Membership in this Society

Membership in the Jussi Björling Society-USA, Inc. is on a calendar-year basis.

Membership contributions submitted to the Society after October 31st of any calendar year will be credited to the following year, unless a membership is in arrears, in which case it will be applied to the current unpaid year.

This Journal is currently published once a year for the members of the Jussi Björling Society-USA, Inc. and the Jussi Björling Appreciation Society, and for those members of the Scandinavian Jussi Björling Society who chose “affiliate” membership in the Jussi Björling Society-USA, Inc. In addition, a Newsletter is also published each year for these members.

Please examine your mail label which indicates your last membership year paid.

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Note on Back Issues

Copies of past issues of this Journal (Nos. 12–27) are offered on an “as available” basis to members at $11 per copy postpaid. For a listing of contents of these issues, or to order copies, write to any of the following:

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Submission of Articles

The editor invites the submission of articles on subjects of interest to the members of the Jussi Björling Societies.

Please be advised that if you submit material to JBS-USA (letters, photographs, articles, etc.), you are granting Jussi Björling Society - USA, Inc. the right to publish, distribute and edit that material in any manner deemed appropriate by the Board of Directors, including permission to share the material with Jussi Björling Society - USA, Inc.’s publishing partners, including other JB Societies. Unless you advise us specifically to the contrary, JBS-USA will assume that you are in agreement with these terms and conditions.

This Journal recommends to authors that they follow the publishing conventions set out by D. Kern Holoman in “Writing About Music” (Univ. of California Press).

ON THE COVER: Jussi Björling in Concert, 1959. Photo by OE Nelson
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The Journal of the Jussi Björling Society – USA
Number 29, February, 2021

This Journal is produced by the Jussi Björling Society – USA, Inc. in collaboration with the Jussi Björling Appreciation Society (UK), Scandinavian Jussi Björlingsällskapet, and the Jussi Björling Museum (Borlänge, Sweden).

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From the President

By Janel E. Lundgren

F irst, the JBS-USA Board of Directors joins me in sending our best greetings to you all, with the hope that you all are safe and well.

In spite of the pandemic, members of JBS-USA have been loyal and generous in supporting our Society, through donations to the Conference, membership dues, and additional contributions. We have survived 2020, and are beginning the new year with the financial stability to continue our outreach programs and to pursue new projects — all because our members are active partners in our devotion to the Björling legacy. We thank you!

But the year has also brought the major loss of the Jussi Björling Museum, now permanently closed in Borlänge, Sweden. Efforts are still underway to delay the moving of the collection to library storage, and/or to find a new location for the Museum. By mid-December 2020, our members had sent in 62 signatures for the Museum Appeal, and more are still coming. If you wish to add your own signature, please inform us at matthewjmancini@mac.com.

Our lead article by Museum Founding Curator Harald Henrysson will bring you up to date on the status of the Museum as of mid-January 2021. Our website will also be frequently updated with the latest information. JBS-USA stands ready to partner with our sister societies in Sweden and the UK, in support of any happy solution.

This Journal contains good news as well. Our Board is excited to announce that we will be privately printing an English version of Jussi Björling, en minnesbok, as translated by Gail Campain, and with additional material by Harald Henrysson. The volume should be available to members by early summer.

The new 6-CD set, “Jussi Björling — A Tribute,” has received rave reviews from three distinguished critics — Henry Fogel, Ken Meltzer, and Kristian Krogholm — reviews which are printed in this Journal. The CD set is now available for sale through our website or using the enclosed order form, at a member-discounted price.

The JBS Board is also working to make some virtual concerts more readily available to JBS members. You will receive specifics of these soon. And our Chicago Conference has been successfully re-scheduled for April of 2022. The specific dates will be available in March of this year.

We hope you enjoy these and other articles as you page through this Journal. We thank all those who participate in this publication, with special thanks for the significant contributions of board members Walter B. Rudolph, Dan Shea, and Ken Svengalis, and, of course, Harald Henrysson. I conclude with an expression of appreciation. We all know Harald Henrysson as a friend, and as the ultimate resource on the life and art of Jussi Björling. In addition to co-founding two Jussi Björling Societies, one in Sweden and one in the United States, Harald gave us all the major gift of a JB research center and repository in the JB Museum, which he created in Borlänge. Planned and developed in a very special way by Harald, the Museum has been a favorite destination of international music lovers, including distinguished British vocal specialist, author and broadcaster John Steane, who wrote in Gramophone, “Of all singer museums, Björling’s is best.”

Those of us who have had the privilege to visit the Museum over the years know that it has been a warm and welcoming place, occupying two floors of a large residence overlooking a park in the center of Borlänge, with generous displays, comfortable places to sit and read or listen, and easy access to paper and recording collections. Curator Harald (and after his 2009 retirement, the current curator Jan-Olof Damberg) was always at the ready to help you find what you sought. The same was true long distance, as each of them provided answers, documents and photos by email.

If the Museum speaks for anyone in addition to Jussi, it also speaks for the professional excellence and personal commitment of Harald Henrysson. Now that Museum is in great jeopardy. We, at JBS-USA, are committed to joining with Harald, his colleagues and members of the Jussi Björling Sällskapet, in their urgent work to re-open the Museum (whether in Borlänge or Stockholm), to preserve the collections, and with them the life work of this dedicated and supreme jussiologist. Thank you Harald, for all you have done and continue to do. I know I speak for the entire membership when I say, you have our heartfelt appreciation and gratitude.
Museum was officially closed in accordance with the decision. However, the curator, Jan-Olof Damberg, has not yet had to begin dismantling the museum and during January is permitted to receive visitors who contact him in advance.

The official explanation for closing the museum was that the number of visitors was considered too low to justify its costs. Two members of the cultural board registered their dissent, and are planning to try to get the decision overturned at the next meeting on 2 February. The sudden decision meant that the museum could only be open for another 16 days in December, something especially regrettable since Covid restrictions likely prevented many from going there for a last visit. When Jussi’s children Lars and Ann-Charlotte learnt about the development — from the Jussi Björling Society, not from the city — they reacted immediately in a letter to the administration, strongly complaining about the decision and the lack of information and demanding that all their family’s depositions be returned to them. On the last day the museum was open, an appeal to save it, initiated by the Björling society and the Royal Opera Soloists’ Association, was handed over to the head of the cultural administration. Names are still being collected and it has at the beginning of January gotten more than 700 signatures, among them several internationally renowned singers like Plácido Domingo, Joseph Calleja, Nina Stemme, Peter Mattei and Håkan Hagegård.

The Björling memory in Borlänge

While hoping that the municipal decision described above can be changed so that unnecessary destruction is avoided, I want to stress that Jussi Björling, the most famous person born in Borlänge, was never forgotten there. As early as 1969, a one-room Björling exhibition opened on the grounds of the local open-air museum, in a small house mostly built of timber from the demolished house where Jussi was born, and the new street close to his birthplace was

The decision and its background

For several years, the future of the Jussi Björling Museum has been discussed in the municipal administration in Borlänge, the city where Jussi was born in 1911 and which owns and runs the museum. For some time, the administration had planned to move it from its present building, where it opened in 1994. Since it was unclear when and where the museum would be moved and what activities it would have in the future, on 29 April 2020 the three Jussi Björling societies sent a letter to the Department of Cultural and Recreational Activities in Borlänge, stressing the importance of the museum and its activities and asking sixteen questions about the city’s plans. The letter was signed not only by the chairmen of the societies but also by Jussi’s children Lars and Ann-Charlotte and by individuals who have been active in preserving his memory, including Andrew Farkas, Stephen Hastings, Jacob Forsell, Hanna Hedman, Roger Alderstrand and myself.

Those questions about the museum’s future were not answered until seven months later, in a letter dated 23 November from the head of the municipal department to the chairman of the Jussi Björling Society in Sweden, Bengt Krantz. On 24 November the cultural board took a decision which confirmed the answers to our questions. The signers of the letter had not known that the plans no longer were to move the museum with its activities, but to close it, empty the building and only re-use selected parts of the collections, in a new exhibition of music life in Borlänge to be housed in the municipal library. No person with special competence related to Jussi would be hired in the future. The fate of the archive was unclear. Probably, no further sale of CDs and souvenirs would take place. As of 1 January 2021, the Jussi Björling Museum was officially closed in accordance with the decision. However, the curator, Jan-Olof Damberg, has not yet had to begin dismantling the museum and during January is permitted to receive visitors who contact him in advance.

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By Harald Henrysson
called Jussi Björlings Väg. In 1990, a Jussi Björling statue was unveiled in a new square which was then named Jussi Björlings Torg, and in 1991, I was entrusted with arranging a temporary Björling exhibition, where many ideas for the future museum could be tested. In 1994, leading politicians in the city had ambitions to expand its cultural profile. I was offered the opportunity to lead the build-up of a real Jussi Björling Museum in a 1926 house built for a physician, and gratefully accepted. After the opening on 22 October, I stayed on as curator until my retirement in 2009, when Jan-Olof Damberg took over. An international Jussi Björling Tenor Competition (to which 125 tenor applicants from 38 countries sent cassette recordings) was arranged at the same time, with finals the day after the museum opening. The competition was planned to return every three years, but never did for financial reasons. Many elite-level concerts in Jussi's memory have been given in Borlänge over the years, several of them at Stora Tuna Church, where the graveyard is his final resting-place. In 2019, the latest memorial concert, in a church near the museum, celebrated its 25th anniversary. I hope that it will not necessarily have been a farewell event.

The museum

When the museum opened in 1994, with Jussi's widow Anna-Lisa cutting the ribbon, an experienced museum architect, Sven-Olof Gudmunds, had designed exhibition cases and other details. His contributions were essential to produce on the two floors an attractive, intimate interior where much of the large collections were displayed and where a visitor could listen to Jussi's singing, see him on video or study the archive material. I began my work in February, and since the museum was to be opened on 22 October, the workload was intense. I was glad to have fellow “jussicologist” Bertil Bengtsson, whom several JBS-USA members have met, hired to assist.

Among the most conspicuous objects in the exhibition are more than a dozen stage costumes, most of them loaned by the Björling family but some by the Royal Opera. The family depositions also include many other personal belongings, correspondence, programs, photos and a large clippings collection following Jussi's career in Sweden. Archive material from countries where Jussi sang has systematically been added, catalogued, copied and arranged in binders to make it easily available to visitors. Donations from many countries have expanded the collections. Paintings, posters, photographs, documents, and maps showing Jussi's career gradually filled more and more of the museum walls. The archive was the basis for the comprehensive list of Jussi Björling's performances which is now available on the web. It contains, for example, more than 400 printed programs and 3400 reviews in various languages, and about 3500 pictures are digitized.

Archive copies of almost all known Jussi Björling recordings, which have not been commercially issued, were obtained — especially from the Swedish Radio. A large collection of commercial sound records — 78s, 45s, LPs, tapes, CDs and DVDs — was built up. More than 900 CD issues where Jussi is represented (of about 1500 that exist) show how much his voice is still alive. (This part of the collection was important for the “phonography” of his recordings that I have issued and continue to revise on the web, the last version in November 2020.) A comprehensive selection of CDs has been offered for sale, directly or by mail, as have specially produced souvenirs. The museum has presented many programs about Jussi Björling or opera in general, one of the earliest a fascinating talk by 91-year-old Märta Björling-Kärn, the last person to have lived and traveled with David Björling and his boys. Several of Jussi's opera colleagues readily accepted an invitation to appear at the museum.

I am glad to have met many members of JBS-USA at the Jussi Björling Museum; one of them is now my dear wife, Sue. The guestbooks bear unmistakable evidence of how appreciated the museum has been by visitors from many countries, and also how much Jussi's art has meant for them. In 2004, the museum's tenth anniversary was celebrated with a Jussi
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).

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
The JB Museum Closed

Stockholm Headline: The Jussi Björling Museum will be closed down: “It’s sad that there is so little pride in father there.”

Dagens Nyheter December 7, 2020

After 26 years the Jussi Björling museum in Borlänge will be closed down for good. Diminishing visit figures and a strained economy are the given reasons, but the handling by the local authority is questioned. “This is what always happens to culture, when the bureaucrats have free hands”, says the opera singer Marcus Jupiter.

The feelings are strong after the news that the museum will be closed. “Shameful and sad”, says the court singer Malin Byström about the information on Facebook. Her words are mild compared to those from many of her colleagues. In the social media, there has been a hailstorm of invectives after the news became known.

The Jussi Björling Museum has been run by the town of Borlänge since October 1994. Then the doors of the former doctor’s villa were opened a few minutes’ walk from Borlänge’s railway station. A stage costume that was used by Enrico Caruso and donated to Jussi Björling by Caruso’s widow is on show in a display case. CD records, 78 rpm records, scrapbooks, video films, footages and concert post bills are shown on two floors. But only a few weeks more. On January 1, the museum will be closed.

What will happen to the collection in the future has not been decided. “Today we don’t know what premises we’ll get,” says the curator, Jan-Olof Damberg. “We’ll probably be in a room in the library, and the base is likely to be a photo exhibition by Jacob Forsell that was shown at the Stockholm Concert Hall in 2011.”

