

Audio Update and Observations

By Kristian Krogholm

Under the guidance of Andrew Rose, Pristine Audio has issued no less than three Puccini recordings with Jussi Björling. Earlier I commented on PACO158 *Manon Lescaut* (Met-1956). To sum up my reactions from that set, I find the sound of orchestra absolutely exemplary. Few can make an old recording of an orchestra sound more up-to-date than Mr. Rose. I have in my collection most of Pristine's Furtwängler and Toscanini sets and they are second to none. Björling's voice on the other hand, I find sounds more "muscular" than is to my liking. And it is the restoration that has made him sound like that. I don't believe Björling ever sounded muscular. With muscular I mean that you can hear the physical process behind the vocal production. It gives the voice a slightly forced sound. That is not Björling to me. So I still prefer the WHRA version of that performance even though Pristine surely has a better source on hand to work from.

The two new issues from Pristine were studio recordings. *Tosca* PACO163 and *La bohème* PACO164. Little need to be said about these performances which all connoisseurs of great singing already know inside out. But the heart of interest for me here is the sound. *Tosca* unfortunately had the same characteristics as the *Manon Lescaut*. The orchestra sounds fabulous. It has depth, clarity and a real modern sound. Björling's voice again to me sounds more flat, more dark and less flexible than he did on the Urania version of the same performance. The Urania version for me is on another level together. It has a much wider range of sound, and the easy soaring of Björling's top — as in "la vita mia costasse" or "Vittoria" — is captured to great effect.

The Beecham *Bohème*

Then finally on to the 1956 Beecham *Bohème* recording PACO164 which has a totally different sound. It was a revelation. Truly. The clarity of the voices, the crisp and clear sound from top to bottom and the presence of the voices are simply wonderful. I thought no one could improve EMI/Warners own set which was transferred from the original tapes. But here Mr. Rose is really on the right path. Both Björling and de los Angeles sound gloriously fresh and free. Björling sounds much younger than in both *Manon Lescaut* and *Tosca*. And that is much due to the restoration. "Nei cieli bigi quando fumar dai mille comignoli parigi" has been sung many times in my shower, not always in tune. I find the opening words — where Rodolfo enters

— so refreshing, and no one can sing them more beautifully and with more musicality than Jussi Björling. He owned this role completely. I listened to the Pavarotti 1972 version for reference. The Italian is better than anyone else, except for Björling. The 8-year-old Swedish tenor sounds younger, phrases more easily and handles everything from fortissimo to pianissimo, from lyric to dramatic more effortlessly. And the best of all: he can act convincingly. If I had to choose a portion from this recording, it has to be from "Dunque è proprio finita..." to the end. That it singing of infinite beauty. That is singing that will last for eternity. As Victoria de los Angeles said when she was asked to re-record various operas in stereo in the 60's: "It is not that I couldn't make new great recordings, but I just think it would be impossible to improve what I had done with Björling." ■

Join the JBS Board in Washington, D.C. this November

Friday, November 15, Saturday November 16

On FRIDAY EVENING, NOVEMBER 15, the Jussi Björling Society has made plans to attend the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center, a concert performance of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*, featuring Stephen Gould and Christine Goerke, conducted by Gianandrea Noseda. To join us for the concert at a group price of \$70, contact Janel Lundgren, at tonerna@myfairpoint.net