

The Jussi Björling Museum closed after 26 years

By Harald Henrysson



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 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

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



Members of JBS-USA with Harald Henrysson in the Museum's Upstairs Listening Room, September 2018

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



Björling congress in Stockholm and Borlänge. John Steane, the renowned British expert on classical singing, was one of the speakers. Afterwards his verdict was, as expressed in the *Gramophone*: “Of all singer museums, Björling’s is best.” The Jussi Björling Society in Sweden (Jussi Björlingsällskapet) is working intensely, together with other interested people, to find a solution which makes it possible for the museum to re-open, or a new museum to be built up without the collections being scattered. This should be of interest not only to the city, but to Dalarna, to Sweden and the whole musical world.

A foundation may be the best form to run a museum of this kind, and it should be possible to get funding for an institution of such cultural value. Unfortunately, the sudden and unexpected decision prevented examining such possibilities earlier. Borlänge is a city which has done much in Jussi Björling’s memory through the years, including running the museum for more than 26 years with a full-time curator. I do hope that the administration is now aware of all criticism the recent decision has met and of all work that is being done to find a

solution which does not cause unnecessary damage. Reduced opening hours could also reduce the costs for the existing museum. It is important to postpone all measures that may render future Björling museum activities more difficult!

If it should not be possible to continue the activities of a Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge, Stockholm would be the natural place for a new one. Since the age of 17, Jussi lived in the Swedish capital and spent much of his career in both opera and concert there. Few classical artists have appeared so frequently in their hometown and been so generally beloved. In Stockholm, it would naturally attract more visitors and it would be easy to cooperate with the national music institutions there.

Jussi Björling’s voice and art will live on whatever happens, but the chance to get a fuller picture of the man and his legacy in a worthy museum should not be lost! ■

Harald Henrysson is *Founding Curator of the Jussi Björling Museum in Borlänge, Sweden, and an ultimate resource on the life and career of the artist. He is the author of a new book, David Björling and His*

Sons in America, as well as three published editions of A Jussi Björling Phonography. Co-founder of the Jussi Björling Society in Sweden, he has contributed notes for some 40 LP/CD recordings, and co-authored a JB Chronology on the web. In 2006, Henrysson received the Jussi Björling Award (Jussi Björlingstipendiet) from the Stockholm Royal Opera Soloists Foundation; in 2011 the Scandinavian Jussi Björling Society Prize (Jussi Björlingsällskapets Pris).

To Harald,

All Jussiphiles and lovers of great singing who visited the Museum are in your debt. You were the driving force behind its creation and longevity. You provided us (Jussi’s global audience) with a focal point for information and memorabilia (musical and otherwise) that made us feel like members of an international community. In addition, your commitment to and enthusiasm for Jussi’s art promoted Sweden’s musical heritage throughout the world. I am sure that we all share a deep sense of gratitude for your tireless efforts.

Bravo and tack så mycket!
Thomas Hines
Member, JBS-USA

JACOB FORSELL



Harald Henrysson