Jussi Björling Society – USA at Symphony Center
Chicago Conference Rescheduled!

JBS-USA is happy to announce that plans for the much-anticipated Chicago Conference, postponed from spring of 2021, are now being finalized for the weekend of March 24 to 28, 2022. We are accepting advance registrations with the enclosed form, or online, through the JBS web site. As before, the Conference will include nine distinguished speakers, group tickets to performances by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Lyric Opera of Chicago, and group discounted hotel rooms.

The Conference venue will be the 9th floor Thomas Club at Symphony Center, and the hotel is the Silversmith, located just four blocks away.

Following is the order of events as currently planned:

THURSDAY, MARCH 24:
The Conference will open with a 5:00 pm dinner at Opus Restaurant in Symphony Center, followed by a 7:30 pm concert by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. JBS will have a block of discounted seats in beautiful Orchestra Hall. As of this writing, the CSO has not completed planning their season, nor have they announced repertoire for the spring concerts. You can check our website (or that of CSO) for the latest news; we will also reach out to you with updates. We can say that the short list of likely conductors, unofficially shared with us, is exciting!

FRIDAY, MARCH 25:
Conference sessions will be held from 9 am to 12 noon, and from 1:30 pm to 4:30 pm, in the 9th Floor Thomas Club in Symphony Center. You may take a virtual tour of the venue by visiting the CSO website at https://cso.org/about/facility-rentals/virtual-tour/ and selecting the 9th Floor Club.

During the lunch break, attendees may opt for boxed lunches in the venue, or may choose to have lunch in a neighboring café or restaurant. (Please sign up for boxed lunches in advance.)

Friday evening is free, but we will soon provide you with a list of performances, concerts and events occurring that night, including Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Auditorium Theatre, Chicago Opera Theatre, Harris Theatre and others. This will give you plenty of time to make your own plans and purchase your own advance tickets.
Tosca

pm performance of discounted main floor seats for the 7:30 Saturday evening JBS will have a block of on Michigan Avenue’s Magnificent Mile. Saturday evening JBS will have a block of on Michigan Avenue’s Magnificent Mile. some glamorous shopping in the Loop or free for you to have a leisurely lunch, or do conclude at 1 pm. Saturday afternoon is Conference sessions resume at 9 am and follows.

SATURDAY, MARCH 26:
Conference sessions resume at 9 am and conclude at 1 pm. Saturday afternoon is free for you to have a leisurely lunch, or do some glamorous shopping in the Loop or on Michigan Avenue’s Magnificent Mile. Saturday evening JBS will have a block of discounted main floor seats for the 7:30 pm performance of Tosca at Lyric Opera of Chicago. A description of this production follows.

SUNDAY, MARCH 27:
This can be a free day for you in Chicago. However, we will be organizing some optional activities, such as a tour and lunch at the Chicago Art Institute, a matinee performance, a Sunday concert: there will be much to choose from as we get closer to the date. Our Jussi-weekend will conclude with a Gala Farewell Dinner in a favorite restaurant, soon to be selected as more restaurants re-open.

THE HOTEL:
JBS has a block of generously-discounted hotel rooms at the Silversmith Hotel. Located at 10 South Wabash, the hotel is only four blocks away from Symphony Center, and offers room service, fitness center and free WiFi among its amenities. Rooms include large walk-in showers, coffee makers, safes, and small refrigerators. Breakfast and dinner are available on premises at the Adamus Restaurant.

WE RECOMMEND that you make your Conference reservations soon! The Thomas Club has a seating capacity of 95, and the Conference will be open to the public, so the potential for selling out is likely. Please send the enclosed registration form along with your check. For payment with credit card, please visit our website to fill out the online registration form, at www.jussibjorlingsociety.org.

If you already made payment last year for reservations at the postponed 2021 Conference, we will be in touch with you individually about any cost adjustments.

LYRIC OPERA’S PRODUCTION OF TOSCA will star Michelle Bradley in the title role, with Russell Thomas as Cavaradossi, and Fabián Veloz as Scarpia. Conducted by Eun Sun Kim, the traditional production is designed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and directed by Louisa Muller.