It is the combination of museum and accessible archive for research that has made the place unique. The collection has attracted scholars from all over the world.
and at the same time anybody interested has been able to browse in a complete catalogue of Jussi's recordings, reviews, concert and opera programs. All what is included in a real museum with expert personnel, sales and scholar support will disappear. All this the town of Borlänge confirms in its answer to an official letter sent in late April, where the chairmen of the three Jussi Björling societies in Sweden, the UK and the USA including engaged music scholars and opera singers asked about the issue of premises and the future for the museum. An e-mail from the executive official of culture and leisure time, Patric Hammar, confirmed its reception. He promised to come back about it during the fall for “further discussion” and to answer questions. It wasn’t until November 23, that the answer was delivered, the day before the decision was made.

Can you understand that many people became disappointed when the promised dialogue about the future of the museum never happened? The aspect of time could always be discussed. But all the people involved have been aware for a long time that it has been tough. The town has arrived at a point where it has become untenable to continue to run the museum in this way. The move has been considered for several years.

The issue came already up in 2013, curator Jan-Olof Damberg confirms.

He emphasises that there has been talk about moving the museum — not winding it up. A great deal of the collection constitutes of depositions made by the Björling family. Depositions that will now be returned.

The children of Jussi Björling, Lars and Ann-Charlotte, are very disappointed at the closing of the museum. They also question how the local authorities have acted on the issue. The news about the closing reached the family on the grapevine. “It was Harald (Henrysson, former curator of the Jussi Björling museum) who told us over the telephone. The family’s view is very critical, to say the least,” says Lars Björling.

Also Ann-Charlotte is disappointed with the town authorities. She got the news from the chairman of the Swedish Jussi Björling society, Bengt Krantz. “I think it is miserable. The fact that the family wasn’t informed is really, really poor. It’s so sad that this happened, because Daddy wanted to be buried in Borlänge. It’s unfortunate that there is so little pride for Daddy.”

The executive official of culture and leisure time, Patric Hammar, has a different opinion. He stresses how precious Jussi Björling is to the town. “It will always be important to display the memory of him in the town. On behalf of the town we are always going to honor and pay tribute to Jussi.”

Can you understand the family’s reactions concerning how you have handled this on behalf of the town? “It’s unfortunate if it is as you say, that the information about the shutdown reached them on other ways. The relation to the family is most important. But even if we had had a better dialogue the problems with a diminishing number of visitors and an indefensible economy would have remained.”

There might, however, be a change for the better. Marcus Jupiter hopes the Björling family collection will come to Stockholm. He’s dreaming of a museum on the premises of the former Opera School. “The building is empty and big enough to be used for a full opera museum.”

Lars Björling suggests that the family is thinking likewise. “Not saying too much, there may be an opening in Stockholm. It might also be something that observes Christine Nilsson and Jenny Lind. I don’t think I can say more yet”, he concludes.

Text: Carl-Henric Malmgren
Translation: Calle Friedner
The JB Museum Closed

A Sampling of Quotes from JBS-USA Members

What a shame. Visiting the Jussi Björling Museum is one of my cherished memories — What a wonderful place. How sad. A terrible mistake. What a shame.
David Lewis

I am appalled and saddened that Borlänge has no concern for a singer considered one of the greatest tenors of all time and whose singing still brings me joy.
Stephanie Digby

I cannot understand how anyone could sanction the closure of such a magnificent world famous jewel of a museum.
Joseph Colley

I am saddened by the news of the imminent closing of the Jussi Björling Museum. To me he remains the greatest tenor of all time and I’ve had years of enjoyment from his recordings.
Linda Waldman

A world cultural treasure which must not be allowed to close down.
Everett Fox

For many of us in America the idea of traveling to Sweden to see this museum is very important. Although he has been gone for many years his music is still the top of my personal operatic list. His legacy is meant to endure in Sweden, not to be put aside....
Phyllis Frank

His artistry and interpretation has served as the gold standard by which many of today’s music students are trained. He serves as an inspiration and should be given the honor he rightfully deserves, even if other modifications are needed for the museum’s survival.
Lisa Mazza-Lockwood

I have known and loved Jussi’s voice for almost 70 years — I am 86, and remember the broadcast of Don Carlo in 1950. My wife and I celebrated a wedding anniversary at the Museet.
Don Pruitt

There are few memories of historical singers left to us now and Jussi was of course one of the great singers of the 20th century, so it is vital that this museum be kept going.
David Cutler

A world cultural treasure which must not be allowed to close down.

Dan Shea and Göran Forsling enjoy the Museum

Historic Met Opera Announcement Poster

Birgit Nilsson, Autographed Photos Display

JANEL LUNDGREN

JANEL LUNDGREN JANEL LUNDGREN
Museum Update from Harald Henrysson

February 1, 2021

After my article was written [see page 5], the decision to close the museum has been heavily criticized, especially in the local press. The appeal initiated by the Björling Society and the Royal Opera soloists has now got more than 1400 signatures from many countries. Among those added since the article was written are Joan Baez, who once visited both the museum and Jussi’s grave, Jonas Kaufmann, Cecilia Bartoli and Neil Shicoff. A fund-raising drive has also begun.

The chairman of the Borlänge Board of Cultural and Recreational Activities, Maslah Omar, has declared himself positive to studying the initiatives and suggestions for preserving and running the museum and has asked the relevant officials to do this. A first report is expected at the Town board meeting on 9 February. This means that the dismantling of the museum will not yet begin.

Göran Forsling, the board member of the Jussi Björling Society who lives in Borlänge, has also had a long meeting with the chairman of the City Council, Jan Bohman, which he describes as positive, although no commitments were made.

Continuing updates will be posted on the JBS-USA website.
**JUSSI BJÖRLING**

**A Tribute**

Jussi Björling (ten); various artists

**IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1135-6, mono (6 CDs: 447:11)**

**GOUNOD Faust** Jean Morel, cond; Jussi Björling (Faust); Elizabeth Söderström (Marguerite); Robert Merrill (Valentin); Cesare Siepi (Méphistophélès); Metropolitan Op O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 12/19/1959

**MASCAGNI Cavalleria rusticana**
Nino Verchi, cond; Giulietta Simionato (Santuzza); Jussi Björling (Turiddu); Walter Cassel (Alfo); Metropolitan Op O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 11/16/1959

**PUCCINI Tosca** Dimitri Mitropoulos, cond; Mary Curtis-Verna (Tosca); Jussi Björling (Cavaradossi); Cornell MacNeil (Scarpia); Metropolitan Opera O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 11/21/1959.

**BONUS: ALTHÉN: Land, du välsignade.** Arias and scenes from La bohème (with Ethel Mårtensson), Aida, Faust, Cavalleria rusticana (with Maria Jeritza), Tosca (act 3 complete with Kjerstin Dellert), Rigoletto, and Il trovatore (with Gina Cigna). Also songs from JB’s first and fifth Carnegie Hall concerts.

**JB A Tribute may be purchased at member discounts using the enclosed form, or on our website.**

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Review

The New CD Set from Immortal Performances: Essential Listening

By Henry Fogel

Almost all performing artists exhibit differences between their studio recordings and their live performances (and, hopefully, also between different live performances). The degree of that difference can vary mightily from artist to artist. One tenor in whom this difference was very strongly pronounced was Jussi Björling. As fine as his studio recordings are, and some of them are extraordinary, the intensity and musical imagination he brought to live performances invariably increase compared with what we hear on his studio records. This remarkable compilation from Immortal Performances is essential listening for anyone who admires the great Swedish tenor. The three performances in this set celebrate Björling’s final Met season. Sadly, ten months later, at the age of 49, he would succumb to a heart attack.

The prize here is the Faust, a role that could have been written with a tenor like Björling in mind, but which he never got to record commercially. This is the only one of the three operas that originates from a Met broadcast, and thus the sound is much better than the others. The performance has been issued before on various labels. The best of those is on Pristine (PAC0064), and comparing it with the new version, I find the actual sound quality similar. Immortal Performances’ is a bit clearer, while Pristine’s has more ambience, which occasionally muddies detail.
However, one thing you get from *Immortal Performances* is a greater sense of occasion. *Pristine* fits the opera on two discs, and one way they achieve that is by cutting short the applause after “Salut! Demeure” and at other places. Since Björling did not commercially record *Faust*, we cannot make comparisons except for the big aria, which he did record. But using that as a guidepost, one notes that he holds the top note longer than he does in his studio recording of the aria. More importantly, throughout the opera we hear a degree of dynamic shading and coloristic imagination that is not always found on Björling’s studio recordings. Those listeners who have in their minds the idea that Björling was an exquisitely tasteful singer but lacking the instinct for animal excitement or for specific characterization will find their prejudice challenged severely throughout this set. One example will suffice: in the final scene, when Faustencoun-
ters the imprisoned Marguerite, Björling vividly conveys his deep sorrow and sadness at the grief he has caused. He begins the passage in hushed tones that darken the normal brightness of his timbre.

In addition to Björling, the Swedish soprano Elisabeth Söderström is another tremendous asset to the performance. The two pay attention to details of articulation and inflection, singing with an unusual degree of specificity. The Garden Scene is not just beautiful music (which it always is) but a real awakening of love and passion. Söderström’s bright soprano never turns the slightest bit harsh. That scene is begun by the Méphistophélès of Cesare Siepi in a lovely Invocation to Night, underlining the strength of this cast. Siepi is a dramatic presence as the Devil, but he also exhibits a *cantabile* line that is essential for this music. There is an elegance in Siepi’s characterization that is stylistically appropriate to Gounod. In Robert Merrill, the performance may have the richest voice and most musically strong Valentin of any performance. Jean Morel conducts with a deep understanding of the style, but there are a few chaotic moments (he seems to lose control at the end of the second act, for instance). However, Morel’s overall shaping of the score is very successful.

Turning to *Cavalleria rusticana*, we are confronted by some sonic challenges, but they can be lived with by listeners who have a tolerance for historical recordings. Björling made two studio recordings of Mascagni’s one-act thriller. The 1953 effort with Zinka Milanov and Robert Merrill is conducted by Renato Cellini. The 1958 features Renata Tebaldi and Ettore Bastianini, conducted by Alberto Erede. Both are fine but flawed as well. Milanov’s singing is edgy until the big duet with Turiddu, and Cellini’s conducting is idiomatic but somewhat studio-bound. Björling’s second recording should have been something special, but it really never gets off the ground, largely due to Erede’s lumpish, bar-to-bar conducting. While Tebaldi hurls a terrifying curse at Turiddu at the end of the duet, prior to that she is too ladylike.

Björling sings well and is convincing in both sets. However, the difference between his performances in the studio and on stage has rarely been demonstrated as dramatically as it is here at the Met in 1959. And in Giulietta Simionato he has a Santuzza equipped and willing to let loose too. I only wish Nino Verchi’s conducting had fully equalled the fire produced by those two. It isn’t bad (and surely far better than Erede’s), but it doesn’t add to the heat in the way someone like Mitropoulos might have.

The November 16, 1959 date of this performance is meaningful because it was Björling’s first appearance at the Met after a two-season absence. Although Turiddu is the first voice heard in the opera, he isn’t seen off-stage serenading during the Prelude. After that, a good bit of the action takes place before Turiddu’s first stage entrance, which is for the duet with Santuzza. The Met audience was prepared to let Björling know how much he was welcomed back, and I for one am glad that *Immortal Performances* retained the entire ovation that greeted him; it is heartwarming and exciting to feel like a part of the event, even just hearing it. Verchi had to stop the introduction to the duet and restart it after the ovation subsided.

Many points of comparison between this performance and Björling’s two studio recordings document the added inspiration he drew from the stage and the presence of an audience. In the duet he sounds at times almost uninged. Turiddu’s dramatic change of mood after the cocky “Brindisi,” when
he seems to foretell his death and asks his mother to look after Santuzza, is a remarkably precise bit of vocal acting from Björling. In Simionato’s case, the degree of difference from her studio recording is smaller than with Björling, because she had the ability to create intensity even in the sterile setting of a recording studio. Nonetheless, she surpasses herself here and gives what may well be, vocally and dramatically, one of the finest portrayals of Santuzza ever given. Rosalind Elias is a fine Lola, Walter Cassel an adequate Alfio. He sings the role effectively, but there is nothing distinctive or particularly interesting about the timbre of his voice.

Producer Richard Caniell has performed wonders with this restoration. The recording was made in the stage wings and is thus afflicted with all kinds of problems, including changing balances and perspective, and distortion at climaxes due to the microphones or electronics in the system becoming overloaded. Caniell has replaced a few of the high notes sung by both together in the Turiddu-Santuzza duet where the overload rendered them unlistenable, using other Björling recordings. Each of these replacements is very brief, and Caniell is up front about them in his recording notes. The fact is that I have had this performance on HRE LPs and could rarely bring myself to listen to it. Now, for the first time, I can actually enjoy it from start to finish.

