

## Giorgio Tozzi Remembers Jussi Björling

By Walter B. Rudolph  
Contributing Editor



Giorgio Tozzi and Jussi Björling

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

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

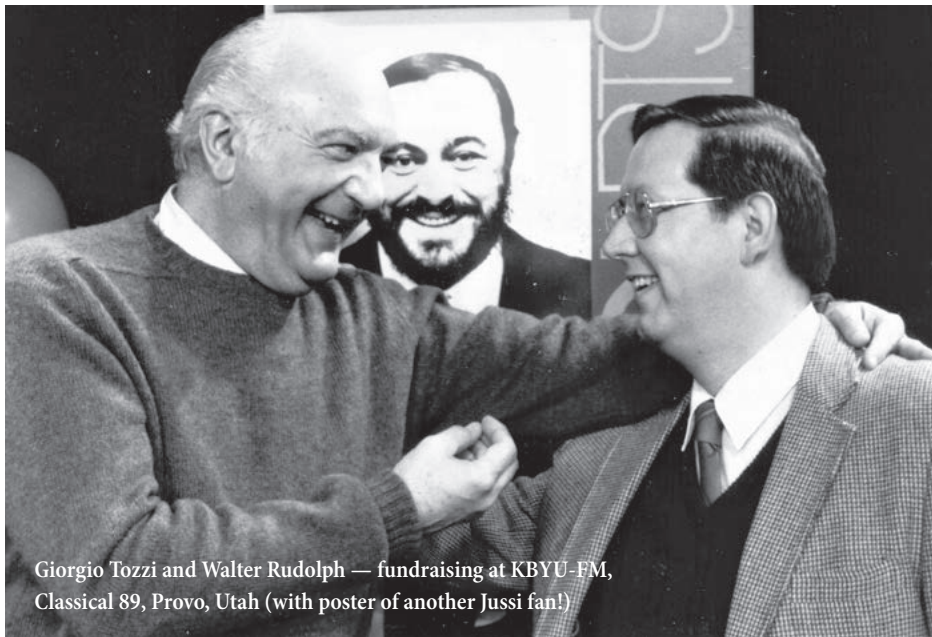
for this planned program. I even went so far as to offer to ship a cassette recorder and microphone to him for this purpose....There was no response.

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! *A Tribute to Jussi Björling and Giorgio Tozzi – an American Bass* were both heard nationally on NPR's *Options*.

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

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Giorgio Tozzi and Walter Rudolph — fundraising at KBYU-FM, Classical 89, Provo, Utah (with poster of another Jussi fan!)

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St. Peter, Minnesota JBS-USA, 2001  
– Walter Rudolph and Giorgio Tozzi

ways I'm still discovering.

The \*Christmas marking in the transcription is my own (see page 27) and is included for the memory I have of Giorgio and Monte attending the 2001 Björling Conference in St. Peter. At lunch time, he asked me to arrange for Anders and Janet Björling to join the four of us for lunch in the cafeteria. I had seen him slip a yellow square Kodak film box in his suit coat pocket, and knew exactly what it was, because he had told me about it previously. At lunch he took it out, and made reference to that Christmas experience when Jussi

and Anna-Lisa and children had come to his 71st Street apartment. Giorgio had taken home movies of the occasion, and now he presented his only copy to Anders, who had also been there.

We were gone over Easter weekend in 2011. When we returned that Sunday evening, there was a voicemail from Giorgio. I called him the next day, and regret not having recorded every word of our nearly two hour conversation. He died on Memorial Day, the next month. It took Marilyn to point out to me that his call was to say "good bye." *Thank you, Giorgio!*

## 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



Giorgio as Timur/*Turandot*  
with Walter C., Stacia and  
Marilyn Rudolph

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*

*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



Celebrating Walter's birthday on Giorgio and Monte's Anniversary (l-r) Monte and Jennifer Tozzi, Walter Rudolph, Giorgio Tozzi, Clare and Stan Cory.

our recording the Verdi *Requiem*, which was conducted by the immortal Fritz Reiner, with the soprano Leontyne Price, the mezzo-soprano Rosalind Elias, Jussi and myself. This recording took place in Vienna. The day that Jussi was to record the “Ingenisco,” he was very nervous. I asked him why he was nervous. After all, he had sung it so many times. He said, “Well, you know, this orchestra here is comprised of the finest musicians in Vienna. And if I don't sing well today, it will be all over Vienna tonight.” So you see he was very conscious and very aware of the responsibility of his position. Needless to say, he had nothing to worry about. He sang magnificently. And the evidence of the truth of that statement can be readily had by just listening to the recording.

Once upon a time when I was much younger and quite immature, I used to think how it seemed to be so unjust that a

tenor could stand up on a stage and probably not perform too well, but if he managed to successfully negotiate the high notes of his role, he would be greeted with thunderous applause, great acclaim and would triumph over all. After having worked with many greats; after having grown up quite a bit and having matured (hopefully), I began to recognize the tremendous responsibility that tenors do have in the field of opera (and the example I just cited of Jussi being nervous about recording the “Ingenisco”).... Suppose the tenor sings magnificently all night long, and doesn't manage to sing magnificent high notes. And there you are – he's disappointed his audience! So you see, since a man's success or failure can ride on his capacity to negotiate those high Cs, B naturals and Bb's, one can readily see why tenors are rather nervous people. I don't blame them at all. And Jussi, on his own, was nervous. He was nervous because

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. ■

*Giorgio Tozzi — 1980*