The American soprano Michelle Bradley, a 2018 graduate of the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, is beginning to garner great acclaim as one of today’s most promising Verdi sopranos. Last season she debuted with the Vienna State Opera as Leonora/Il trovatore (role debut), with San Francisco Opera as Elvira/Ernani (virtual performance, role debut), with San Diego Opera in the title role/Aida, while also returning to the Metropolitan Opera for their New Year’s Eve Gala as Liù/Turandot (Act Two).

Tenor Russell Thomas starred earlier this season in Vanished, a three-part indie art film produced by The Dallas Opera. Thomas’s 2019/20 season included his first Don Alvaro/La forza del destino (Deutsche Oper Berlin, new production), Radames/ Aida (Houston Grand Opera, new production — Thomas later reprised the role at Canadian Opera Company), and his return to the title role/Otello (Washington National Opera), after successes at the Canadian Opera Company, Deutsche Oper Berlin, and the Atlanta Symphony.

Argentine baritone Fabián Veloz’s recent performances include the title role/ Rigoletto to open the season at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, as well as appearances there in La bohème, La traviata, and Andrea Chénier; La traviata in Beijing, Naples, and Atlanta; Tosca at Opera’s Teatro dell’Opera and the Baths of Caracalla; and Cavalleria rusticana/Pagliacci in Bologna.

Eun Sun Kim, conductor, is Music Director Designate of San Francisco Opera and Principal Guest Conductor of Houston Grand Opera. The much-acclaimed Korean conductor opened the 2020/21 season leading the famed Concert de Paris at the Eiffel Tower, televised worldwide. In North America, Kim has enjoyed recent successes at San Francisco Opera, LA Opera, Wash-
ington National Opera, and Houston Grand Opera. She has conducted at all the major German houses, and maintains particularly close relationships with the Berlin State Opera and Oper Frankfurt.

THE CONFERENCE SPEAKERS:

Lars Björling, Jussi’s youngest son, was present at his father’s last performances at the Metropolitan Opera in the fall of 1959, and provides a detailed and warmly personal account of those performances in the recently released Immortal Performances CD set.

Andrew Farkas is co-author with Anna-Lisa Björling of the acclaimed Björling biography, Jussi. He is the co-author or editor of three other opera biographies and a bio-bibliography. He has contributed book chapters, articles, bibliographies and reviews to a number of international publications, anthologies, encyclopedias and music magazines. He developed and directed the library of the newly established University of North Florida (1970-2003). He was awarded the 1991 Distinguished Professor Award, and upon his retirement he was given the Library Director Emeritus title.

Henry Fogel is Producer/Host of Collectors’ Corner with Henry Fogel for WFMF Radio Network, a series featuring a broad range of orchestral, vocal, chamber and solo-instrumental music. Recently retired as the dean of Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts, he was also for many years president and CEO of the Chicago Symphony, and has held many important positions in music administration over the past 55 years.

Stephen Hastings has been the Milan correspondent of Opera News since 1991, and is the author of the masterful book, The Björling Sound, A Recorded Legacy. Born in London and educated in Oxford, he was editor of the Italian monthly Musica for many years. He is a frequent contributor to JBS publications, and has spoken at almost all JBS conferences, both in the United States and in Sweden.

Harald Henrysson is Founding Curator of the Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge, Sweden, and an ultimate resource on the life and career of the artist. He is the author of a new book, David Björling and His Sons in America, as well as three published editions of A Jussi Björling Phonography. Co-founder of the Jussi Björling Society in Sweden, he has contributed notes for some 40 LP/CD recordings, and co-authored a JB Chronology on the web. In 2006, Henrysson received the Jussi Björling Award (Jussi Björlingstipendiet) from the Stockholm Royal Opera Soloists Foundation; in 2011 the Scandinavian Jussi Björling Society Prize (Jussi Björlingsällskapets Pris).

Nils-Göran Olve is a former chairman of the Friends of the Royal Opera in Stockholm, and contributes regularly to the Swedish Jussi Björling Society as interviewer, lecturer, and writer. He also regularly provides articles on historic singers for the UK magazine The Record Collector. With a doctorate from the Stockholm School of Economics, he has written more than twenty books on management control.