Björling made a studio Tosca recording in 1957, which comes off quite well when heard in Pristine’s transfer (the RCA versions I have heard all add to the steeliness in Milanov’s voice in the title role). But here again Björling onstage significantly surpasses Björling in the studio. In all three operas you should not make the mistake of thinking that the difference only shows itself in moments of heated passion. There are innumerable details where the tenor milks a phrase just a bit more or reflects tenderness toward Tosca with a little more urgency. In such moments Björling displays a level of specificity in his inflection that is quite special.

In more urgent moments he also seems freer, more willing to let loose (at “Vittoria, vittoria!” for example.) The degrees of shading and subtle rubato he employs in “E lucevan le stelle” are beyond those found in the RCA studio Tosca and even beyond some of Björling’s recital performances. He holds on to the notes at “mi cadea fra le braccia,” as if holding on to the memory of Tosca in his arms. The tenderness of the diminuendo at “discoglea” is singularly beautiful. And then at “e muoio disperato,” he virtually explodes, then repeats the line with a sense of defeat, only to burst forth with an extraordinarily powerful climax at “E non ho amato” before again descending into sadness on the final “tanto la vita.” The whole aria is a lesson in how to give specific meaning through dynamic shading and the application of color to the voice.

In Mary Curtis-Verna, Björling has a more qualified partner than might have been expected. Curtis-Verna was an American soprano (born Mary Curtis, she married her Italian voice teacher Verna) who made quite a name for herself in the 1950s and 60s by being willing and able to jump in to replace an ailing singer who cancelled at the last minute. She had a lovely spinto soprano voice, evenly produced from bottom to top of her range, and a very natural way with a phrase. Curtis-Verna didn’t bring either a unique personality or voice to the stage, but she was a very fine singer. In today’s world, when she wouldn’t be in competition with the likes of Milanov, Albanese, and Tebaldi, she would probably have a bigger career on records.

I heard her many times at the Met during her career, but I must say that my reaction to hearing this performance was “Oh my, she really was quite good.” The high C in the last act at “io quella lama” is spectacular—perfectly in tune and with plenty of ring to the sound. (One aside: I have seen Curtis-Verna’s name spelled with and without the hyphen. The logical way to learn which is correct is to google the artist’s autographs, and she always used the hyphen.)

Cornell MacNeil is a powerful Scarpia, and Dimitri Mitropoulos’s conducting is really wonderful, encompassing all of the emotions in the score, from tenderness to tension, pain, and fury. The recorded sound is quite good; Caniell describes it as a “Met house-line recording.” The one problem is the prompter, who must have been negotiating for a spot on the cast list. He is both too loud and badly timed. Caniell has removed the prompter 196 times through careful editing, which results in some shortened musical phrases by a minuscule amount. I must say I didn’t hear any of those excisions.

The three operas in this set represent the entirety of Björling’s repertoire in his final Met season. It is shocking to think about how wonderful the voice sounds here, knowing that in less than a year he would be dead.

As is always the case with Immortal Performances, there is a great deal of bonus material and two wonderful booklets. Some of Milton Cross’s announcements are included in the Faust, which you can skip if you wish. Among the most interesting extracts in the bonus material are arias from La bohème and Rigoletto taken from Björling’s first U.S. concert, a General Motors Concert radio broadcast from November 28, 1937. He shared that broadcast with Maria Jeritza, and the one duet they perform together is hair-raising. It is an abbreviated version of the Turiddu-Santuzza duet, beginning with “Bada, Santuzza.” (A flute takes the part of Lola.) This performance is completely alive, so much so that you willingly overlook that one or two of Jeritza’s top notes are a shade flat. A brilliant “Celeste Aida” from another General Motors Concert a month later is also very beau-
The booklets include articles by Harald Henrysson and the tenor’s son Lars, extensive recording notes by Caniell, plot summaries, artists’ biographies, and wonderful photographs. Henrysson is the former curator of Sweden’s Jussi Björling Museum and the author of the Björling phonography. The details of Björling’s history in America make for fascinating reading, and Henrysson’s notes offer exemplary illumination on the recordings included in this set. Lars Björling’s “personal reminiscence” is both educational and moving. His recollections of being backstage with his father and artists like Leonard Warren (in 1945), and his personal reminiscing of the tenor’s final Met season, are just the kind of things we opera lovers eat up.

Immortal Performances is selling the 6-CD set for the price of 5. Frankly, it would be recommended enthusiastically were it 6 CDs for the price of 7 or 8! No matter how well you think you know Jussi Björling’s art, you will learn new things and deepen your love for his unique talent through this set. Five stars: A superb package of live Jussi Björling material.

Henry Fogel is Producer/Host of Collectors’ Corner with Henry Fogel for WFMT Radio Network, and will be a featured speaker at the JBS-USA Chicago Conference in 2022.
Cavalleria rusticana. But Björling gave just 90 performances in the Metropolitan Opera House (plus 30 tour appearances) during his 21-year career. This was the product of numerous factors, including the challenges of international travel, the onslaught of WWII, Björling’s numerous health issues, and fee disputes with Met GM Rudolf Bing.

In any event, when Björling returned to the Met in November of 1959 after a more than two-year hiatus, everyone sensed how special the occasion was. Shortly after the series of performances, Björling confided to his son Lars (who provides a beautiful and touching essay in an IP booklet accompanying the set): “I feel that was the last time I will sing at the Met.” It was not like a prediction, rather it just slipped out of his mouth, like he was thinking aloud.” On September 9, 1960, Jussi Björling died of the heart condition that had long plagued him, at the age of 49.

All told, Björling sang eight Met performances between November 16 and December 22, 1959; trios of Mascagni’s Cavalleria rusticana and Puccini’s Tosca, and two of Gounod’s Faust. The new IP Björling 6-disc tribute includes the three performances that were recorded. The December 19, 1959 Faust was a nationwide Saturday afternoon broadcast. The November 16, 1959 Cav and November 21, 1959 Tosca were preserved courtesy of in-house microphones.

Jussi Björling sang beautifully right to the end of his life. The color of his tenor voice darkened over time, but still maintained its silvery beauty. The high notes, delivered in later years with a more effortful production, continued to ring out with impressive security and authority. Even if these Met performances “merely” captured Björling in a vocal estate similar to his commercial recordings of the period, their historic importance would command interest. But as I’ve commented in Fanfare on previous occasions, while Jussi Björling was a sterling artist in the recording studio, he was a different performer when interacting with a live audience. While it might be credible to find Björling a somewhat reserved interpreter in his studio recordings (I don’t), he...
was a fiercely committed onstage performer, giving unstintingly of himself both vocally and emotionally. And to my ears, that added intensity is only further magnified in these extraordinary Met farewell performances.

The set opens with Björling's 1959 Met return performance on November 16, 1959. Björling made two excellent studio recordings of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1953 RCA: Zinka Milanov, Robert Merrill, Renato Cellini, conductor; 1957 Decca: Renata Tebaldi, Ettore Bastianini, Alberto Erede, conductor). Both find Björling surrounded by first-rate colleagues and in excellent voice, offering a beautifully-sung and convincing portrait of Turiddu. But in the 1959 Met performance, Björling sings with a vocal and dramatic intensity that puts the two commercial recordings in the shade. Turiddu's offstage serenade to Lola is sung with gorgeous tone, impressive breath control, and the unrestrained fervor of a man in the throes of erotic love. If anything, Turiddu's first onstage appearance, the confrontation with Santuzza, is even more electrifying. Björling is greeted by the Met audience with an extended and ecstatic ovation that brings the performance to a halt (Björling, perhaps temporarily overwhelmed by the ovation, sings "A Francofonte! A Francofonte!" instead of the correct sequence, "Che vuol tu dire? A Francofonte!") Richard Caniell addresses this error by retaining the first "A Francofonte!", and eliminating the second). In the duet, Björling's Turiddu battles his spurned lover, Santuzza, sung by the great Italian mezzo Giulietta Simionato. Here, Björling and Simionato deliver one of the greatest and most scintillating versions of this scene ever recorded. It's a blend of vocal glory, technical assurance, and interpretive abandon rarely achieved even by the greatest artists. Turiddu's "Brindisi," his confrontation with Alfio, and the Farewell to Mama Lucia all find Björling again in sterling voice, and eclipsing the dramatic impact of his studio recordings. It's fascinating (and most welcome) to hear a singer sometimes described by critics as "taciturn" invoking the Italian tradition of *verismo* tenors, but without ever crossing over into bombast.

Simionato creates a believable and wholly sympathetic character in Santuzza. Giulietta Simionato was a fearless singer, and she unreservedly pours her rich, Italianate voice into Mascagni's *verismo* masterpiece. Baritone Walter Cassel, a valuable singer at the Met for many years, is a first-rate Alfio, sporting a rich, powerful, and gruff vocal and dramatic persona entirely appropriate for the role of the brander who kills Turiddu. Two other Met stalwarts, Thelma Votipka and Rosalind Elias, are both fine in the lesser, but still dramatically important roles of Turiddu's Mama Lucia, and Lola. Conductor Nino Verchi leads the performance with a sure hand, giving Mascagni's rich and colorful score its full due, but never at the expense of the opera's overall momentum. Richard Caniell has seamlessly replaced a few seconds of mike overload/distortion with apposite excerpts from other Björling performances.

As in the case of *Cavalleria rusticana*, Jussi Björling's role in *Tosca* (Cavaradossi) is documented in a fine studio recording, made for RCA in 1957, and co-starring Zinka Milanov and Leonard Warren, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting. And as in the case of *Cavalleria*, the November 21, 1959 Met performance displays Björling not only in superb voice, but singing with an intensity and abandon not found in the RCA studio production. Björling's Tosca on this occasion is the American *lirico-spinto* soprano, Mary Curtis-Verna. Perhaps Curtis-Verna lacked the individuality and star power of such singers as Licia Albanese, Milanov, Renata Tebaldi, and Leontyne Price. But Curtis-Verna was an artist capable of singing a wide variety of roles in a manner worthy of the finest international stages. In the 1959 performance, Curtis-Verna hits all the marks, with a voice that lacks neither for power, attractiveness, or security in the upper register. Perhaps this is not an especially individual interpretation, but Curtis-Verna still proves a worthy partner to Björling's fervent and gorgeously sung Cavaradossi.

At the time of this performance, Cornell MacNeil possessed one of the world's most beautiful and imposing baritone voices. In later years, MacNeil studied the role of Scarpia with Tito Gobbi, and his interpretation assumed a level of subtlety not evident in the 1959 performance. It is true that MacNeil's Scarpia on that occasion is of a generalized sort. But what a voice! The opportunity to hear MacNeil in the Act I Te Deum, or in any of the great moments of Act II is something every opera lover should have the opportunity to savor. The conductor is Dimitri Mitropoulos, a master of many scores, including Puccini's *Tosca*. Mitropoulos's vision of *Tosca* has a power, sweep, and intensity that rivals Víctor de Sabata in the iconic 1953 *EMI* recording with Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano, and Gobbi. How wonderful it is to hear a conductor who both revels in Puccini's masterful orchestral score, and understands at every turn how to pace the work to allow the singers to shine their brightest.

There is another presence in the 1959 *Tosca* I must acknowledge. The placement of the microphone recording the performance vividly captures the work of the prompter assigned with the task of cueing the singers. Richard Caniell found the prompter's work distracting in the extreme: "I removed the prompter in substantial vocal lines and spaces. This thereby shortened
the phrase. In no instance did I do this with Björling and only once with Curtis-Verna. In Act I, I removed the prompter 81 times, in Act II 90 times and Act III 25 times for a total of 196 excisions. Thus the number of occasions that you hear him are instances when he cannot be removed without musical damage.” My preference would have been to leave the prompter’s contribution as is. While each of the prompter’s cues takes but a fraction of a second, they occur within the flow of the music. Removing them alters the pace and momentum as Mitropoulos intended, albeit microscopically. However, if you are among those who like your prompters to be neither seen nor heard, you will be most grateful for Richard Caniell’s expert work here.

Unlike Cav and Tosca, Björling never made a commercial recording of Charles Gounod’s Faust. In addition to the December 19, 1959 broadcast included on this set, Björling sang in a December 23, 1950 broadcast co-starring Dorothy Kirsten, Anne Bollinger, Frank Guarrera, and Cesare Siepi. Björling is in more youthful voice in the 1950 broadcast. Nevertheless, I prefer the 1959 performance. It is in better sound, quite excellent in fact. And the overall cast being stronger. Björling’s opening “Rien!” (“Naught!”) is delivered in a tired and throaty manner. Is this a deliberate portrait of the aged and weary Faust, or merely a vocal hiccup? In any event, Björling is in sterling voice from that point forward. It’s impressive to hear Björling make the transition from the verismo characters of Turiddu and Cavaradossi to a role that demands the poetry and elegance essential to the art of 19th-century French opera. Björling achieves this transition in seamless form, with beautiful phrasing and French diction, while maintaining the ability to summon verismo power and passion when needed, as in Faust’s invocation of Satan in Act I. Unlike the 1950 Met performance, Björling transposes a portion of the great aria “Salut! demeure chaste e pure”. An ingenious transposition in the aria’s “B” section at “Tu fis avec amour” takes the music down a half step. The climactic note in the phrase “Où se divine la présence” is a B (rather than the written C), and a glorious one at that, inspiring a prolonged ovation. Throughout, Björling is sensitive to the music and text, once again creating a compelling and convincing portrayal.

