

Jussi in New Zealand!

by Janel E. Lundgren



Soprano and festival organizer Heather Pascual

A festive celebration of the art of Jussi Björling was held on March 26th, 2021, in the beautiful Royal Akarana Yacht Club, overlooking Waitemata Harbor in Auckland, New Zealand.

The event was organized by opera and concert singer Heather Pascual, a long-time admirer of Björling. Quoting her from the printed program: "It has been a dream of mine for some time to hold a celebration of the great Swedish tenor, as well as support the Kiwi Music Scholarship Trust ... This evening is about bringing that dream to fruition."

Heather reports that "...the venue came alive with the sound of Jussi's voice reverberating around the centre, which was filled to capacity." Many of the audience were of Swedish descent. Recordings of Jussi included Turiddu's aria from *Cavalleria rusticana*, Toselli's "Serenade," "Nessun dorma" from *Turandot*, and the duet from *The Pearl Fishers* with Robert Merrill.

The evening was further enhanced by

the performances of singers Simon O'Neill and Catrin Johnsson. Also a Björling admirer, tenor Simon O'Neill interrupted his performance schedule for the occasion, flying home to New Zealand following his performances of Siegfried at the Deutsche Opera in Berlin. During the evening, he sang Cilea's "È la solita storia del pastore" (the first aria he had ever heard Jussi sing), and "A Dream" by Grieg. O'Neill's international career includes regular appearances at the major opera houses of Europe, England and New York. He is a native New Zealander, and a Fulbright scholar. He became Officer of New Zealand Order of Merit in the 2017 Queen's Birthday Honors List.

Mezzo soprano Catrin Johnsson was born in Sweden, and trained at the Royal Colleges of Music in Stockholm and in London. A winner of the Christina Nilsson Award, she performs with the New Zealand Opera, and is a Performance Teacher in Voice and Stagecraft at the University of Auckland. On this evening, she sang a group of Swedish songs well-known to Jussi fans, including Schrader's "Sommarnatt," Peterson-Berger's "Jungfrun under lind," Sibelius's "Säv, säv, susa," and Stenhammar's "Sverige."

She and Simon were accompanied by pianist Rachel Fuller, a professional accompanist who has played for some of the world's finest singers, and has worked at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as well as opera houses in Norway.

Frank Olsson, Honorary Swedish Consul to Auckland, served as Master of Ceremonies.

Recent recipients of the Kiwi Music Scholarship Trust were overseas, some of them singing at major opera houses, and unable to travel to the event because of the pandemic: Manase Latu, Bianca Andrews, Siyu Sun, pianist, Jonathan Eyres, to name a few. The scholarship was set up by Heather's uncle Sven Stenbäck (in memory of her aunt Maida who was a fine pianist and accompanist), to assist young singers and instrumentalists with their studies and to further their careers. Recipients have to be New Zealanders, and of course are expected to be of a high standard in order to be eligible for the scholarship.

The *impresaria* of the event, New Zealand soprano Heather Pascual, has appeared in many leading opera roles, both onstage and on television, including Musetta, Nedda, Cio-Cio-San, and Santuzza. She has recorded programs of Schumann, Schubert and Brahms, as well as albums featuring songs by French and Spanish composers. Her concert work has included appearances with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. She is still active in the musical world, and is happy with the success of this event. She says, "Everyone enjoyed themselves – the Swedish flag was flying outside the centre and some people were quite emotional. The Swedes were proud of their countryman and I guess I was a little emotional too!"

Heather now hopes to start a New Zealand Jussi Björling Society. All of us at JBS-USA send her congratulations and great good wishes for her new endeavor. We will be happy to help! ■



Catrin Johnsson and Rachel Fuller