Conrad L. Osborne, renowned critic, author, voice teacher and performer, is the author of the definitive book on the subject, Opera as Opera: The State of the Art. He also posts the extensive blog “Osborne on Opera.” As an international music critic, he has written for High Fidelity/Musical America, The New York Times, and Opera News, among many others. He also serves as an Administrative Consultant, with affiliations over the years with Affiliate Artists, National Opera Institute, and the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music.

Roger Pines recently completed his 26-year tenure at Lyric Opera of Chicago as dramaturg, program editor, and co-host / co-producer for the company’s live opening-night broadcasts. An annual panelist on the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts’ “Opera Quiz” since 2006, Roger writes regularly for Opera News, Opera (U.K.), opera company programs nationally and internationally, and CD and DVD releases by major...
recording companies. He has judged for numerous prestigious vocal competitions nationwide, including the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions (since 1991) and the national competitions of both Classical Singer Magazine and the National Association of Teachers of Singing. He also is in demand as a lecturer, teacher, opera coach and broadcaster.

Fred Plotkin is one of America’s foremost opera experts and has distinguished himself as a writer, speaker, consultant, teacher, and expert on all things Italian. He does a great deal of broadcasting (including his program “Fred Plotkin on Fridays” on idagio.com) and is the lead opera writer for New York’s WQXR.org. His book, Opera 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving Opera is the best-selling opera education text in America.

Master of Ceremonies:
Walter B. Rudolph, retired broadcaster and musicologist, is a former President of JBS-USA. In addition to Jussi Björling, he has particularly followed the careers of Hans Hotter and Giorgio Tozzi. His most recent presentation was to the Richard Wagner Society in Washington, DC.

Anders, Lars, and Ann-Charlotte Björling are invited special guests. We also anticipate some lively panel discussions and surprise musical visitors!

We hope you agree that we are bringing together the very best in musical events and presenters to provide an enriching and enjoyable weekend for our membership – and that getting together again will be such a welcome and happy occasion in itself.

The Conference, our first in Chicago, will also be an important part of our continuing recruitment efforts for new members. We will reach out to the city’s musical, educational, and Swedish communities. It is our hope to win fresh interest and new members for the Society, and to remind Chicago of Jussi’s two decades of performances in the city – including his 1937 United States opera debut!

It will be another wonderful JBS weekend, and we look forward to seeing you there!

Jussi Björling: We Remember (Jussi Björling en Minnesbok)
Now Published in English Translation by JBS-USA

Short weeks after Jussi Björling’s death in September of 1960, Bertil Hagman launched himself on an ambitious project: to record reminiscences of the great tenor while those memories were still fresh. Hagman interviewed several dozen friends and colleagues who knew Jussi and had performed with him, and by the end of 1960 had published Jussi Björling en Minnesbok (JB A Memory Book).

Due to the haste with which the original was published, a number of errors of fact crept into the text. The decision was made early in 2021 to produce a corrected, complete and richly illustrated edition of this unique book. Gail Campain (translator of the original US version) sought out Harald Henrysson’s help and the two of them have worked together to remove those errors, and provide illuminating footnotes as well as short biographies of all the contributors.

Janel Lundgren has shepherded the book through every phase of its publication, and has provided a remarkable number of entertaining and significant photographs as well as insuring that this book is both tremendously attractive and professionally produced in every way.

Translator Gail Campain was born in Melbourne, Australia and is a graduate of RMIT University. Her career has been chiefly in the Victoria State Public Service. She undertook private study of the Swedish language after falling under the spell of the voice and artistry of Jussi Björling, and has been a member of JBS-USA since 1999. Her translation of the Minnesbok was previously published episodically in the JBS-USA Journal. This is the first publication of this remarkable book in its entirety in English.

