

Karl Schmitt-Walter

The baritone Karl Schmitt-Walter relates the following story in "Das Musikalische Selbstporträt" (pages 147-148):

I worked for a long time in Berlin, including during the war. On one occasion a guest appearance was made there by a tenor who was to become very famous, though, strangely enough, not so much so in Germany.

He turned up for a ten o'clock rehearsal at about half past ten; a shortish, plump, blond young man. He was very polite, apologised in broken German for his lateness, and we were able to start rehearsing. Not him though - he just marked his music.

The director waited for a while but soon went to the management and declared: "I refuse to take responsibility for this!" The rest of us said to one another - it's just as it always is with official cultural exchanges. We are required to flatter Sweden, and so a Swedish singer gets to make a guest appearance at our Opera House whether he can sing or not.

I went to that evening's *La Bohème* performance feeling very skeptical. My first lines to Rodolfo, who was standing by the window looking out over Paris, ended with: "What are you doing?" He replied in Swedish: "I'm looking at the sky, seeing how the smoke from a thousand chimneys is wafting over Paris..."

I was almost speechless - the voice was so beautiful!

He sang and sang. Gradually everyone gathered in the wings, listening and waiting for the big aria. He sang the famous aria so incredibly beautifully that we all asked in amazement: "Who is this young man with his unbelievable voice?" It turned out that it was Jussi Björling, who was to become one of the world's most famous tenors.

We got together after the performance, and he thought it was a great joke that we had actually taken him for a poor devil whom we would have to help through the performance.

He had eclipsed us all!

The performance took place on Friday, 6 February 1937.

[Translated by Gail Campain from a Swedish translation of the original German published in issue 21 of *Jussi Björling Sällskapets tidning*.]

