

Review

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 (*Alfio*);
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),
Aïda, *Faust*, *Cavalleria rusticana* (with
Maria Jeritza), *Tosca* (act 3 complete
with Kjerstin Dellert), *Rigoletto*, and
Il trovatore (with Ginaigna). Also
songs from JB's first and fifth Carnegie
Hall concerts.

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The New CD Set from Immortal Performances: Essential Listening

By Henry Fogel



IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES

JUSSI
BJÖRLING
A
TRIBUTE

HIS FINAL FABULOUS MET SEASON - 1959
(includes two performances never previously available)

CAVALLERIA RUSTICANA, complete Met 1959
TOSCA, complete Met 1959 ♦ FAUST, complete Met 1959
also
Björling's New York radio debut (1937)
plus subsequent scenes and arias from the operatic stage and concerts,
including rare broadcasts from Swedish Radio

SPECIAL ARTICLES - RARE PHOTOS

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* (PACO064), 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.



As Faust

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 Faust encoun-

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 unhinged. Turiddu’s dramatic change of mood after the cocky “Brindisi,” when



Elisabeth Söderström

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 Simonato'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-



As Cavaradossi at
the Met, 1957



Mary Curtis-Verna as Tosca

tiful, and it is coupled with an exquisite performance of a Björling favorite, Ragnar Althén's "Land, du välsignade."

Excerpts from Swedish performances of *Tosca* (1959, with Kjerstin Dellert in the title role) and *La bohème* with Ethel Mártensson as Mimi are very fine too, even with Björling singing in Italian and the others in Swedish. I should also mention the complete act 3, scene 2 from *Trovatore* featuring an absolutely ringing high C at the end of "Di quella pira," and a genuine trill in "Ah! Si ben mio." If you thought of Björling in terms of artistry and finesse to the exclusion of animal excitement, this will provide a corrective! The February, 1959 Stockholm *Tosca*, of which we get the entire third act, was the tenor's final *Tosca* in Sweden. As with the Swedish *La bohème*, the rest of the cast is singing in Swedish.

A direct comparison with his Met performance from nine months later reveals many differences of detail. Björling lingers over certain phrases just a bit more in

Stockholm and holds on to the climactic note of "E lucevan le stelle" just a tad longer. Finally, his seductive caressing of the line at "O dolci mani" will melt you. The *Tosca*, Kjerstin Dellert, does not offer the vocal richness of Curtis-Verna. All these excerpts demonstrate that the tenor never just phoned it in. Each time he sang a role, there were some differences, some new ideas he brought to the music. Also interesting, to those for whom this matters, is that in his earlier concert performances of "Salut! De-meure" Björling sings it in its original key, with a high C. In the 1959 Met performance it is a half-step down.

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 Henrys-

son'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.