Jussi Björling: We Remember is available only to current members of the three JB Societies. The postpaid cost is US $35 (for delivery within the Continental United States. There will be additional shipping charges, as incurred, for other shipments). An order form is enclosed in this Newsletter. You may also order using the link on our web site at jussibjorlingsociety.org

— Sue Flaster

Gail Campain
BOOK REVIEW

Bidú: Passion and Determination by Denis Allan Daniel

Page Publishing Inc., 2020
Conneaut Lake, PA

According to the author, this is the first biographical study in English of the world-renowned Brazilian soprano, Bidú Sayão, who had a storied career in opera during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Of considerable interest to members of the Jussi Björling Societies, this study emphasizes her collaboration with Jussi in major Metropolitan Opera productions… notably Gounod’s Roméo et Juliette (1947) and Puccini’s La bohème (especially the 1948 performance). Blessed with a haunting lyric soprano voice, she specialized in bel canto roles that took her to the major operatic houses of the world and left an indelible impression on critics and audiences alike. She was, in her generation, the outstanding soprano from Brazil. At a time when voices alone were admired in operatic circles, she was also known for her superior acting talents. Luckily, we can judge this theatrical ability from the many YouTube excerpts that are still available, in particular her sensitive interpretation of “Un bel di vedremo” from Madama Butterfly. This biography presents a fact-based evaluation of Sayão’s career and personal life, leaning heavily on performance reviews, especially those of Jussi and Bidú’s common appearances, a discography of Bidú’s known recordings and concerts, a list of her performances at the Metropolitan, Rio de Janeiro, and San Francisco operas together with an ample bibliography crafted for audiophiles and scholars alike. Although the author is Brazilian by birth, the book is written in flawless English and contains numerous illustrations, photos, and other iconographic details that give it an intimate tone.

Born into an upper-class family in Botafogo, Rio de Janeiro on May 11, 1904 (almost seven years older than Jussi), Bidú demonstrated unusual musical talents as a child (very similar to Jussi’s career) and made her major operatic debut in Rio at eighteen years of age. This critically-acclaimed performance gave her the opportunity to study first with Elena Teodorini in Brazil, then in Romania and finally with the world famous Polish tenor, Jean de Reszke, in Nice, France. Following this period of operatic training, she sang a number of leading lyric roles in Europe as well as her native Brazil. After her first marriage failed (to impresario Walter Mocchi), she married the well-known Italian baritone Giuseppe Danise in 1935. His death in 1963 came as a considerable shock and the loss of her beloved mother in 1966 was a source of great sadness for Bidú Sayão during the rest of her life. In addition to these sorrows, Brazilian officials and music critics were highly critical of her commitment to the Metropolitan Opera. She was accused of having “abandoned” her native country and being unpatriotic. This was, of course, a source of great disappointment in her personal and professional life.

She debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in 1937 as Manon (Massenet) and performed a wide range of lyric and coloratura roles at major opera houses throughout the world. As a Jussi fan himself, the author, Denis Daniel, devotes an entire chapter to Jussi and Bidú’s joint appearances as well as a variety of periodical reviews of their performances.

Bidú Sayão was one of the favorite sopranos of the great Brazilian composer, Heitor Villa Lobos, and made her final recording as the soprano soloist in Villa-Lobos’ cantata, Forest of The Amazon, with the composer himself conducting the work. As one critic described her voice: “This was a voice such as one doesn’t often hear in this world. Pure and effortless, it ranged from a silver trickle to a golden torrent…. her voice soared to almost unbelievable heights and hung there--hung there like a skylark pouring its heart out in the sky.” In this regard, it is relevant that Jussi himself initially refused to record Roméo et Juliette without Bidú Sayão as Juliette. Unfortunately she retired prematurely from opera in 1952 and spent the remaining years of her life at her home (purchased with her husband Giuseppe Danise) in Lincolnville, Maine. In 1995, several years prior to her death, she returned to Brazil to attend a tribute to her career during the Carnaval de Rio, thus receiving from her fellow citizens the recognition she so richly deserved.

Bidú Sayão passed away on May 12, 1999 at the age of 94 in Rockport, Maine. Her ashes were scattered at sea in the bay near her home. This biographical and operatic study of Sayão’s career reveals the triumphs and tribulations of an ambitious and highly successful Brazilian soprano whose greatest performances will be forever linked with Jussi Björling. It is a book which should be a part of every Jussiphile’s personal library.

— Tom Hines
Prime Music Activist Bea Bobotek, 93, Has Passed Away

By Christer Ahl, Alec Bobotek, Maija Budow, Caryl Pines Curtry, Dan Shea, & David Scally.

Our grande dame Bea Bobotek, one of the Jussi Björling Society’s guiding lights since its founding 23 years ago, died April 10 in Alexandria VA. She had sweeping connections in the Washington classical music scene, as well as inside key institutions like radio station WGMS, the Smithsonian and local museums and embassies. These connections became increasingly useful over the years, as Washington became our favorite gathering place.

