor when one has a world soprano by one’s side, but Jussi is as we know a cordially generous character. Sometimes he tore himself away at the curtain calls and implored *Aida* to take a bow alone when the cheers poured abundantly across the footlights this evening. They certainly deserved it, for this was an event of the ne-plus-ultra type.”

After all these ovations it probably must have felt like a non-event to go to the opening ceremony for the annual congress of The Swedish Society for the Promotion of Ski Sport and Outdoor Life in Sundsvall. It was cold as sin in Central Square when Jussi sang at the opening ceremony. On the other hand it was most likely more pleasant in the Town Hall in the evening, where Jussi and Anna-Lisa, with Harry Ebert at the piano, sang in connection with the festival banquet. And as a further consolation they had the privilege be the first to spend the night in the newly renovated deluxe suite at legendary Hotel Knaust! ■

This article first appeared under the title “Jussi of the Month January 2019” as part of a monthly feature on the web site of the Swedish Jussi Björling Society at www.jussibjorlingsallskapet.com/id/1860.html

Congratulations!

We are thrilled to report that Bengt Krantz, chairman of the Jussi Björling Sällskapet and director of the Malmö Opera, has received the 2019 Litteris et Artibus (Letters and Arts) award.

Litteris et Artibus is a Swedish royal medal established in 1853 by Charles XV of Sweden, who was then crown prince. It is awarded to people who have made important contributions to culture, especially music, dramatic art and literature.

Receiving this medal from HM the King, Bengt joins a list of the most distinguished Swedish artists, including Jussi Björling (who received the medal in 1945).