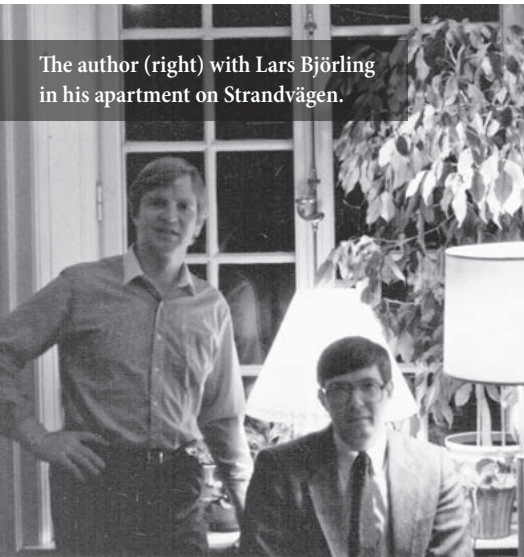


How Jussi's Appearances on American Television First Made Their Way to Sweden

By Kendall Svengalis, Contributing Editor



The author (right) with Lars Björling in his apartment on Strandvägen.

In the days before the founding of the Jussi Björling Society – USA, several future JBS board members established contact with Harald Henrysson who, at the time was record librarian at Swedish Radio. It was those contacts, and subsequent correspondence that eventually led, with Harald's encouragement, to the founding of the JBS-USA in 1997. This account takes us back 34 years, to 1986, when I had my own unique Jussi Björling experiences in Sweden, thanks to Harald.

My own contact with Harald was prompted by a letter from my cousin, Annette Carlsson, who lives in Arjäng, Värmland, after the publication of the first edition of *A Jussi Björling Phonography* in 1984. Annette knew of my Björling addiction and often sent me Jussi-related newspaper clippings. She also sent me a video of the first Swedish television broadcast of *Fram för Framgång* (*Head for Success*) which I had transferred from PAL to the NTSC format.

It was in 1976, on my first visit to Sweden, that I met Annette, her parents, and my great uncle, Ernst Larsson, who were then living on Lake Ömmeln in Bollsyn, Svanskog, a small, remote settlement along

the Värmland-Dalsland border. This idyllic corner of Värmland was about as far off the beaten path as one could imagine. But when the subject of Jussi Björling came up, great-uncle Ernst was quick to inform me that he fishes with Rolf Björling. When asked to explain this remarkable coincidence, he explained that Rolf was married to Gunnel Eklund (1939-), a singer whose parents still lived two houses down the country road. On their periodic visits to her family, Rolf soon found a fishing companion in my great-uncle whose home bordered the lake. Small world! Gunnel had even toured the United States as soloist with the Värmland YMCA Chorus in 1969, two members of which stayed in the home of my future wife, Ellen, in Stratford, Connecticut when they performed in Bridgeport. Visiting Swedish male choruses typically arranged home stays with members of local American Union of Swedish Singers choruses of which Ellen's father was a member.

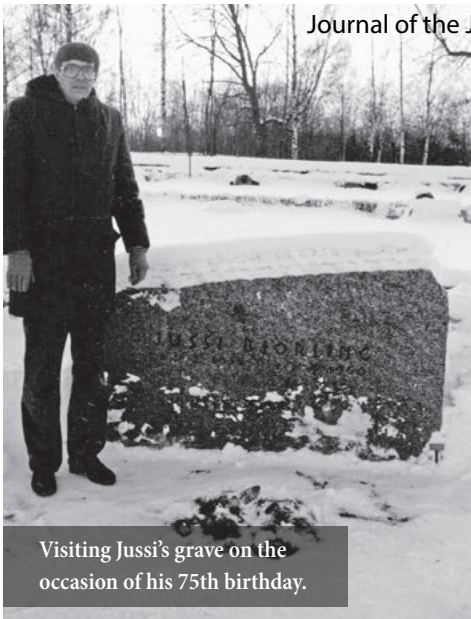
As the 75th anniversary of Jussi's birth approached, I asked Harald if any celebration was planned. At the time, I was unaware that a gala Memorial Concert had been held the previous September 9, commemorating the 25th year of Jussi's passing, on September 9, 1960. It was a star-studded affair, with opera luminaries from around the world, and Sweden, in attendance. The performers included Robert Merrill, James McCracken, Birgit Nilsson, Giuseppe di Stefano, Nicola Gedda, Elisabeth Söderström, Håkan Hagegård, Gösta Windbergh, and Rolf, Lars, and Ann-Charlotte Björling, among others. The concert, held at Stockholm's Konserthus, was preserved on a two-LP set and a one-hour Swedish television video of highlights.

Despite the fact that no formal cele-

bration of Jussi's 75th birthday was being planned, I was determined to make the trip to Sweden regardless, in the hope that something might materialize. So, I booked my flights on SAS, and made a reservation at the Hotel Birger Jarl in Stockholm. Little did I anticipate that the celebration would involve—me!