Our very first JBS conference was held in DC at the Washington Plaza Hotel at Thomas Circle and was co-sponsored by the Embassy of Sweden. The action began with the Embassy’s annual “Jennie Lind Concert” at the Corcoran Gallery Hall and involved programs with key personalities like Anders Björling, Andrew Farkas, Cantor Don Goldberg, Harald Henrysson and Walter Rudolph.

The first JBS board was there too, meeting our brand-new membership, and Bea already was very much involved, suggesting interesting initiatives. One that became a major success was Bertil Bengtsson’s program at the Hirschhorn Gallery, arranged “under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution and co-sponsored by the Embassy of Sweden and JBS-USA.” Ahem, JBS had made the big time! At the enthusiastic reception following Bertil’s talk, we were delighted with the notable presence of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. And our spring 2001 JBS Journal article about this event acknowledged “We are grateful to Bea Bobotek for her enterprise in suggesting this idea and pulling together many strings!”

In addition to helping us navigate the resources available in DC, Bea loved the travel opportunities available for our members: an early one of these was our “Lightly-Structured” trip to the Stockholm area June 13-29, 2000. Those dates allowed time for visits to the Royal Opera House for opera and ballet, a day visiting the site of Jussi’s 1937 film Fram för framgång with members of the Swedish Society, concerts with Montserrat Caballé, Leif Segerstam, and others; we published a long list. Bea plotted with her good friend Maija Budow, and others of us, to add an extra week before June 13 in order to attend Wagner’s Ring at Helsinki’s beautiful new opera house – that turned out to be another perfect idea!


But we were never just a travel group, we had agendas to cover, business to conduct, as a group with a real Mission. For example, the worldwide events marking the 50th anniversary of Jussi’s death (Sept.9,1960) brought a small group of us to Scandinavia House on Park Ave. in NY, Sept.9,10: Christer Ahl, Bea, Maija, Beau and Linda Kaplan; Marilyn and Wally Rudolph, Connie Cloward, Bill Clayton, Monica Valley, Dan Shea.

Scandinavia House’s dining room played Jussi’s music on Sept.9, thanks to Bea’s iPod. Of our entire group she had the only technology advanced enough to mesh with theirs. Our Newsletter of November 2010 describes the memorial music we played and discussed from the just-released 4-CD WHRA set Jussi Björling Live!, from Jussi’s 1937 national US radio debut to his last Swedish radio broadcast in 1960. Other parts of that day’s talks were
given by Wally, on Hans Hotter, and by Bea, on favorite baritones Tibbett, Warren, Panzera, Holzmair, and others. We finished that weekend by joining the Vocal Record Collectors meeting to play and discuss the making of our new 4-CD set, and then to sell those CDs to the large and eager VRC crowd.

All the foregoing demonstrates Bea’s value and devotion to our Björling Society, but by no means captures the extent of her musical activities. As her son Alec has described in his Biographical and Memorial Notes (available at http://www.bobotek.net/Bea), Bea loved to schedule her visits to Seattle to coincide with Seattle Opera events, and to attend them with Alec and his family (and others of us who had heard, often from Bea, of these events). Alec’s 2009 visit to Bayreuth with Bea had many magical moments which they share in their Bayreuth Experience story at https://www.wagneropera.net/bayreuth/my-bayreuth-experience.htm#bobotek), e.g. during their tour of Wahnfried just as Jenő Jandó, visiting from the Liszt Academy, was invited to play Wagner’s piano: a private recital ensued!

Of the many other examples of Bea’s influence in the classical music world that we could savor, we have room here for only one more: Bea sponsored the production of a beautiful CD of two Schumann song cycles: Liederkreis and Dichterliebe with highly respected bass-baritone William Sharp and his accompanist Kenneth Slowick. The sound of this singer and pianist are very special indeed, beautiful tributes to the woman who asked for them.

