

Jussi Björling

His Final Season at the Met 1959

by Richard Caniell
Founder and Sound Engineer, *Immortal Performances*

It is an extraordinary fact that Jussi Björling's final season of his life, afflicted though he was with heart problems, revealed his voice at its most refulgent, his characterizations the utmost in expressiveness. Fortunately, we have preservations which corroborate the truth of this while communicating that his vocal art had achieved a fusion of fiery passion and refinement of expression without parallel in any other tenor of the twentieth century.

The three roles he sang in his ultimate Met season are presented in our tribute in the order in which they were heard. The first two — *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Tosca* — derive from single-mike house lines in far better sonics than have been hearable in tape copies passed between collectors. The last, *Faust*, from a justly famed broadcast, is here presented in the best sound and with the broadcast commentary by Milton Cross, recreating this occasion with memorable fidelity.

In addition, the set offers as bonuses the complete third act of *Tosca* from Jussi's final performance at the Royal Opera, Stockholm, in 1959. We have previously released the complete *Manon Lescaut* he sang there in 1959 (IP 1110-2) and other scenes and arias that add further dimension to his history. Our releases of Björling's vocal art over the years include the 1940 Verdi *Requiem*, 1940 *Roméo et Juliette*, 1940 *Un ballo in maschera*, 1941 *Il trovatore*, 1947 *Roméo et Juliette* and 1959 *Manon Lescaut*. This present release would not have been possible without the generous contribution and encouragement of Harald Henrysson, Sue Flaster, Kristian Krogholm, Jan-Olof Damberg of the Björling Museum and Stephen Hastings.

My personal involvement with Jussi Björling began in the early 1940s when I acquired a number of 78-rpm discs of his singing and then had the opportunity to see him at the Met in a 1947 *Il trovatore*. Up until then, the tenors I most cherished were Gigli and Melchior, so that Björling's virile, shining tenor voice spanned the distance between these two, introducing me to a voice with great lyric warmth mixed with a glowing power of expression. My regard for his singing increased exponentially as I came to hear him in all his recorded roles; I came to regard him as the greatest tenor among the lyric dramatic voices of his era. Out of this came the interest and energy to share his achievement with other music lovers and thus ensued our *Immortal Performances* CD sets, the latest of which is among the most thrilling of all. ■

John Steane on Richard Caniell

In a book published almost forty years ago I wrote of the invaluable supply of 'private' recordings, mostly taken 'off-the-air' of live performances, some of them from the 1930s, noting that unfortunately they came with much factual misinformation and were unreliable in matters such as speed and pitch. I added that it was to be hoped that one day these faults could be amended, with proper editing of the originals and with more scholarly care over documentation. In one instance (and by no means the most important) I said that attention of this kind, by whoever provided it, "would earn eternal gratitude." Richard Caniell is the man who has done most to win that gratitude in the intervening years.

Working with a small, dedicated body of assistants, in a privately run but officially recognized organization on a non-profit-making basis, he has now amassed a library of some hundreds of these recordings, all made publicly available, in maximum clarity of sound, with speeds and pitches corrected and full documentation provided. Many of the recordings are of symphonic and operatic performances renowned in reputation but otherwise lost to present-day listeners as hearing-experience. The artists – conductors, instrumentalists and singers – are, typically, the very greatest of the last century.

These are the cold facts and are (or could be) open to all. The purpose of my writing now is to pay a more personal tribute. Living and working in England, I have never met Mr. Caniell and do not suppose now that I ever will. But over the years he has been close and vivid as a man of exceptional devotion to his calling. And that is what it is. As a young man, he heard a record of music conducted by Toscanini which moved him more deeply than he thought music could ever do, and that was the start. A record-man, with a passion for greatness in performance, he followed where this led. Then the realization that so many recordings lay undiscovered, 'un-mined' and essentially wasted drove him to work in this field, and, where most of us would be content to research and leave the practicalities to others, he got down to the job himself. He mastered the technical business and (most crucial of all) was prepared to put in the hours of labor, identifying minute faults and correcting them. At all stages he has met with setbacks that I know would have deterred me and would have discouraged anybody. If ever any private enterprise in this field of preservation and restoration deserved support, this of Mr. Caniell's most surely does. ■

The late John Steane (1929-2011) is the author of The Grand Tradition: Seventy Years of Singing on Record, 1900-1970 (Duckworth and Scribner), Voices: Singers and Critics, and three volumes of Singers of the Century (all Duckworth and Amadeus). He contributed to such publications as Opera, Opera Now, Musical Times, and The New Grove Dictionary of Music. From 1975 to 1995 he was a frequent broadcaster on BBC Radio 3.