Marguerite is Björling’s fellow Swedish artist soprano Elisabeth Söderström. A superb singing actress, Söderström here is in glorious voice, a rich and beautiful lyric soprano that easily encompasses the role, fine trills in “Ah! je ris de me voir” included. And Söderström brings a lieder singer’s sensitivity to the music and text, with every phrase capturing the myriad of emotions Marguerite experiences throughout the opera. I think this is one of the finest Marguerites preserved on recordings. As in the 1950 broadcast, Mephistophélès is sung by Cesare Siepi. The Italian basso lavishes his rich, gorgeous voice and charismatic personality onto the role of the Devil. In the early portions of the opera, Siepi emphasizes Mephisto’s playful, ironic side, and seductive qualities, a reminder of what a singular Don Giovanni this great artist was. And so, when the more dangerous and fearsome Devil emerges from the Church Scene to the opera’s conclusion, the contrast is all the more stunning.

How wonderful it is to have a baritone of Robert Merrill’s stature perform the relatively brief but crucial role of Marguerite’s brother, Valentin. Merrill sails through “Avant de quitter” and “C’est une croix” with a vocal splendor few can match. And Merrill also proves a convincing actor in Valentin’s curse of Marguerite. Rounding out the cast of principals is the wonderful lyric mezzo Mildred Miller in the trouser role of Siebel. When I interviewed Miller for my Pittsburg opera radio show, she told me how impressed she was that before the start of Act II of this broadcast, Björling took time backstage to offer her support and encouragement before she sang the aria “Faites-lui mes aveux.” Miller was especially touched because she knew that Björling had his own demanding aria (“Salut! demeure”) coming up after hers. Miller sings her aria, and all the rest of Siebel’s music, with a beautiful voice, marvelous French diction, and irresistible youthful energy; a wonderful portrait of a lovesick boy. Veteran Thelma Votipka contributes a sharply characterized Marthe. I wish I could be more enthusiastic about Jean Morel’s conducting. The tempos tend to be on the slower side, and there are moments of precarious coordination between pit and stage, as in the opening of the Act II Kermesse. But Morel certainly doesn’t get in the way of his marvelous cast. The Walpurgisnacht Scene, often cut in performance, is a welcome addition.

MYTO previously issued the 1959 Met Faust in very fine sound, but without
Milton Cross’s broadcast commentary. The IP release restores Cross’s contribution, enhancing the experience of this historic performance. MYTO also released Björling’s portions of the 1959 Cav and Tosca (as appendices to, respectively, a 1949 Met Manon Lescaut and 1948 La bohème). Again, the recorded sound is comparable to the IP; in these two cases, not the equal of contemporaneous broadcasts, but quite listenable. Still, as I’ve tried to make clear, both the Cav and Tosca are performances worth hearing in their entirety. The complete Met Cavalleria rusticana, Tosca, and Faust, would alone merit purchase of the Immortal Performances Björling tribute. But in addition, IP gives us a series of bonus tracks documenting Björling at the height of his powers.

Following the complete Met Cav is an excerpt from a September 24, 1944 Royal Opera Stockholm performance of Faust. A portion of Faust’s aria, “Salut! demeure”, gorgeously sung by Björling, is completed by his equally fine 1951 RCA studio recording. Caniell does a masterful job of matching the sonics of the two sources. As an appendix to the Met 1959 Tosca, IP opens with a lovely spoken greeting by Björling, anticipating his American debut as an adult (Björling sang in the U.S. as a child). Björling’s first U.S. concert, a November 28, 1937 General Motors broadcast announced by Milton Cross, features Björling in excerpts from La bohème, Rigoletto, and Cavalleria, the latter with soprano Maria Jeritza. Next is Björling’s fifth U.S. concert on December 19, 1937, again courtesy of General Motors, with commentary by Cross. Here, Björling sings Verdi’s “Celeste Aida” and Althén’s “Land, du välsignade”. From Hilversum, Holland, on June 8, 1939, Björling performs “Salut! demeure” (in Swedish) and “Che gelida manina” from La bohème.

The selections conclude with Manrico’s great scene from Il trovatore, part of a complete Covent Garden performance on May 12, 1939. All of the excerpts, reproduced in excellent sound, find Björling in his absolute prime and in sublime voice. The Hilversum concert (available complete from Bluebell) and Covent Garden Il trovatore (complete, Bel Canto Society) are two of my absolute favorite Björling recordings. It would be hard to imagine anyone singing with a more glorious synthesis of vocal beauty, poetry, and electrifying freedom in the upper register (note, for example, the soft attack and crescendo on the high “C” in “Salut! demeure”, or the trills and blazing high Cs in Trovatore). After the complete Met Faust, the IP Björling tribute concludes with the complete Act III from a February 12, 1959 Royal Opera Stockholm Tosca and excerpts from Acts III and IV from a September 30, 1957 Malmö Municipal Theater La bohème. In each case, Björling sings in the original Italian, while the remainder of the cast performs in Swedish translation. The Stockholm Tosca documents Björling in even finer voice than the Met performance of the same year, with the tenor giving one of his most intense and voluptuously sung versions of “E lucevan le stelle.” Those familiar with Björling’s great 1956 EMI studio Bohème, conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, will recognize the heightened intensity and immediacy of the tenor’s Stockholm Rodolfo. Once again, the sound on these excerpts is excellent.

As always, the documentation accompanying this IP release is first-rate. Björling scholar Harald Henrysson provides a lengthy, informative, and engaging essay on Björling and the featured recordings. Lars Björling’s personal reminiscence of his father’s last season at the Met is a treasure trove of insights, anecdotes, and touching remembrances. Complete plot synopses, and Richard Caniell’s always engaging and thought-provoking Recording Notes join photos and artist bios. Caniell concludes his observations with the following: “For me, (Jussi Björling) was the greatest of his genre and this collection of his final performances is the best honor I can deliver to his memory.” By doing so, Richard Caniell and Immortal Performances have gifted us with a remarkable treasure trove of recordings that I think are essential to an understanding and appreciation of a tenor for the ages. Magnificent.

5 Stars: Jussi Björling’s final Met season, plus other treasures.
Jussi Björling's very first US concerts are finally to be released on CD. That was about time. It only took 83 years. On the new stupendous 6-CD Björling tribute set from Immortal Performances, we find two of the three radio appearances he made from Carnegie Hall in 1937: the first from 28 November and the third from 19 December. The second concert from 5 December has already appeared on CD (VAIA1189 and WHRA 6036).

The two concerts included in this new CD set, present him in his finest vocal state. “Che gelida manina” was in many ways Björling’s signature aria, so the fact that he should open his American tenor career with Rodolfo’s narrative was only fitting. And seldom – if ever – have we heard a more brilliant Rodolfo. The 26-year-old Björling pours out his fresh youthful tone, “more metal than velvet,” according to The Sun, and they add: “Mr. Bjoerling sang the Bohème air with excellent taste and abundant volume, the quiet ending being particularly well handled, indicating his ability to float a good piano tone when that is his choice.” Springfield Daily News writes: “The phenomenal even quality of his voice was well proved and a high C gave him no trouble and his listeners plenty of thrills.”

Jussi Bjoerling certainly came in at the top, debuting at Carnegie Hall and letting his high C be relished for listeners all over the country. As his second aria, he chose “La donna è mobile” from Rigoletto, and while the singing is fine, he forgets the text and improvises in the midst of things by repeating the first verse. A little haphazard perhaps, but the high B natural rings out to great acclaim. He clearly was nervous, and that explains him forgetting the second verse of the Duke aria. For the last selection, he sang the quarrel duet from Cavalleria Rusticana opposite the great soprano Maria Jeritza, with him singing in Swedish to her Italian. Very fine singing, and with a real dramatic flair to it, unfortunately somewhat dimmed by brutal sound quality.

New York Journal writes: “Out of the loudspeakers Sunday night poured a glorious voice. It came from the throat of a 26-year-old stolid youngster making his American debut into millions of homes throughout the land. Today the name of Jussi Bjoerling is known from coast to coast. Critics are shouting his praises. The ordinary ear was amazed at the quality, purity and the facile singing. His debut was certainly a great triumph. A husky, well-knit, young foreigner, looking for all the world like a pink-cheeked collegian with a fat face.”

Jussi Björling presented himself to the American public, not as a matiné idol, but as a world-class singer with a voice like no one else. From that point on he could do no wrong. His third concert in this series took place on 19 December, and he sang a superb “Celeste Aïda.” The recitative has always been the most difficult part of this aria, and whoever the tenor may be, you hear much too often barking and shouting. Björling is the only tenor who can actually transform this recitative into something both musically gratifying and dramatically convincing at the same time. The singing of the aria itself is easy. At least it certainly sounds like it. This is supposed to be one of the most difficult arias in the spinto repertoire. But not for Björling. He sounds freer here than in his studio version from December 1936, the first high B flat swells and rings with apparent ease. He concludes the aria with the usual fortissimo.

If anyone could have sung that B morendo it was certainly Björling at this stage of this career. Crescendi and diminuendi on top notes were executed by Björling with utmost ease around this time. The year before he sang exquisite perfect diminuendos in the song “Ay,ay,ay,” so he could do it if he wanted to.

For his last selection he sang “Land du välsgnade,” by Ragnar Althén. The freedom of his tone is singular. He shows off his true quality, with absolute freedom of production, plenty of overtone and a top that rings and carries. His American career got a flying start. It was the beginning of something great. Enjoy these selections now in Richard Caniell’s superb new 6-CD set.
Companion Translation Coming for *Jussi Björling, en minnesbok*

JBS-USA is excited to announce plans to privately publish in 2021 a companion volume of the English translation of the book, *Jussi Björling, en minnesbok*.


Compiled by Bertil Hagman, the book includes reminiscences by Nils Grevillius, Set Svanholm, Hjördis Schymberg, Birgit Nilsson, Kurt Herbert Adler, Harry Ebert, and Johannes Norrby, to name a few — each contributing a chapter.

The translator is JBS member Gail Campbell. She originally translated the work more than twenty years ago for the JBS-USA *Journal*, for serial publication. Now Gail is revisiting her translation as we bring together all the chapters into one volume.

Harald Henrysson will be lending fresh insight with additional notes about the writers’ relationships with Jussi, clarifications about dates, places and circumstances, and a Foreword.

The volume should be completed by early summer of 2021, and will be available to JBS members only.

— Janel E. Lundgren

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As JBS-USA moves ahead with special projects and plans for the future, the Board would welcome the participation of members with abilities and talents in the following categories.

- Research / Interviewing opera or Jussi pundits
- Writing for publications, website, press copy
- Online outreach projects

If you would enjoy playing a more active role in JBS-USA on these or any other topics of interest to you, please let us know by contacting Janel Lundgren, tonerna@myfaipoint.net, or call 207/361-2729.
Much has been said and written in praise of this phenomenal woman since her passing in September 2020, especially about her substantial influence in the world as a champion of justice, and as a legal, cultural and feminist icon. We join in the celebration of her life by remembering her love of opera and her superb taste in tenors.

Following is a reprint of two articles from the JBS-USA Journal, Fall 2001, recounting the June 26, 2001 presentation by Bertil Bengtsson at the Smithsonian Institute in cooperation with the Embassy of Sweden and JBS-USA, an event attended by Justice Ginsburg.

Her later letters to JBS President Dan Shea are also here. (Note her reference to the radiation of her mail, in the era of anthrax and Ricin threats through the USPS.)

The Smithsonian Presents Bertil Bengtsson on Jussi: A Swedish Tenor’s American Odyssey

By Dan Shea, based on reports from Bea Bobotek, Enrique Gilardoni, Beau Kaplan and Don Pruitt

As Bertil Bengtsson prepared for his two presentations at the JBS Conference at Gustavus, he received a welcome invitation from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Thanks to information provided them by JBS member Bea Bobotek, they knew of his availability to speak on Jussi and his career: it would be an attractive program for their continuing lecture series. Bertil worked out some agreements between the Smithsonian and the Embassy of Sweden and accepted.

By the time June 26 arrived, word had gone out in the monthly Smithsonian Associates magazine and a nearly sold-out audience of over 200 would appear for the “evening seminar and light buffet reception” at the modern Ring Auditorium of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The whole event was presented “in cooperation with the Embassy of Sweden and the Jussi Björling Society – USA,” in view of some fine cost-sharing and planning expertise shared by the Embassy’s Cultural Counselor Nancy Westman, Smithsonian officials and JBS, working with Bea’s leadership.

