

I have to pay to be applauded, I think I will stop singing." When the same question was put to me at my Metropolitan Opera debut in December 1959, I repeated Jussi's words and felt enormously pleased with myself.

In 1959 we recorded *Turandot* together. How wonderful he sounded, and what a pity that we were never able to hear his Calaf on the stage! His recording of this role is a marvel as regards both beauty of sound and dramatic expression. He also, on occasion, played with the idea of one day singing *Otello*, "but", as he said to me when we spoke by telephone in August, a few weeks before he died, "I've got plenty of time for that."

The last time I saw him was in Vienna last summer. He sang his and Verdi's *Requiem* for a recording - his final recording. One afternoon, when I was sitting in my hotel room trying to catch up on my correspondence, the door opened and in walked Jussi, Anna-Lisa, their daughter Ann-Charlotte and a number of other friends. They had just arrived by plane and had come up to say hello. Jussi suggested we have a contest to see who could hold a high C the longest... I think we shook the distinguished Hotel Imperial to its very foundations, and people started to gather outside the door. A few days later Set Svanholm arrived in Vienna for a concert performance of Wagner's *Rienzi*. Set had brought with him the Royal Swedish medal *Litteris et artibus*, which the King had awarded me. I was about to sing Brunnhilde in a new production of *Götterdämmerung*, and we both thought that the 'official' presentation should take place after the opening night. I invited some of my Swedish friends, including Jussi and his family, to *Die Drei Huzaren*. After Set Svanholm¹ had presented me with the medal, Jussi rose to his feet and made a very amusing speech for 'his little cake crumb', as he used to call me when he was in his best humour. He concluded as follows: "I only hope that our general manager doesn't have something extra in his back pocket in the manner of the manager who once presented a medal to one of our famous conductors. After a mutual exchange of courtesies and various expressions of delight, that manager took a piece of paper from his pocket saying, 'You know, I had almost forgotten to give you the bill for the medal.'" This time, though, there was no bill.

Jussi's love for his family and for Sweden was considerably stronger than his ambitions for his career. He always tried to be with his family as much as possible, and he was as happy as a child every time he finished a tour and could fly back to Sweden again. A few years ago he received an offer for a concert tour of South Africa, but Jussi was difficult to persuade. He would have preferred to stay at home. Anna-Lisa tried every trick in the book to get him to sign the contract, and he finally accepted, but on one condition only - that he would be allowed to give his darling wife a really big diamond ring. What wife would have the heart to deny her husband such a request?

That's how he was, this friend and colleague - generous with himself and his gifts. It was therefore a time for celebration when Jussi performed and scattered his vocal gold about him. He was humble before his art and unsurpassed in his skill. And this is how we will always remember him - Jussi, the King in the Realm of Song, at the height of his glorious career.

"Please Mr. Björling, May I Use Your Christian Name?"

By Elisabeth Söderström

One December day in 1959 in New York I was interviewed for the radio by an American reporter. He asked me, among other things: "Miss Soederstroem, what do you consider to be the goal of your career?" I had made my debut at the Metropolitan Opera a few months

¹ Svanholm was general manager of Stockholm's Royal Opera at the time.

earlier, and my reply came completely spontaneously: "Well, I reached that goal the day before yesterday. I sang Marguerite in *Faust* at the Metropolitan with Jussi Björling in the title role, and that is something which I couldn't, even in my wildest dreams, have dared to hope I would achieve."

My fantasies during my years as a student and the first period of my engagement at the Royal Opera, and my reality at the time of that interview were both represented by these two paragons, Jussi Björling and the Metropolitan Opera - that greatest, that almost unattainable experience to be sought after in the world of opera, whether one was seated in the enormous auditorium as a member of the expectant audience, or whether one was lucky enough to be a fellow singer on the stage.

I did not imagine then that these performances would turn out to be historic in that they were the last occasions on which Jussi sang at the Metropolitan Opera, a house in which he had appeared since 1938.

My respect for Jussi Björling is deep-rooted and had already been established in my school years, when I came to love his wonderful voice through the gramophone records which my father collected. I was especially gripped by the aria 'I männer över lag och rätt' [Ye men of law and justice] from Atterberg's *Fanal*, which I felt gave the listener such a marvellous experience of Jussi. I admired him enormously, not only for the timbre of his voice, but also for his wholly musical phrasing and for his ability to give life to the text and to enunciate it without ever distorting a single vowel.

It would be a long time, however, before I got to sing opposite Jussi in a principal role, for our repertoire seldom coincided. The first such occasion occurred in 1959 in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. It was a surprising experience. Surprising, because I had not expected his playing out of the drama would be as intense and inspiring as it was. I had imagined that it would be fantastic to be able to sing with an artist who was such a master of his voice that you felt yourself positively influenced by his technique. It was as if your throat had been given a light douche with oil. The whole performance was unconsciously one long singing lesson. But meeting Jussi as Des Grieux on the stage also meant that I was truly able to live the role of Manon. He did not for one second drop his stage persona, but played every moment as a completely convincing *chevalier*. It was not until the curtain fell at the end of the last act and we got to our feet after Manon's death scene that he allowed himself a personal comment. He said in his positive way: "Well, that was really enjoyable - I wouldn't have minded continuing for a bit longer. At other times you just want it to be all over as quickly as possible." I have never received a finer compliment!

I respected Jussi so greatly that it was not until we were acknowledging the applause at the end of the fourth performance of *Manon Lescaut* that I plucked up my courage and reverently asked whether I could call him by his Christian name. "My dear girl, I've been waiting for that for a long time," said Jussi, and he gave me a big hug in front of the whole audience, which greatly appreciated this gesture from their idol. My joy was complete.

There were only these few performances with Jussi - *Manon Lescaut* in Stockholm and *Faust* at the Metropolitan Opera. I can no longer look forward to that unattainable operatic ideal, Jussi and the Metropolitan in combination, but the longing for something which can never more be a reality is assuaged a little by the memory of the truly rich experiences of a few evenings.