I should point out that in the year leading up to this event, I was able to secure a VHS copy of Jussi's appearance on the November 20, 1950 *Voice of Firestone* broadcast through the kindness of Mark Malkovich, director and founder of the Newport Music Festival. Mark had planned to screen the program in one of the Newport mansions during the Festival, but an equipment malfunction prevented this from happening. I later phoned him and asked if, under the circumstances, I could show the program to my choir at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Providence, an edifice designed by Martin Hedmark, an architect who had collaborated in the design of the Engelbrekt Kyrka in Stockholm. He gladly agreed, but cautioned me not to share it due to copyright restrictions with the New England Conservatory, which is the repository for the Firestone collection. I must confess that, before returning it to him, I could not resist making a copy, but kept it close to my vest. I reasoned, who would know if it now surfaced in Sweden, or was given to the Björling family?

Scanning Harald's *Phonography* for Jussi's other American television credits, I took note of his February 17, 1957 appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Picking up the telephone in my office at the Rhode Island State Law Library, I dialed Ed Sullivan Productions and made contact with Carmine Santullo, Ed Sullivan's long-time secretary who still managed the archive of the *Ed Sullivan Show* programs. I rather brazenly explained that I was traveling to Sweden for the celebration of Jussi Björling's 75th birthday and would like to obtain a copy of that program for screening at the celebration. He could not have been more helpful. When I asked what the cost would be, he simply told me not to worry about it,



Visiting Jussi's grave on the occasion of his 75th birthday.

and would figure it out later (it eventually cost me nothing since Swedish television paid Sullivan Productions for the rights to screen the Björling excerpts). On the Saturday morning of my departure for Sweden (February 1), a UPS truck pulled up to my Providence home with a package containing the treasured VHS copy of a program that had not been seen since its original television broadcast. Now, I had two American television appearances by Jussi in my possession that had never been seen in Sweden before.

Once my red eye flight touched down in Sweden on Sunday morning, I made my way by bus to a chilly Stockholm and checked into the Hotel Birger Jarl, located a short walking distance from the Engelbrekt's Kyrka and the apartment building where Anna-Lisa Björling resided. From there, I walked to Stockholm's Central Station and boarded a train to Tullinge, a Stockholm suburb, for a scheduled meeting with Harald and his family. For someone generally starved of Björling conversation, meeting Harald was a true delight. We spent a stimulating afternoon in his apartment, talking and listening to rare Björling recordings, topped off by a delicious dinner. As I prepared to depart, Harald invited me to meet him at Swedish Radio the following day for a tour. Naturally, he asked me to bring along the VHS copies of the two American television broadcasts in my pos-



Uno Östberg (center) with reporters and guests at Jussi Björling birthday celebration in Borlänge, February 5, 1986.

session. I was thrilled to be invited, but had no idea what doors this would open.

On Monday morning, after bundling up, I explored the NK department store and several local record and book stores, before walking over to the Operan and buying tickets for the Monday and Tuesday evening performances of *Così fan tutte* and *Un ballo in maschera*, the latter starring Nicolai Gedda as Gustave III. With tickets in hand, I walked to Swedish Radio for my scheduled meeting with Harald. I was impressed by the modern facilities and the comprehensive collection of sound recordings in the collection. Then, Harald walked me down the hall to the office of Per Öhnell, one of Swedish Radio and Television's leading producers and announcers. What I didn't know at the time, however, was that it was Per who announced Jussi's funeral on Swedish television on September 17, 1960.

Harald explained to Per that I had something very special that had never been seen in Sweden before—video of Jussi's American television programs. Per's eyes lit up as I told him about the *Voice of Firestone* and *Ed Sullivan* programs that I had in my possession. But since they were in NTSC format, they would have to be converted to PAL for viewing in Sweden. Per led us down the hallway to a video production studio where the transfers could be made. On the way, he knocked on every door, announcing to all within earshot that they were going to see Jussi on American television for the first time. Soon, the room was filled with production staff eager to view this remarkable event. It sent chills up my spine to observe the impact this was having on those among the staff who truly appreciated Jussi's artistry and the uniqueness of the moment. The staff

made several PAL copies of the videos for me, including those I could deliver to the Björling family after screening them at Jussi Björling Gården in Borlänge.

At the end of the workday, Harald then escorted me to Lars Björling's apartment, conveniently located on Strandvägen, across from Djurgården. Needless to say, I had no idea I was going to meet Jussi's son, and his wife and daughter. There, in his living room, we watched the now converted videos of the two programs. As Lars watched intently, I remember him explaining to his young daughter that these were programs of her grandfather, although she was probably too young to fully appreciate the importance of what she was viewing.

That evening, after the opera, I received a phone call from Harald at my hotel room with totally unexpected news. He told me that Anna-Lisa wanted to meet me on Tuesday morning. Apparently, Lars must have called his mother and told her that some gentleman from the United States had "video of Dad." Presumably, he suggested she ask Harald to bring me to her 4th-floor apartment on Karlavägen, adjacent to the Engelbrekt Kyrka, where Jussi's funeral was held.