Thus Bertil and his friend Elaine Karlsson added Washington to their itinerary, and joined friends Bea, Beau Kaplan and Enrique and Maria-Luisa Gilardoni there, as well as Embassy officials Nina Ersman and Margareta Paul. The event itself was a big success: Bertil gave his fine lecture, a variant of what he was to present at Gustavus, amply illustrated with recordings, slides and videotapes, including a Firestone Hour “Flower Song” from Carmen, and a “La donna è mobile” from the Ed Sullivan Show. The slides showed Jussi with Anna-Lisa in costume for Roméo et Juliette, a backstage shot at the Met of Roméo with Anders and Lars standing with “the kissing lady” Bidú Sayão, and candid shots of Jussi with Anna-Lisa relaxing in Bermuda and Hawaii. The distinguished audience was in fact very enthusiastic, and an elegant reception followed....We were especially pleased with [Don Pruitt’s] photo of Bertil conferring with Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Assume the discussion was of Jussi and opera — rather than some fine point of US or Swedish jurisprudence.

(Actually, Justice Ginsburg is a well known supporter of the arts in Washington, and has been interviewed on a Met Opera broadcast intermission, so her interest in Jussi was not so surprising.)
More on Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Bertil Bengtsson’s Smithsonian Lecture

By Dan Shea

We were pleased to learn that Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg had attended Bertil’s lecture in Washington, described elsewhere in this Journal, but not really surprised: Justice Ginsburg is a well known supporter of the arts and especially an opera fan. In fact, she told about her enthusiasm for opera during an interview on a Met intermission feature last season, as you may recall. But in checking some biographical notes on her (www.supremecourthistory.org/justice/ginsburg.htm and also via google.com) we were surprised to learn of her additional connections to Sweden and to the classical music recording industry!

In fact, after graduating from Harvard Law School Justice Ginsburg participated in a comparative law project sponsored by Columbia Law School that culminated in a book on judicial procedure in Sweden, coauthored with Anders Bruzelius (1965). Her official autobiography states that “After almost daily tutoring in Swedish for several months, she traveled to Sweden to observe Swedish courts in operation.” Further, during the years 1990-1993 she “spent some of her spare time assisting in the translations of the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure into English.” She concludes by mentioning that “She is an opera devotee who has appeared in full period costume — complete with wig and fan — as an extra in a Washington Opera production.” She has been married since 1954 to Martin D. Ginsburg: they have a daughter, Jane, who teaches at Columbia Law School, and a son, James, who produces classical recordings.
As we announced in last November, we have successfully moved our Chicago Conference to April of 2022.

As you know, the Chicago Symphony has cancelled all performances through March 30, 2021, and will not accept group ticket orders for this April as they expect to be cancelling the rest of the season. The Javier Camarena recital was cancelled, and Lyric Opera cancelled their entire 2020-21 season.

However, by the time you receive this, CSO and Lyric Opera will be announcing their 2021-22 performance schedules. At that time, we will select the most likely weekend in early April of 2022 — most likely the first or second weekend of the month. And, with the Conference originally scheduled for a Thursday through Saturday, we plan to take the opportunity to add an extra day of optional activities on Sunday to round out the weekend. So save the general time frame, and we will update you with the specific dates soon.

The speakers and the venue will remain the same, but we will be booking different concerts, of course. For those of you who have already paid your registration and concert fees, the payments will be credited to the new dates, unless we hear from you otherwise. Payment adjustments and refunds can also be made if you wish to change your concert ticket orders.

The Board deeply regrets pushing this event out by a full year, but surely by then, everyone will feel safe from the virus, and will be comfortable travelling and gathering together in happy reunion!

— Janel E. Lundgren
For this planned program. I even went so far as to offer to ship a cassette recorder and microphone to him for this purpose....There was no response.

My recollections say it was fully two months later when a cassette tape arrived in the mail. On it were 16 minutes and 25 seconds of Giorgio’s voice. It was definitely not scripted. If one were to read his words today, in a normal, conversational voice, I suppose it would take 11-12 minutes. He was thoughtful in his comments. As he continued, the content deepened, and I could feel his joy in recalling the early years of his career at the Metropolitan Opera, where Jussi’s influence made its stamp on Giorgio’s voice and career.

I mention his voice because, like Jussi (and perhaps because of Jussi – I never thought to ask), he had that tearful sound. Listen specifically to his Jake Wallace in La fanciulla del west and Timur in Liu’s death scene in Turandot. It is unmistakable!

As the years passed, Giorgio and I enjoyed numerous experiences. I arranged for him to concertize with the Brigham Young University Philharmonic, where he sang the major scenes from Boris Godunov, then Music and the Spoken Word with the Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square. Then followed Don Basilio, Timur, and the title role in Gianni Schicchi with Utah Opera. One of the voice faculty at BYU developed heart trouble, and Giorgio replaced him, flying in every week from California for a Thursday night — all day Friday teaching gig. Often as not, I was his transportation for the hour drive connecting from the Salt Lake City airport. I know he shared things with me that no one else knew (nothing salacious, but very personal thoughts and memories). When he was hired by Indiana University, he asked me to write a letter of recommendation. He was fascinated with life, and when he wrote The Golem of the Golden West, he sent me an autographed copy, signed with his defining humbleness.

My life has been enriched by Giorgio in King Marke performance in Tristan und Isolde with Birgit Nilsson and Wolfgang Windgassen (1970). In 1977 I began my radio career, and my trial song was with Giorgio in 1979. It aired only locally, but generated sufficient confidence that I determined to do a tribute to my other favorite singer, Jussi Björling, recognizing 20 years having passed since his death. Giorgio seemed a natural participant, so I wrote him a letter, asking if he would consent to recording some of his thoughts about Jussi.

Simply stated, Giorgio Tozzi was my idol as a teenager. I felt very isolated from opera in Cody, Wyoming, even though the Community Concert series had allowed me to hear Igor Gorin, Jon Crain and Maureen Forrester in recital. I knew names from the annual photo booklet supplied by the Community Concert Association, which my mother always received because she sold tickets.

I met Giorgio for the first time, back stage at San Francisco Opera following his
Giorgio Tozzi's transcribed memory of Jussi Björling (made for KBYU-FM)

I became acquainted with Jussi Björling's magnificent voice in quite a surprising way. I was very young at the time — only about 18 years old. And as I had been studying singing for a couple of years, an ex-opera singer from the old Chicago Opera Company suggested that I learn an aria entitled "Il lacerato spirito" from Simon Boccanegra. Well, in order to learn the aria, I thought it might be interesting if I went down to a record store and heard a recording of it. And to tell you the truth, I hadn't intended to buy the record, because the big 12 inch classical records usually cost about two dollars apiece — in those days they were rather expensive.

So I went into the Lyon-Healy Music Store on Wabash Avenue in Chicago, and asked the clerk if they had a recording of that particular aria. And they said they did in a recording by the immortal Alexander Kipnis. I took the record into a booth and played the "Il lacerato spirito" which I thought was absolutely fabulous, sung by the mellow, rich voice of Kipnis, with his consummate artistry. Of course it was much richer and deeper than any voice I had dreamed of having — especially at my age (18).

Out of curiosity, I turned the record over to see what was on the other side, and noticed there was an aria entitled "Che gelida manina." It was sung by a man named Jussi Björling. I thought...well, "I'd like to hear this recording." I'd heard the aria before; but I'd never heard the singer, so let's hear it. So I put on the flip side, and I...flipped! Because I heard this absolutely beautiful, silvery-toned voice that just swept me up to the skies by its beauty. The phrasing, the line — everything about it
stage with Jussi Björling; and not only on stage, but also recording with Jussi. You know, as a man, I got to know him fairly well. He was rather shy. He was not what you would call an aggressive, outgoing, blustery-type of gregarious person. He was shy and quite retiring. I remember several times in Italy when we were recording, Jussi would ask me to second him because of the fact that he didn’t speak Italian fluently, although he sang it magnificently.

I’m very happy to say, he liked me as a person. And one of the greatest accolades I could receive was to know that he also respected my talent. I remember one “Christmas, having invited Jussi and his wife Anna-Lisa and their two children over to our home. We had an apartment at the time on 71st Street in New York. And it was interesting — I didn’t think that Jussi would accept the invitation, feeling that perhaps being such a famous person he would have already been invited many times over. So I was delighted when he accepted.

He came to our home, and we’d asked him to say grace. And he did say grace. And he made a little toast. He said, “You know, of all the years I’ve been coming to the United States, this is the first time that anyone ever invited us into their home for one of the holidays.” I was quite surprised. But then, thinking it over, I remembered I myself had been very hesitant to invite him because I felt that such a famous man certainly would have been invited by so many people that it would have been rather futile to even ask him. And I imagine that is the reason why he never was invited. Probably others felt the same way I did. I thank God now that I had the courage to override my own false considerations of the situation, and invite him. It was a very beautiful day and a happy day I must say!

When one thinks of Jussi Björling, one also thinks also of the security of the man as an artist and a singer. Whenever he sang, one had the feeling that this man was born to sing, that he knew how to sing, and that his greatest joy in life was singing. And to a great extent that was true. But when we talk about security, I remember the occasion of

just completely took me by such surprise, that nothing would do but I had to buy that record! And so, straining further my already strained budget, I extravagantly forged ahead and bought this magnificent record. I must say that was an experience that I’ve never forgotten!

After I had heard Mr. Björling on other recordings and on radio broadcasts — which was, in fact, after World War II shortly after I’d been discharged from the Army, Jussi gave a concert at Chicago’s Orchestra Hall. And naturally I had to hear that concert. So a friend of mine (a young singer also starting out in Chicago) and I got tickets to the concert. We were rather late in getting our tickets, but we were very lucky because we wound up with seats on the stage. And I remember sitting off to the side, and seeing this rather stocky-looking, but very energetic-looking man who was not terribly tall, who strode out onto that stage to face the audience; bowed very graciously, and started his concert, singing the famous Lied, “Adelaide.”

I must say that nothing (memory chuckle) — nothing can ever take the place of that particular experience in my memory of music. It was so thrilling to be seated on stage with this man who had so overwhelmed me when he was a disembodied voice on a record.

Well, you can imagine what a great thrill for me to ultimately find myself on
he knew what his responsibilities were. He knew what audiences expected of him. But more than that, I think he knew what he expected of himself! He knew his responsibility to his audience. And he wanted to give. He was a giver. Every time he performed, he gave. And that’s one of the reasons why he was such a great artist.

As a man, I found him very simple – a very simple person. He was not what you’d call a sophisticate, in any sense of the word. Nor would you assume that he was any kind of a high-power intellectual either. When you talked with him, he expressed himself very simply. And one would have assumed that his needs were rather simple, and his demands in life were rather simple. But I can assure you that the demands that he made on himself were anything but simple. They were tremendous demands. I think that like any great artist, his demands sometimes seemed almost impossible. The demands he made on himself. However, I think that he carried off his challenge very, very well — he accepted his own challenge very, very well, time and again. Any problems that he may have had, one can readily understand for the stress under which this man lived.

I don’t think that there will be many artists in the firmament of his magnitude. Just as there are not many stars of the magnitude of a Caruso, or of a Tebaldi or Nilsson — or any of the other “greats” of the great magnitude. They are few and far between. There is no sense in talking about who was greater. When one talks about greatness, there is only one word to use, and the word is “great.” There is no such thing as great, greater or greatest when one deals with artists of this magnitude. They are all in the same sphere. And Jussi is one of the brightest stars of that sphere.

I’m sure that when God created Jussi, He decided it was time to give the world a treat. And a treat He did give us, by giving us one of the most beautiful singers in the history of the art.
Jussi Björling on the Opera Stage

A statistic survey*

The statistics comprise his complete opera and operetta performances. They include two (in Stockholm and New York), where he had to be replaced during the performance. A gala performance of *Die Fledermaus* at the Met, where he did not sing music from the operetta, is not included.

