

Review

A Remarkable Treasure Trove of Recordings

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As Turiddu, Stockholm, 1954

A glorious 6-disc (priced as 5) set from *Immortal Performances* features complete recordings of three Met performances by the brilliant Swedish tenor Jussi Björling, all from his final season at the Met.

In a March 1958 interview with J.S. Harrison of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Björling observed: “my greatest response from the public has always been at the

Metropolitan.” Recordings documenting several Björling performances at New York’s Metropolitan Opera are testament to the special relationship between Björling and his Met audiences. Perhaps the rarity of these occasions intensified the emotional bond.

Björling made his Met debut on November 24, 1938 as Rodolfo in Puccini’s *La bohème*. His farewell took place on December 22, 1959, as Turiddu in Mascagni’s

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 Victor 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



As Cavaradossi,
Stockholm, 1957

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 casting is 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, Méphistophélès 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 Pittsburgh 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 irrepressible 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 C's 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. ■

As Faust at the Met.



Metropolitan Opera SEASON 1959-1960

Saturday Afternoon, December 19, 1959, at 2:00
SUBSCRIPTION PERFORMANCE

CHARLES GOUNOD
FAUST

Opera in four acts Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré
Conductor: Jean Morel
Production by Peter Brook
Sets and Costumes by Rolf Gérard
Stage Director: Nathaniel Merrill

Faust	Jussi Björling
Marguerite	Elisabeth Soederstroem
Méphistophélis	Cesare Siepi
Valentin, Marguerite's brother	Robert Merrill
Siebel	Mildred Miller
Marthe	Thelma Voipka
Wagner	Roald Reitan

Choreography by Zachary Solov
Audrey Keane and Corps de Ballet
Chorus Master: Kurt Adler
Associate Chorus Master: Thomas P. Martin
Musical Preparation: Walter Taussig
KNARE PIANO USED EXCLUSIVELY
The audience is respectfully, but urgently, requested not to interrupt the music with applause