Remembering Bea Bobotek
by Caryl Pines Curry

If it were not for Bea’s ebullient music evangelism, I would not now be a member of the Björling Society. I would not have experienced the last ten years or so of Vocal Arts, DC. Nor would I have had the pleasure of driving with her to operas, concerts and musical events at embassies and other locations. She had a subscription to the Met Opera and went to NY frequently with friends. She went to Seattle and elsewhere for Wagner’s Ring Cycle, and to the Smithsonian for chamber music. She would go anywhere to feed her need for a variety of musical formats. In short, she went to EVERYTHING!

Conversations in the car were edifying with respect to Bea’s remarkable operatic knowledge and memory. She could recall who sang whom when and where from recordings, broadcasts and the numerous operas around the world that she had attended since the late 1930s. She was able to dissect performances, compare them to others in the past, and thoroughly enjoy great ones. She was acerbic in her critiques of mediocrities.

I miss her now as I go alone to virtual events. I miss calling her to tell her what opera is on Saturday NPR radio. And I will certainly miss her when concert halls and opera houses return to live performances. She was a unique and thoughtful friend, with a prowess for spreading her enthusiasm for the art form we all love.

by Maija Budow

I met Bea quite by accident through another friend at the indoor tennis club to which we all belonged. This friend happened to mention to me that a group of music lovers were flying to Helsinki, Finland to attend Wagner’s Ring. What timing! I had just lost my husband after a long illness and I was trying to look to the future. The friend introduced me to Bea and the rest has been a wonderful adventure! We travelled with the Jussi Björling Society not only to Helsinki, but to conferences all over the USA, and to Sweden of course! What a life that was to meet all these music enthusiasts — and we had so much fun! It was also a pleasure to host a JBS dinner at my own home in Washington, D.C. and to become a member.

Bea and I and others would also travel to New York every three to four months for long week-ends, to catch up with every opera they produced at the Metropolitan Opera. Bea supported every musical group locally in DC including the National Opera, National Symphony and Vocal Arts DC. Together, we were on the go all the time for almost 20 years. Bea was a most inclusive and generous friend, and became the best one I ever had. I miss her terribly and will never forget her.
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!

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 Johnson. 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 Johansson 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.
Remembering Sarah Duvall
(Nov. 15, 1949–Aug. 15, 2020)

by Norm Krasne

After suffering a catastrophic stroke last summer, one of our fellow JBSers, my partner Sarah Duvall, passed away on August 15th. Compared to most in our Society, she was a relative newcomer to opera and to Jussi's heavenly tenor. As her exposure to the art form grew, she came to prefer more contemporary operatic works to the more traditional classics, but she recognized superior singing when she heard it. Portland (OR) Opera was our home base and over a decade we became more involved with the Company and made many friends among its supporters and staff. Sarah was a volunteer for Portland Opera, co-managing its Storage Locker containing household items used by the young Resident Artists when they came into town. At her passing she was Vice President of Communications and Marketing for Opera Volunteers International (OVI).

Her introduction to JBS-USA took place in St. Peter, MN, on the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College, in June, 2011, the Centennial Celebration of Jussi's birth. Those of us who were there will recall that temperatures in the Minneapolis area the week before ranged from 95-100 degrees (F) every day; so naturally, intelligent planners that we are, everyone filled their suitcases with shorts and polo and t-shirts for the four days. By the time we left, not a sweatshirt or jacket with the Gustavus insignia remained in the bookstore!

Sarah was amazed, as I had been in Charleston in 2006, my first attendance, by the devotion and corporate knowledge of the JBS crowd. She had (not so secretly) thought, "a four-day conference about a singer who died in 1960: how will we ever fill the time!" Of course, her view changed at the opening event, a delightful reception in the nearby home of Anders and Judie Björling. The quality and depth of the sessions, the shared meals, the camaraderie and great music and singing made the time fly. Even the ride back to the Minneapolis Airport in our mini-cooper was special as we sat across from the ever-gregarious Eldon Wolff who provided non-stop entertainment with his profusion of stories.