### Jussi Björling's opera and operetta repertoire

The roles are listed chronologically according to Björling's first performance of them. Opera titles are those of the original score, role names have been translated when that is common usage. The second column shows the years between which the role was sung, the third column the number of performances. Only one number in that column shows that Björling sang the role only with the Royal Opera in Stockholm. If there are two numbers, connected by a plus sign, the first number indicates his performances with the Stockholm Opera, the second his performances with other opera companies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Description</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Performance Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manon Lescaut (Puccini): A Lamplighter</td>
<td>1930-32</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellman (Ziedner): Näktergal</td>
<td>1930</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don Giovanni (Mozart): Don Ottavio</td>
<td>1930-37</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (Charpentier): A Song-Writer</td>
<td>1930-31</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guillaume Tell (Rossini): Arnold</td>
<td>1930-32</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saul og David (Nielsen): Jonathan</td>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engelbrekt (N. Berg): Bishop Sigge</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I cavallieri di Ekebù (Zandonai): Ruster</td>
<td>1931-36</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tannhäuser (Wagner): Walther von der Vogelweide</td>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roméo et Juliette (Gounod): Tybalt</td>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der fliegende Holländer (Wagner): Erik</td>
<td>1931-33</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>La notte di Zoraima (Montemezzi): A Voice</td>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Il barbiere di Siviglia (Rossini): Count Almaviva</td>
<td>1931-37</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salome (R.Strauss): Narraboth</td>
<td>1931-32</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>L’illustre Fregona (Laparra): Tomas</td>
<td>1932-37</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tristan und Isolde (Wagner): A Young Sailor</td>
<td>1932-35</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rigoletto (Verdi): The Duke of Mantua</td>
<td>1932-58</td>
<td>24+32=56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Das Herz (Pfitzner): A Cavalier</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mignon (Thomas): Wilhelm Meister</td>
<td>1932-37</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lelisir d’amore (Donizetti): Nemorino</td>
<td>1932-33</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resa till Amerika (Rosenberg): The Bargeman</td>
<td>1932-33</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>La traviata (Verdi): Alfredo Germont</td>
<td>1933-39</td>
<td>13+1=14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evgeny Onegin (Tchaikovsky): Lensky</td>
<td>1933-35</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Das Rheingold (Wagner): Froh</td>
<td>1933</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kniaz’ Igor (Borodin): Vladimir Igorevich</td>
<td>1933-37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kronbrunden (Rangström): Mats</td>
<td>1933-34</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roméo et Juliette (Gounod): Roméo</td>
<td>1933-51</td>
<td>38+6=44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Djamileh (Bizet): Haroun</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martha (Flotow): Lionel</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tosca (Puccini): Mario Cavaradossi</td>
<td>1933-59</td>
<td>23+28=51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Die Zauberflöte (Mozart): Tamino</td>
<td>1933-36</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arabella (R.Strauss): Count Elemer</td>
<td>1933-34</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanal (Atterberg): Martin Skarp</td>
<td>1934-39</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un ballo in maschera (Verdi): Riccardo / Gustavus</td>
<td>1934-57</td>
<td>9+29=38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faust (Gounod): Faust</td>
<td>1934-60</td>
<td>48+23=71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La bohème (Puccini): Rodolfo</td>
<td>1934-60</td>
<td>60+54=114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il tabarro (Puccini): Luigi</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>4</td>
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</table>

*Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 2021*
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>Performances</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadko (Rimsky-Korsakov): The Indian Guest</td>
<td>1934-36</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La fanciulla del West (Puccini): Dick Johnson</td>
<td>1934-37</td>
<td>8+1=9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Entführung aus dem Serail (Mozart): Belmont</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalleria rusticana (Mascagni): Turiddu</td>
<td>1935-59</td>
<td>25+6=31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidelio (Beethoven): Florestan</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il trovatore (Verdi): Manrico</td>
<td>1935-60</td>
<td>19+48=67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Die Fledermaus (J.Strauss): Alfred</td>
<td>1935-36</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aida (Verdi): Radamès</td>
<td>1935-58</td>
<td>24+7=31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagliacci (Leoncavallo): Canio</td>
<td>1936-55</td>
<td>17+3=20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La damnation de Faust (Berlioz): Faust</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madama Butterfly (Puccini): B. F. Pinkerton</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>11+1=12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La fille du régiment (Donizetti): Tonio</td>
<td>1936-37</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rossini in Neapel (Paumgartner): Gioacchino Rossini</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mefistofele (Boito): Faust</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Der Zigeunerbaron (J. Strauss): Sándor Barinkay</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>L'affrancate (Meyerbeer): Vasco da Gama</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manon Lescaut (Puccini): Chevalier Des Grieux</td>
<td>1949-59</td>
<td>8+17=25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Carlo (Verdi): Don Carlo</td>
<td>1950-58</td>
<td>0+16=16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>659+272=931</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Besides these complete performances, on special occasions Björling sang in Stockholm single acts or scenes of the operas, at the Opera House or — also in stage costume — at the Concert Hall. At the Opera House, he performed complete acts of the following operas: *L'illustre Fregona* (acts 1+3 once), *Roméo et Juliette* (act 2 three times), *Aïda* (act 3 two times) and *Madama Butterfly* (act 1 once). In Paris, he once sang Act 1 of *La bohème*.

### Opera companies with which Björling sang

Arranged according to the number of complete opera or operetta performances with each company in the second column. Three numbers there indicate: performances on the home stage + performances on tour = total number. In the third column: first and last year of performing with the company.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opera companies</th>
<th>Performances</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kungliga Teatern / Operan (Royal Opera), Stockholm</td>
<td>619+40=659</td>
<td>1930-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Opera, New York</td>
<td>90+29=119</td>
<td>1938-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco Opera</td>
<td>26+18=44</td>
<td>1940-58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago City Opera, Chicago Opera Company, Lyric Theater of Chicago, Lyric Opera of Chicago</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1937-58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiener Staatsoper (Vienna State Opera)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1936-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro alla Scala (La Scala Opera), Milan</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1946-51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Opera (Covent Garden), London</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1939-60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suomalainen Ooppera (Finnish Opera), Helsinki</td>
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<td>1943-55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Národní Divadlo (National Theater), Prague</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1936</td>
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<tr>
<td>Det Kongelige Teater (Royal Theater), Copenhagen</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1942-45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Comunale (Municipal Theater), Florence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1943</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magyar Királyi Állami Operaház (Hungarian Royal State Opera House), Budapest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1937-42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sächsische Staatsoper (Saxonian State Opera), Dresden</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans Opera</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1950</td>
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<td>Connecticut Opera, Hartford</td>
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<td>1951-53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malmö Stadtsteater (Municipal Theater)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulsa Opera</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmopolitan Opera, San Francisco</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zemské Divadlo (County Theater), Brno</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nürnberger Opernhaus (Nuremberg Opera House)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deutsches Opernhaus (German Opera House), Berlin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neues Deutsches Theater (New German Theater), Prague</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1937</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
San Antonio Grand Opera 1 1949
Opera Guild of Greater Miami 1 1954
Württembergische Staatsoper (Wurtemberg State Opera), Stuttgart 1 1954
Narodno Pozorište (National Theater), Belgrade 1 1954
Hrvatsko Narodno Kazaliste (Croatian National Theater), Zagreb 1 1954
New York City Opera (on tour) 0+1=1 1956
Stadttheater (Municipal Theater), Zurich 1 1957

Total: 931

Countries in which Björling appeared on the opera stage
Number of performances followed by first and last year.

Sweden 650 1930-60
United States 210 1937-60
Austria 15 1936-37
Italy 13 1943-51
Finland 9 1931-55
Denmark 6 1933-45
Czechoslovakia 6 1936-37
United Kingdom 6 1939-60
Germany 5 1937-54
Latvia 3 1935
Hungary 3 1937-42
Norway 2 1934
Yugoslavia 2 1954
Switzerland 1 1957

Total: 931

—Harald Henrysson

*A previous version of this list, printed in the JBS-USA August 2020 Newsletter #36, contained an arithmetic error, herewith corrected. A table divided by country has also been added.
How Jussi’s Appearances on American Television First Made Their Way to Sweden

By Kendall Svengalis, Contributing Editor

In the days before the founding of the Jussi Björling Society – USA, several future JBS board members established contact with Harald Henrysson who, at the time was record librarian at Swedish Radio. It was those contacts, and subsequent correspondence that eventually led, with Harald’s encouragement, to the founding of the JBS-USA in 1997. This account takes us back 34 years, to 1986, when I had my own unique Jussi Björling experiences in Sweden, thanks to Harald.

My own contact with Harald was prompted by a letter from my cousin, Annette Carlsson, who lives in Arjäng, Värmeland, after the publication of the first edition of A Jussi Björling Phonography in 1984. Annette knew of my Björling addiction and often sent me Jussi-related newspaper clippings. She also sent me a video of the first Swedish television broadcast of Fram för Framgång (Head for Success) which I had transferred from PAL to the NTSC format.

It was in 1976, on my first visit to Sweden, that I met Annette, her parents, and my great uncle, Ernst Larsson, who were then living on Lake Ömmeln in Bollsbyn, Svanskog, a small, remote settlement along the Värmland-Dalsland border. This idyllic corner of Värmland was about as far off the beaten path as one could imagine. But when the subject of Jussi Björling came up, great-uncle Ernst was quick to inform me that he fishes with Rolf Björling. When asked to explain this remarkable coincidence, he explained that Rolf was married to Gunnel Eklund (1939– ), a singer whose parents still lived two houses down the country road. On their periodic visits to her family, Rolf soon found a fishing companion in my great-uncle whose home bordered the lake. Small world! Gunnel had even toured the United States as soloist with the Värmland YMCA Chorus in 1969, two members of which stayed in the home of my future wife, Ellen, in Stratford, Connecticut when they performed in Bridgeport. Visiting Swedish male choruses typically arranged home stays with members of local American Union of Swedish Singers choruses of which Ellen’s father was a member.

As the 75th anniversary of Jussi’s birth approached, I asked Harald if any celebration was planned. At the time, I was unaware that a gala Memorial Concert had been held the previous September 9, commemorating the 25th year of Jussi’s passing, on September 9, 1960. It was a star-studded affair, with opera luminaries from around the world, and Sweden, in attendance. The performers included Robert Merrill, James McCracken, Birgit Nilsson, Giuseppe di Stefano, Nicola Gedda, Elisabeth Söderström, Håkan Hagegård, Gösta Windbergh, and Rolf, Lars, and Ann-Charlotte Björling, among others. The concert, held at Stockholm’s Konserthus, was preserved on a two-LP set and a one-hour Swedish television video of highlights.

Despite the fact that no formal celebration of Jussi’s 75th birthday was being planned, I was determined to make the trip to Sweden regardless, in the hope that something might materialize. So, I booked my flights on SAS, and made a reservation at the Hotel Birger Jarl in Stockholm. Little did I anticipate that the celebration would involve—me!

I should point out that in the year leading up to this event, I was able to secure a VHS copy of Jussi’s appearance on the November 20, 1950 Voice of Firestone broadcast through the kindness of Mark Malkovich, director and founder of the Newport Music Festival. Mark had planned to screen the program in one of the Newport mansions during the Festival, but an equipment malfunction prevented this from happening. I later phoned him and asked if, under the circumstances, I could show the program to my choir at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Providence, an edifice designed by Martin Hedmark, an architect who had collaborated in the design of the Engelbrekt Kyrka in Stockholm. He gladly agreed, but cautioned me not to share it due to copyright restrictions with the New England Conservatory, which is the repository for the Firestone collection. I must confess that, before returning it to him, I could not resist making a copy, but kept it close to my vest. I reasoned, who would know if it now surfaced in Sweden, or was given to the Björling family?

Scanning Harald’s Phonography for Jussi’s other American television credits, I took note of his February 17, 1957 appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Picking up the telephone in my office at the Rhode Island State Law Library, I dialed Ed Sullivan Productions and made contact with Carmine Santullo, Ed Sullivan’s long-time secretary who still managed the archive of the Ed Sullivan Show programs. I rather brazenly explained that I was traveling to Sweden for the celebration of Jussi Björling’s 75th birthday and would like to obtain a copy of that program for screening at the celebration. He could not have been more helpful. When I asked what the cost would be, he simply told me not to worry about it,
and would figure it out later (it eventually cost me nothing since Swedish television paid Sullivan Productions for the rights to screen the Björling excerpts). On the Saturday morning of my departure for Sweden (February 1), a UPS truck pulled up to my Providence home with a package containing the treasured VHS copy of a program that had not been seen since its original television broadcast. Now, I had two American television appearances by Jussi in my possession that had never been seen in Sweden before.

Once my red eye flight touched down in Sweden on Sunday morning, I made my way by bus to a chilly Stockholm and checked into the Hotel Birger Jarl, located a short walking distance from the Engelbrekt's Kyrka and the apartment building where Anna-Lisa Björling resided. From there, I walked to Stockholm’s Central Station and boarded a train to Tullinge, a Stockholm suburb, for a scheduled meeting with Harald. I was impressed by the modern facilities and the comprehensive collection of sound recordings in the collection. Then, Harald walked me down the hall to the office of Per Öhnell, one of Swedish Radio and Television’s leading producers and announcers. What I didn’t know at the time, however, was that it was Per who announced Jussi’s funeral on Swedish television on September 17, 1960.

Harald explained to Per that I had something very special that had never been seen in Sweden before—video of Jussi’s American television programs. Per’s eyes lit up as I told him about the Voice of Firestone and Ed Sullivan programs that I had in my possession. But since they were in NTSC format, they would have to be converted to PAL for viewing in Sweden. Per led us down the hallway to a video production studio where the transfers could be made. On the way, he knocked on every door, announcing to all within earshot that they were going to see Jussi on American television for the first time. Soon, the room was filled with production staff eager to view this remarkable event. It sent chills up my spine to observe the impact this was having on those among the staff who truly appreciated Jussi’s artistry and the uniqueness of the moment. The staff made several PAL copies of the videos for me, including those I could deliver to the Björling family after screening them at Jussi Björling Gården in Borlänge.

At the end of the workday, Harald then escorted me to Lars Björling’s apartment, conveniently located on Strandvägen, across from Djurgården. Needless to say, I had no idea I was going to meet Jussi’s son, and his wife and daughter. There, in his living room, we watched the now converted videos of the two programs. As Lars watched intently, I remember him explaining to his young daughter that these were programs of her grandfather, although she was probably too young to fully appreciate the importance of what she was viewing.

