

Review

Björling Concerts in *Immortal Performances* Set

By Kristian Krogholm, Recordings Editor

Jussi and Maria Jeritza,
Carnegie Hall, 1937

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 matinee 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 Aida." 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 *diminuenti* on top notes were executed by Björling with utmost ease around this time. The year before he sang exquisite perfect *diminuentos* in the song "Ay,ay,ay," so he could do it if he wanted to.

For his last selection he sang "Land du välsignade," 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. ■