Sarah and I flew down to San Francisco for opera at least a couple of times a year, always to see at least two operas on consecutive evenings. On many such jaunts we'd meet our fellow JBSers, Mary Baiamonte and Phyllis Frank who drove up from central California and were subscribers. After the opera we normally had a drink and a bite while assessing the performance we had just seen; a most pleasant part of our routine. On many such visits we met for a special lunch at Tadich's Grill in the heart of San Francisco's financial district. Sometimes Eldon Wolff took BART in from his home in Berkeley to join us; those were indeed celebratory luncheons! Once, we went to Los Angeles Opera's production of Don Giovanni especially to hear (our diva) Angela Meade's Donna Anna. Afterward, five of us: (the late) Nina Haro, an LA Opera volunteer and long-time JBSer, Mary, Phyllis, Sarah and I enjoyed a (very) late dinner at Kendall's inside the Dorothy Chandler Opera House. At dessert, the four ladies practically "forced me" to crash the after-opera cast party to say hello to Angela (which I happily did).

We especially loved to travel and in March, 2013 we took a "Vantage" four-country tour of South America, flying into Santiago, Chile three days ahead of the tour. After a lengthy flight delay, a long ride and very little sleep, we were delighted to be picked up at the airport the next morning by Enrique Gilardoni who drove us to his beach home at Marbella, just outside the seaside community of Viña Del Mar. I had met Enrique and Maria Luisa because of a happy accident in Charleston in 2006. I arrived late to the closing dinner because I had walked in the wrong direction to our restaurant. Naturally, upon arrival I took the last seat available…next to the Gilardonis and Carol Pozevsky (who Sarah and I had lunch with in New Jersey some years later). As Maria Luisa had not attended the Minnesota Conference, this visit was Sarah's introduction to her. Though Sarah did not speak Spanish or Italian and Maria Luisa doesn't speak English, the two women bonded and became fast friends over three delightful days in Chile. The four of us have shared many happy occasions since then. After our visit, we returned to Santiago to meet our tour group and explored parts of southern Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil for the remainder of our holiday. On our final day of that tour, we left the tour bus and our fellow travelers in the heart of Rio de Janeiro… to meet yet another of our JBS friends, Dorian Bruzzi, who took us to a fabulous seafood lunch (On that very day, a Roman conclave selected Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, who became Pope Francis, to lead the Catholic Church. Our Argentinean tour guide was ecstatic!).

Salt Lake City, Utah was the site of our next JBS Conference, in June, 2015. Once again, Sarah and I got a head start on the rest of the group by going in a week ahead. As planned, we met the Gilardonis at our hotel and began the festivities with an "Opening Dinner" joined by then-JBS President, Walter Rudolph and his wife Marilyn. The next morning we drove down
After our hike, the five of us had a delightful lunch in Kungsholen just down the street from a place where Jussi liked to eat. The next day our entourage traveled north by rail to Strömsbruk to enjoy the annual Baltic Music Festival there, sponsored by our friend, Stefan Olmárs. By that time, Jussi’s delightful daughter, Anne Charlotte, had joined us and she remained with us for the rest of our trip. We continued on to Borlänge where we spent a fantastic few hours at the Jussi Björling Museum. Harald Henrysson, founder and chief curator of the museum until his “retirement” (there’s really no such word when it comes to Harald), was the perfect host for our visit. Until that day, Sarah and I had no inkling of how many Björling collectables displayed in the museum were donated by Enrique (who was on this visit with Maria Luisa, of course, and one of their several granddaughters, Isabella). From the museum, we continued to the Björling family gravesite at Stora Tuna, a beautiful and moving experience. We all returned to Stockholm the next day for more celebrating and a gourmet dinner below Nils-Göran’s residence. Our visit concluded with a nightcap and farewells in his cozy home overlooking the bay. Certainly, we were so looking forward to gathering again with our JBS friends in Chicago next April,…but that was not to be. I hope to meet up with many of you there in April, 2022 and at future JBS gatherings … Sarah will always be with us in spirit on those occasions.

We were delighted to go into Washington, DC a day ahead of a JBS mini-Conference there in November, 2017 to have dinner with our Chilean friends. Sarah and I played hooky from the opening night’s scheduled concert to sneak away to the Kennedy Center to see Angela Meade sing the title role in Alcina (and meet with her afterward). It was also nice to run into our “old” pals Mary and Phyllis in the Opera House that night. A Saturday morning visit to the nearby Swedish Embassy was a special treat that weekend as was a lovely Sunday champagne brunch for seven of us at the Army and Navy Club courtesy of Carol Pozevsky (Unfortunately, Sarah missed that while visiting with her brother).