That evening, after the opera, I received a phone call from Harald at my hotel room with totally unexpected news. He told me that Anna-Lisa wanted to meet me on Tuesday morning. Apparently, Lars must have called his mother and told her that some gentleman from the United States had “video of Dad.” Presumably, he suggested she ask Harald to bring me to her 4th-floor apartment on Karlavägen, adjacent to the Engelbrekt Kyrka, where Jussi’s funeral was held.

The large brick apartment building on Karlavägen is one of the most impressive in the city, one in which Jussi and Anna-Lisa lived together from 1956 to 1960. I met Harald outside the imposing entryway and he rang the buzzer to announce our arrival. It was somewhat intimidating to be invited to the apartment once occupied by Sweden’s most famous musical personality and, now, by his widow and her second husband, Ulf Barkman. We were greeted warmly and invited to have a seat in their living room,
where I explained the circumstances of my obtaining the videos. I recall the walls and piano adorned with photographs of musical luminaries, including Gigli and Toscanini. Anna-Lisa was delighted to watch these programs for the first time since she sat in the wings when they were first broadcast before live studio audiences in 1950 and 1957. I recall her commenting that Jussi felt a little awkward cavorting with the members of the Firestone chorus as they sang “The Neapolitan Love Song,” as this was somewhat different to the operatic deportment to which he was accustomed. But this was live TV and he adapted admirably to the new medium. She also told me that it was Ander’s birthday (February 4th) and that she planned to call and wish him “happy birthday.” Since Harald had already arranged a gathering in my honor at Jussi Björling Gården in Borlänge on Wednesday, I explained to Anna-Lisa that I would bring her personal copies of the videos upon my return to Stockholm. Meeting her and her husband and sharing what must have been precious family memories was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life.

The rest of the day was spent visiting the Nordiska Museet on Djurgården with its fabulous collections of artifacts reflecting Swedish cultural history. That evening, I attended the performance of Ballo at the Royal Opera, after which I remember walking back to my hotel as a light snowfall graced the streets and sidewalks of the city and drifted down in the floodlights illuminating the Johannes Kyrka. Of course, I had no idea what would transpire on the evening of February 28 on these very streets. Prime Minister Olof Palme would be gunned down in that very same neighborhood, as he and his wife were walking home from the Grand Cinema.

On Wednesday morning, I secured a rental car near the Central Station for the four-hour drive to Borlänge. The snow-covered landscape was beautiful, but I was more concerned with avoiding any mishaps in an unfamiliar country. By the time I arrived at my destination, I was surprised to encounter a gathering of locals and eight news reporters from local and regional newspapers and television stations who were there to greet me. As with my previous encounters, Harald had made all the arrangements. The reporters had many questions: How long had I been a fan of Jussi Björling? Did I have any Swedish roots? Yes, I explained in my limited Swedish, my grandmother emigrated from Värmland in 1910. How did I obtain these television programs? One newspaper account even described me as a “video detektiv.”

Photos were taken with me presenting copies of the videos to local cultural director, Uno Östberg, who was most hospitable, and escorted me to the little museum in Jussi Björling Gården to view the modest collection. Following a viewing of the videos by the enraptured audience, and refreshments, I followed Uno in my car to the Stora Tuna Kyrkagård to pay my respects at Jussi’s grave. By this time, the sky was already turning a little dark—it was February in central Sweden, after all—and the temperatures had dipped to about fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. I still had about a four-hour drive to Årjäng ahead of me, through unfamiliar landscape, where I planned to visit my relatives.

I vividly recall the long and winding road through the wooded terrain. At one point, I noticed I was almost out of gas in an area where petrol stations were few and far between. Finally, I found a small, unattended country station that required one to feed kronor notes to dispense petrol. Failing to negotiate the proper sequence, the owner, who lived over the station, came down to assist me, and I was soon on my way. Was I relieved! A short time later, big letters spelling out “WASA” told me I was in Filipstad, birthplace of John Ericsson and home to a large Wasa bread factory. More than an hour later, I arrived in Årjäng and the home of my cousin, Lilly-Ann Larsson, and her husband, Henry. All I can say is that the journey was a far cry from traveling through Sweden during the warm, idyllic days of summer that I had experienced in 1976, and have many times since.

Lilly-Ann always lays out a great table for her guests. I sat down to an evening meal of moose meat, cheese, eggs, Wasa bread and butter, and other delicacies. No sooner had we started eating when the phone rang. Upon answering, Lilly-Ann had a look of shock and surprise on her face. Putting her hand over the speaker, she looked at me and said “It’s Anna-Lisa Björling, for you.” Anna-Lisa was calling to tell me that she would not be home when I returned to Stockholm and would I be kind enough to leave the videos with her neighbor, one floor below. Apparently, a concert had been hastily arranged for Sunday, February 9th at the Stora Tuna Kyrka, at which she, Lars, Ann-Charlotte, and Siv Wennberg would be singing. Sadly, I realized that I would be unable to attend because I was scheduled to fly home on Saturday and changing my airline reservations would have been too costly (Harald later sent me an audiocassette and printed program). Needless to say, Lilly-Ann never forgot the time Anna-Lisa Björling called her home, looking for me, and thought I must be some kind of VIP.

On Thursday, Lilly-Ann’s daughter,
Annette, took me on a tour of Årjäng while Lilly-Ann watched her grandchildren, Lisa and Sam. When the children rose from their nap, they asked their grandmother “Var är gubben? (Where’s the old man?). That’s been a family joke from that day to this. Annette calls me “gubben,” although I was only 38 at the time. But through the eyes of children, I was “gubben.”

On Friday morning, Annette and I drove to Stockholm in my rental to meet up with her husband, Christer, who was attending a furniture show in the capital (he was the proprietor of a furniture store in Årjäng). That evening, we enjoyed dinner in one of those delightful cellar restaurants in Gamla Stan. We then enjoyed a frigid walk down Västerlånggatan (the Western Long Street), the narrow, brick-lined street of Gamla Stan, with its many enticing shop windows, before heading over to the Scania Park Hotel for my last night in Sweden. On Saturday, I took a train to Arlanda Airport for my return flight.

Thanks to Harald, I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In place of my modest expectations for, perhaps, attending some Jussi-related events on the occasion of Jussi’s 75th birthday, or some opera performances, I found myself the center of attention for bringing videos of Jussi on American television to Sweden for the first time. Harald arranged for me to meet Per Öhnell, Lars Björling, and Anna-Lisa Björling, and cement a friendship that has lasted for 36 years. For that, I will always be grateful.

Kendall Svengalis is the retired Rhode Island State Law Librarian, a writer and publisher of books on law and history. He has also written two vocabulary-building espionage novels featuring the 17-year-old Swedish-American girl detective, Ellen Anderson, each of which contains references to Jussi. He discovered Jussi Björling at the age of 16, is a founding member of JBS-USA, and a member of its board since 2002. He is also president of the RI Swedish Heritage Association and performs Swedish ballads with his wife, Ellen, including those of Carl Michael Bellman and Evert Taube.

Browsing the internet recently, I noticed Pristine Classical’s announcement of their new remastering of the “Beecham Bohème” and wondered how powerful modern sound engineering might affect the glorious vocalism of that 64 year old recording. The transcript engineer in charge, Andrew Rose, has built up a substantial catalogue of renovated recordings, mostly from the early LP era, often having surprising clarity and spatial ambience. Mr. Rose definitely seems to have very good taste concerning the artists his company features, including 13 of Jussi’s recordings from the era 1940-1957.

Certainly these audio engineers can do some interesting improvements based on steadily improving technology, and they are motivated partially by the fact that most of Jussi’s recordings continue to be popular. Thus multiple versions exist, and most of them are advances over the original 78s, tapes, and LPs.

What’s a Björling fan to do with all these choices?
Here’s one suggestion: go to that website pristineclassical.com and listen to their...
forget what a treasure this is, his only Met broadcast of this signature role. According to Göran Forsling’s review of the WHRA transcription, “He [Jussi] is in glorious form, strong, confident and ardent but in places too virile, too outgoing. There is a certain lack of lyricism in his reading. ‘Che gelida manina’ is superbly vocalized but transposed down [as usual with on-stage performances]. The duet with Mimì, also transposed, is certainly thrilling and here he takes the higher, unwritten option on the final note... He actually finds more of the inherent lyricism in the last two acts and especially in the Act III finale he is soft and caring... No one else in the cast quite reaches Björling’s splendor.”

Well, that review of this broadcast matinee seems to present Jussi as something of a showoff, at 37, all very uncharacteristic! But we need to listen for ourselves, and decide. Personally, I love Jussi’s whole performance, including his Act I. And there’s a way to guess what another critical view might be, if we’re willing to look at Jussi’s Rodolfo of a week earlier. The cast that evening is identical, except for Marcello (Brownlee) and Schaunard (Thompson) rather than the Valentino-Cehanovsky duo we know from the broadcast. Here’s the most relevant part of Noel Strauss’s review* of the December 16 Bohème:

“It is a long while since this reviewer has heard as convincing and impressive an account of the crucial first act of this opera. For, the entire scene between Mimì and Rodolfo was projected with an amount of poetry, tenderness and ardor that made it uncommonly touching. Rarely are both the soprano and the tenor parts so sympathetically sung, and every word of the text so consistently accorded its due significance, as on this occasion.

Mr. Björling, who was in his best vocal form, made the most of his opportunities in the “Narrative,” which was capped by a sustained high C of notable purity, power and beauty. All of his singing could be commended for its tonal perfection, expressiveness and warmth in a most satisfying and finely detailed portrayal, which easily

Decide to learn more about Björling as Rodolfo.
If you find yourself getting into a mood for more information about this Puccini masterpiece, consider going to your copy of the previous JBS Journal (#27, February 2019) to read Walter Price’s revealing article on the making of that 1956 recording.

Even better, listen instead to Jussi’s earlier approach to Rodolfo in his December 25, 1948, Met broadcast of Bohème with Bidú Sayão and Mimi Benzell, Giuseppe Antonicelli conducting. Sometimes we short “samples” of the sound of some Jussi classics, including this Bohème. Listen and see if you’re impressed by their work. If so, compare your own copy of that recording with the Pristine samples offered. Whatever you decide to do, Congratulations — you have just reminded yourself how satisfactory your “old” recording is (and you may want to settle down and continue enjoying it); or, you might have decided to change to the new improved model. (Or you might want to consider discussions about other transcriptions, e.g. at immortalperformances.org.)
carried off the honors of the evening.”

Well, maybe this Times review was so good that a week later Jussi was overconfident, but still nervous about muffling his “Che gelida” high C for a nationwide audience, and so transposed the aria a half-tone down Gee, wouldn’t it be swell if we could have a good recording of that earlier performance, to compare!

And mirabile dictu, that may be true:

Really? A possible Met in-house Bohème recording from 16 December, 1948?

If you go to your computer and put into the browser: <parterre box, the songs of la bohème will live forever >, then you’ll get a Parterre Box blog page that offers a brief August 18, 2014 discussion of two in-house Met Bohème recordings, supposedly offered for downloading at that time, one from the 12/16/1948 Sayão-JB performance with “amazing sound-quality,” and one from a Jan. 25, 1988 performance with Freni-Pavarotti/Kleiber that also very definitely occurred. This early Parterre Box site might not be above some sort of fraud, but the discussion seems to be consistent with the bloggers having heard some kind of upload. A question would be, is that “in-house recording” real, or possibly just some disguised version of the real 12/25/1948 Met broadcast? Sounds too good to be true!

Jussi’s last Met Bohème, another wonder.

After Jussi opened the Met’s 1953-54 season with a new production of Faust with de los Angeles and Rossi-Lemeni, he sang two additional performances but then had to withdraw after chronic laryngitis settled in. Especially disappointing to us, today, is the fact that Jussi was scheduled for two broadcast performances: the first would have been the December 5 Faust, and the second would have been either the December 19 Bohème (opposite Hilde Güden) or the January 16 Trovatore, opposite Milanov and Warren. Since Jussi’s Manrico is already very well documented with six magnificent recordings, many of us would have wished for a second live Met Bohème! In any case, we can at least celebrate information about Jussi’s next Bohème, of February 1, 1954, when he returned to the Met in top vocal form — here is ...

Musical America’s complete review:*

“After hearing Jussi Björling’s Faust with mixed emotions earlier in the season it was a benediction to witness his return to the Metropolitan in this performance following a month’s vacation in Sweden. This was the Björling of old, not of last November but of years ago, with solid, sustained highs and beauteous security right down the line. From the moment he opened his mouth the sound was as molten silver, unalloyed, spun out into lines of liquid loveliness. Nowhere did Mr. Björling betray a moment’s strain. Not for a long time have I heard such a well-sung Rodolfo; nor had the audience, on the evidence of one of the most prolonged ovations in recent Metropolitan history. It was a grand comeback. One prays that Mr. Björling will be able to consolidate the gains of his recuperation, and that they will continue to be manifest.