The pinnacle of our association with JBS-USA was undoubtedly our Pilgrimage to Jussi’s homeland with a contingent of about twenty other Americans in August and September, 2018. Our group included two fellow Portlanders, Peter Hammond and Frank Johnson.

While we had encountered them from time to time at home, usually around Portland opera events, traveling to Sweden with them cemented our kinship. We’ve happily met with them several times since Sweden and count them among our dear friends. The four of us were fortunate to have arrived in Stockholm early, allowing us to hook up with Nils-Göran Olve who escorted us on a half-day walking tour of his home city. Naturally, the tour included the city’s historic Opera House where Jussi made his debut in July, 1930 (singing the Lamplighter in Manon Lescaut in case you’ve forgotten).
Jussi and Elvis

by David Lewis

Jussi Björling and Elvis Presley. Elvis and Jussi. The Swedish Caruso and the King of Rock 'n' Roll. An absurd pairing Or is it?

First, while Jussi likely was hardly conscious of the King, Elvis was well aware of Björling. After all, he loved singing. In 1970, Presley hired Kathy Westmoreland, a new “high soprano” to sing backup in his Las Vegas show. According to Peter Guralnick's definitive biography, “Careless Love,” Elvis “was curious about her musical background, (and) he asked her opinion about some of the great tenors in history, like Caruso and Björling.”

Yet we know from years of lurking around the Jussi Björling chat group that a significant proportion of Björling lovers despise Elvis Presley. And why wouldn’t they? After all, while Björling liked to sing numbers like “Amor ti vieta” and “Traum durch die Dämmerung,” the King preferred the likes of “Bossa Nova Baby” and “All Shook Up.” And yet … And yet …

It can’t be denied that Elvis had a rare musical talent and a pretty terrific voice. Musical talent? Really? Oh, yes. Let’s take the case of “Don’t Be Cruel.”

True, this ditty will never be confused with “Demanten på marssnön,” and Otis Blackwell will seldom be mentioned together with Jean Sibelius. But Blackwell wasn’t half-bad. In 1956, for instance, he wrote “Fever,” later a hit for Peggy Lee, and “Don’t Be Cruel,” which Presley turned into a No. 1 hit in a matter of moments.

This occurred when Presley’s producer began playing a demo copy of Blackwell’s tune. “It took just a few bars to convince Presley that it was a perfect song for him, and he decided to cut it right away,” wrote RCA’s Anne Fulchino. “Presley learned the song within minutes — he had an inherent musical sense — and in short order a great master was put on tape.” (“Short order” was 28 takes, by the way.)

Such examples proliferate. (Another great case is Blackwell’s “All Shook Up.” Listen to the agonizing original version by David Hill, then hear what Presley made of it.)

What else? There are the painful similarities: both singers lost their mothers too soon; both had merciless addictions; both enjoyed Mario Lanza records. But there are musical similarities, too. Björling recorded “O sole mio.” Presley called it “It’s Now or Never” and sold 20 million copies. Björling sang “Torna a Surriento.” Presley transformed it into “Surrender” and made it into a No. 1 hit. Presley probably wasn’t a tenor, but he caps “Surrender” with a high B-flat. Björling could do that, too.

Jussi Björling Museum Update, Voxna and Strömsbruk

Largely due to the ongoing Covid pandemic and the usual Swedish summer-vacation period, there is nothing new to report about the fate of the Museum, as well as no news about when Borlänge Kommun plans to empty the current Museum building. As of this writing, the municipal government is still planning to relocate the Jussi Björling Museum to space in the Borlänge library. Although the Museum remains officially closed, it is possible to visit by appointment. Efforts continue to find appropriate space in Stockholm as well as to work with Borlänge Kommun to insure the best possible arrangement for this priceless resource.

Stefan Olmårs writes: Unfortunately, the annual Jussifest in Voxna will be postponed until July 11-12 of 2022 due to Covid pandemic. The Strömsbruk events have also been postponed until September 3-4, 2022 due to Covid restrictions. Clearly it is not practical to hold concerts when only fewer than 50 people may attend.
Membership note:

PLEASE CHECK the address label which shows the last membership year paid above your name.

Father and son Lars in Stockholm.