“This was Mr. Björling’s first Rodolfo of the season. It was also Licia Albanese’s first Mimi and Cesare Siepi’s first Colline. Miss Albanese, who was forced to cancel an appearance in La Traviata last week on account of a cold, apparently had not entirely recovered. Her Mimì was unusually restrained, both vocally and dramatically. Like the artist she is, however, Miss Albanese was able to scale her portrayal to whatever resources were at her command, so that her touchingly pathetic characterization was an effective complement to Mr. Björling’s impassioned Rodolfo. Mr. Siepi was an impressive Colline in every way. The remaining principals were as usual: Jean Fenn was a realistically hoydenish Musetta, Robert Merrill a superior Marcello, Gerhard Pechner a hilarious Benoit, and George Cehanovsky a dependable Schaunard. The others were James McCracken, Alessio De Paolis and Algerd Brazis. Alberto Erede conducted in an extremely leisurely fashion."

Some of JBS’s most enthusiastic members attended this performance. Ed Walter and Karl Hekler both were there and have validated the views in the above rave review!

We realize that we’ve raised a few questions here, more or less substantial — and here’s one more, very minor, mystery: Jussi continued to sing at the Met for 24 perfor-
romances during three more seasons, 1956 - 59, but of his patented Rodolfo there would be no more. Was there a Met decision that he was getting a bit old for the part? Maybe not, although in the remaining 5 years he did sing 10 more Rodolfo’s in Chicago, San Francisco, Stockholm, Malmö, Stuttgart, Belgrade, Zagreb.

A look back, to Berlin in 1937.
Karl Schmitt-Walter was a lyric baritone (1900-1985) who sang at the Berlin State Opera from 1935 and then, from 1950, the Munich State Opera, with many guest appearances around Europe. He relates the following story in “Das Musikalische Selbstporträt.” (we’ve told it before, it’s too good not to use it again here):

“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 10 o’clock rehearsal at about 10:30, 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 exchange. 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 very skeptical. My first lines to Rodolfo, who was standing by the window looking out over Paris, ended with [in German]: ‘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 he 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 actually had taken him for a poor devil whom we would have to help through the performance. But he had eclipsed us all!”

[The performance took place on Friday, 6 February 1937. This translation was done by Gail Campain from a Swedish translation of the original German, as published in Issue 21 of the Jussi Björling Sällskapets Tidning.]

OK, here’s the aria in one favorite version (Hilversum 1939).
There are so many great versions, maybe this one from 1939 fits Schmitt-Walter’s 1937 story especially well. Play your own favorite, or if you have a computer handy put these three words into your browser: youtube, Hilversum, boheme.

Have we missed anything rare and good?
Sure, there’s lots of Bohème-material from Jussi’s career — here are some hints:
1. The Producer’s Showcase NBC Concert, Jussi and Renata sing the last 15 minutes of Act I Bohème, VAI DVD: [Wonderful, talent and experience rule!]
2. On March 21,1940, Swedish Radio recorded the complete Act I of La bohème as performed at the Royal Opera House with JB, his Mimi Hjördis Schymberg, and 4 assisting artists; Nils Grevillius, cond.
   This is available on a beautiful Immortal Performances set # IPCD 1134-3, in decent 1940 sound that is much improved over the early LP choices that long ago went out of print. If you have Bluebell ABCD 013, you’ll find 18 minutes of highlights of that performance nicely preserved. To hear Jussi at that fairly early stage make his way through “Så kall” (= “Che gelida”) is a real treat. And his Mimi does very well too. They finish with a tender “O soave fanciulla.” Also on this disk: 38 minutes from an excellent complete Roméo et Juliette, March 27, 1940, in Swedish. Another real treat!
3. Bluebell ABCD 078 preserves 45 minutes of highlights from a lovely 1957 Bohème in Malmö, the Mimi and other Bohemians are competent, and Jussi’s voice is gorgeous, aging like fine wine. Also on this disk: most of Act 3 of a 1959 Stockholm Tosca. (Adding to the fun: JB sings in Italian, all others in Swedish.)

If you love the sort of material in Numbers 2 and 3, then either you have a copy of Harald Henrysson’s Phonography, or you need to get one, successful Jussicology requires this amazing volume in one of its forms. Loving item Number 1 is easy, similarly to loving the Beecham Bohème itself.

Jussi’s recordings keep surprising us with the kinds of special emphases he often adds to his performances — already this can be seen in the 1930’s material and right up to his August 1960 concert in Gothenburg — ultimately that stems from his masterful command of technique. We are listening to examples of “the free voice as an expressive instrument” as Albert Innaurato put it in his lecture at the 2002 JBS conference in New York City. His idea was simply to play a collection of Jussi’s live broadcasts, pointing out the especially delectable vocal coloring and phrasing of his examples. And we can do this for ourselves, — to be sure with many fine musicians we are able to hear — but very reliably with the singing of Jussi Björling!

* The reviews here of past Met performances are taken from the Met Archive Database.

Editor’s Note: Jussi’s last Mimì, Rosanna Carteri, passed away in October 2020. See page 41 for a Met tribute to this lovely soprano.

February 2021 Journal of the Jussi Björling Society – USA, Inc. www.jussibjorlingsociety.org
Hanna Hedman, 1934–2020

By Harald Henrysson

Record producer Hanna Hedman has passed away in June, 2020, after a long illness, just weeks before her 86th birthday. She is mourned by a sister and niece, their families and many friends.

Hanna was born in Lägerdorf, North of Hamburg. In the mid-50s she and her sister moved to Sweden. During the 60s, Hanna was employed at Grammofon AB Electra, which was founded in 1956 and came to represent RCA Records in Sweden. Therefore not only did it market most of Jussi’s 1950s recordings in Sweden, but also arranged his last Swedish recordings in 1957 and 1959. At Electra, Hannah met producer Frank Hedman, who was responsible when those recordings were issued on the RCA label. Frank left Electra in 1977 and founded his own label, Bluebell of Sweden (later simply Bluebell), in 1979. Hanna and Frank were married in 1983. When the 17-years-older Frank suddenly passed away of a heart attack in 1990, Hanna, who had played an important role in his work and had many years of experience in the business, took over management of the company. She was first hesitant about the task, but wanted to continue with meaningful work and soon proved to be entirely up to the challenge.

Bluebell created its own identity as a quality label with a mixture of new recordings and reissues of mostly Swedish artists, composers and ensembles, from opera to jazz. Internationally the label was best-known for issuing Jussi Björling’s live recordings, largely from Swedish Radio’s archive, which are often among his best and widen the perspective on his singing. Frank had issued the label’s first Jussi LP in 1981, and in 2012 Hanna issued the last of Bluebell’s 21 Jussi CD productions, which was also the last release of AB Frank Hedman (Naxos has continued to use the label name after its purchase). In 1989, Frank was one of the founders of Jussi Björlingsällskapet (The Jussi Björling Society) in Stockholm, and in 2011 Hanna became an honorary member of the same society.

Some 30 other representatives of the Swedish classical singing tradition were issued on Bluebell CDs, 25 of them in the series "Great Swedish Singers." Rolf Björling, Nicolai Gedda, Set Svanholm, Gösta Winbergh, Ragnar Ulfung, Birgit Nilsson, Elisabeth Söderström, Hjördis Schymberg, Kerstin Meyer, Berit Lindholm, Margareta Hallin, Joel Berglund, Hugo Hasslo, Erik Saedén and Ingvar Wixell are some of those singers. "Wagner in Stockholm" presented on 4 CDs 53 singers at the Royal Opera. Alice Babs is best known internationally as a jazz singer. Composer issues were, for instance, 5 CDs of Emil Sjögren’s piano music and 2 discs devoted to the contemporary Carin Malmlöf-Forsslings.

I worked together with Hanna for many years, mostly regarding selection and commentaries for her Jussi Björling issues. Among other people contributing to her singer portraits were the dramaturg Stefan Johansson and Bertil Hagman, once program editor for the Royal Opera and publisher of Jussi’s Minnesbok (he happened to be twin brother of actress Gerd Hagman, to whom Frank had once been married). In later years, Christer Eklund contributed with engineering and layout. Hanna ran her company with great engagement and sense of purpose along with excellent musical and financial judgement. The apartment on a high floor in the Stockholm suburb of Solna was also Bluebell’s office, where Hanna hosted the annual Board meeting with a fine dinner, while a garden allotment in Ulriksdal provided her relaxation. Hanna Hedman’s low-key, warm, and humorous outlook made for fine relations with all whom she met, and she is deeply missed. She made a valuable contribution to Swedish music life, and admirers of Jussi Björling’s art have special occasion to feel thankful to her.

Editor’s Note: Some of Bluebell’s wonderful CDs are still available for purchase through our website.
One of the most beautiful and gifted Italian sopranos of her generation, Carteri made her professional debut at eighteen, as Elsa in Lohengrin at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome in 1949. Within the next few seasons, Carteri made house debuts at most of the principal Italian venues, including La Scala, Arena di Verona, La Fenice, Teatro di San Carlo and Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, as well as at Covent Garden, Paris Opéra and the Salzburg Festival. Celebrated for her elegance, impeccable technique and sympathetic stage presence, Carteri sang repertoire that ranged from Desdemona, Violetta, Alice Ford, Liù, Magda in La rondine, Blanche in Dialogues des Carmélites and Mathilde in Guillaume Tell to leading roles in new works such as Pizzetti’s Calzare d’argent and Castelnuovo-Tedesco’s Mercante di Venezia. Carteri’s facility in coloratura allowed her to handle bel canto showpieces such as La donna del lago, I Capuleti e i Montecchi and Linda di Chamounix; her gift for vividly expressed pathos made her unforgettable as Gluck’s Euridice and Natasha Rostova in Prokofiev’s War and Peace.

Carteri made her U.S. debut in 1954, as Mimi at San Francisco Opera, where her other roles in her two seasons with the company were Susanna, Zerlina, Micaëla, Massenet’s Manon, Marguerite in Faust and Donna Gabriella in Cherubini’s Hôtel de Porte. Mimi was also the role of Carteri’s 1954 debut at Lyric Opera of Chicago, where she returned for Marguerite in Faust and Adina L’Elisir d’amore in 1955.

At the peak of her career, Carteri sang opposite the greatest stars of her era; she was Liù to Birgit Nilsson’s Turandot, Zerlina to Cesare Siepi’s Don Giovanni, Silvia to Giulietta Simionato’s Zanetto, Marguerite to Jussi Björling’s Faust and Nannetta to the Falstaff of Renata Tebaldi. Carteri was a favorite colleague of the best stage directors and conductors in Europe, including Giorgio Strehler, Margherita Wallman, Tullio Serafin, Carlo Maria Giulini, Herbert von Karajan, Victor de Sabata and Artur Rodzinski. Her recordings include L’Elisir d’amore and Falstaff under Serafin, La traviata with Pierre Monteux and the Brahms German Requiem (in Italian) with Bruno Walter. At the composer Francis Poulenc’s request, Carteri sang his Gloria at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in 1961 and joined conductor Georges Prêtre and Orchestre National de France for the piece’s first recording the same year — a performance of the piece in which Carteri was never surpassed.

Carteri, who married Italian industrialist Franco Grosoli in 1959, retired from singing in 1966 to devote her time to her family.

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Editor’s Note: Rosanna was Jussi’s Mimi in his final performances of La bohème in March, 1960, in London. “Although communication between the two of them was limited (‘My English wasn’t so good, nor was his Italian,’ Carteri recalled), she retained pleasant memories of their collaboration. ‘I still remember his kindness to me,’ she recently wrote. ‘Although many years have passed by, those evenings in Covent Garden are still fairly clear in my memory. To sing with Jussi Björling has been a very important experience for me because he was an artist of a very high level and a singer with a magnificent voice.’” Anna-Lisa Björling, Andrew Farkas: Jussi, Amadeus Press, 1996, p. 329.
In my capacity as Vice President–Membership of JBS-USA, I am very pleased to report that what started out as routine email exchanges between myself and George S. Weaver, concerning membership and merchandise-ordering matters, has turned into a friendship. During these exchanges with George, I learned that we most likely attended some of the same performances at the "old" Metropolitan Opera during the early 1960s.

George told me that he attended Jussi’s April 2, 1959, recital in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and had vivid memories of the event. George is a fine writer and has written articles about various singers that have been published in The Record Collector. At my request, George provided a brief review of the Björling recital mentioned above and included a copy of his program cover autographed by Jussi as well as the program itself, with Jussi’s encores handwritten onto the program page. George was instrumental in having Jussi sing one of those encores, as he explains in his article.

Thank you George, and enjoy the reminiscence, everyone!

Allan Buchalter

A Memory of Jussi Björling

By George Shelby Weaver

After hearing Jussi Björling on 78-rpm and microgroove discs during my early years, I longed to hear him in person. The only opportunity came on April 2, 1959, in a recital at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that blessed my twenty-two-year-old ears and psyche. From the tenth row it was obvious that his voice soared through the entire auditorium with ease. Its brilliance was immediately captivating, the inimitable shimmer sustained from softest pianissimo to trumpeted fortissimo. It surpassed, of course, his excellently recorded RCA Victor “New Orthophonic” self.

The program was essentially the same as recorded in Atlanta eleven days later except after much applause at the conclusion of the first half of the program in Baton Rouge, he announced and sang “Amor ti vieta” and a Swedish song which he called “Visions” (Note: This is the Björling favor-
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