The large brick apartment building on Karlavägen is one of the most impressive in the city, one in which Jussi and Anna-Lisa lived together from 1956 to 1960. I met Harald outside the imposing entryway and he rang the buzzer to announce our arrival. It was somewhat intimidating to be invited to the apartment once occupied by Sweden's most famous musical personality and, now, by his widow and her second husband, Ulf Barkman. We were greeted warmly and invited to have a seat in their living room,

The author at doorway of Anna-Lisa's apartment building next to the Engelbrekt Kyrka in 1999, on the occasion of an American Union of Swedish Singers tour of Sweden.



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where I explained the circumstances of my obtaining the videos. I recall the walls and piano adorned with photographs of musical luminaries, including Gigli and Toscanini. Anna-Lisa was delighted to watch these programs for the first time since she sat in the wings when they were first broadcast before live studio audiences in 1950 and 1957. I recall her commenting that Jussi felt a little awkward cavorting with the members of the Firestone chorus as they sang "The Neapolitan Love Song," as this was somewhat different to the operatic department to which he was accustomed. But this was live TV and he adapted admirably to the new medium. She also told me that it was Ander's birthday (February 4th) and that she planned to call and wish him "happy birthday." Since Harald had already arranged a gathering in my honor at Jussi Björling Gården in Borlänge on Wednesday, I explained to Anna-Lisa that I would bring her personal copies of the videos upon my return to Stockholm. Meeting her and her husband and sharing what must have been precious family memories was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life.

The rest of the day was spent visiting the Nordiska Museet on Djurgården with its fabulous collections of artifacts reflecting Swedish cultural history. That evening, I attended the performance of *Ballo* at the Royal Opera, after which I remember walking back to my hotel as a light snowfall graced the streets and sidewalks of the city and drifted down in the floodlights illuminating the Johannes Kyrka. Of course, I had no idea what would transpire on the evening of February 28 on these very streets. Prime

Minister Olof Palme would be gunned down in that very same neighborhood, as he and his wife were walking home from the Grand Cinema.

On Wednesday morning, I secured a rental car near the Central Station for the four-hour drive to Borlänge. The snow-covered landscape was beautiful, but I was more concerned with avoiding any mishaps in an unfamiliar country. By the time I arrived at my destination, I was surprised to encounter a gathering of locals and eight news reporters from local and regional newspapers and television stations who were there to greet me. As with my previous encounters, Harald had made all the arrangements. The reporters had many questions: How long had I been a fan of Jussi Björling? Did I have any Swedish roots? Yes, I explained in my limited Swedish, my grandmother emigrated from Värmland in 1910. How did I obtain these television programs? One newspaper account even described me as a "video detektiv."

Photos were taken with me presenting copies of the videos to local cultural director, Uno Östberg, who was most hospitable, and escorted me to the little museum in Jussi Björling Gården to view the modest collection. Following a viewing of the videos by the enraptured audience, and refreshments, I followed Uno in my car to the Stora Tuna Kyrkagård to pay my respects at Jussi's grave. By this time, the sky was already turning a little dark—it was February in central Sweden, after all—and the temperatures had dipped to about fifteen degrees Fahrenheit. I still had about a four-hour drive to Årjäng ahead of me, through unfam-

iliar landscape, where I planned to visit my relatives.

I vividly recall the long and winding road through the wooded terrain. At one point, I noticed I was almost out of gas in an area where petrol stations were few and far between. Finally, I found a small, unattended country station that required one to feed kronor notes to dispense petrol. Failing to negotiate the proper sequence, the owner, who lived over the station, came down to assist me, and I was soon on my way. Was I relieved! A short time later, big letters spelling out "WASA" told me I was in Filipstad, birthplace of John Ericsson and home to a large Wasa bread factory. More than an hour later, I arrived in Årjäng and the home of my cousin, Lilly-Ann Larsson, and her husband, Henry. All I can say is that the journey was a far cry from traveling through Sweden during the warm, idyllic days of summer that I had experienced in 1976, and have many times since.

Lilly-Ann always lays out a great table for her guests. I sat down to an evening meal of moose meat, cheese, eggs, Wasa bread and butter, and other delicacies. No sooner had we started eating when the phone rang. Upon answering, Lilly-Ann had a look of shock and surprise on her face. Putting her hand over the speaker, she looked at me and said "It's Anna-Lisa Björling, for you." Anna-Lisa was calling to tell me that she would not be home when I returned to Stockholm and would I be kind enough to leave the videos with her neighbor, one floor below. Apparently, a concert had been hastily arranged for Sunday, February 9th at the Stora Tuna Kyrka, at which she, Lars, Ann-Charlotte, and Siv Wennberg would be singing. Sadly, I realized that I would be unable to attend because I was scheduled to fly home on Saturday and changing my airline reservations would have been too costly (Harald later sent me an audiocassette and printed program). Needless to say, Lilly-Ann never forgot the time Anna-Lisa Björling called her home, looking for me, and thought I must be some kind of VIP.

On Thursday, Lilly-Ann's daughter,

Annette, took me on a tour of Årjäng while Lilly-Ann watched her grandchildren, Lisa and Sam. When the children rose from their nap, they asked their grandmother “Var är gubben? (Where’s the old man?). That’s been a family joke from that day to this. Annette calls me “gubben,” although I was only 38 at the time. But through the eyes of children, I was “gubben.”

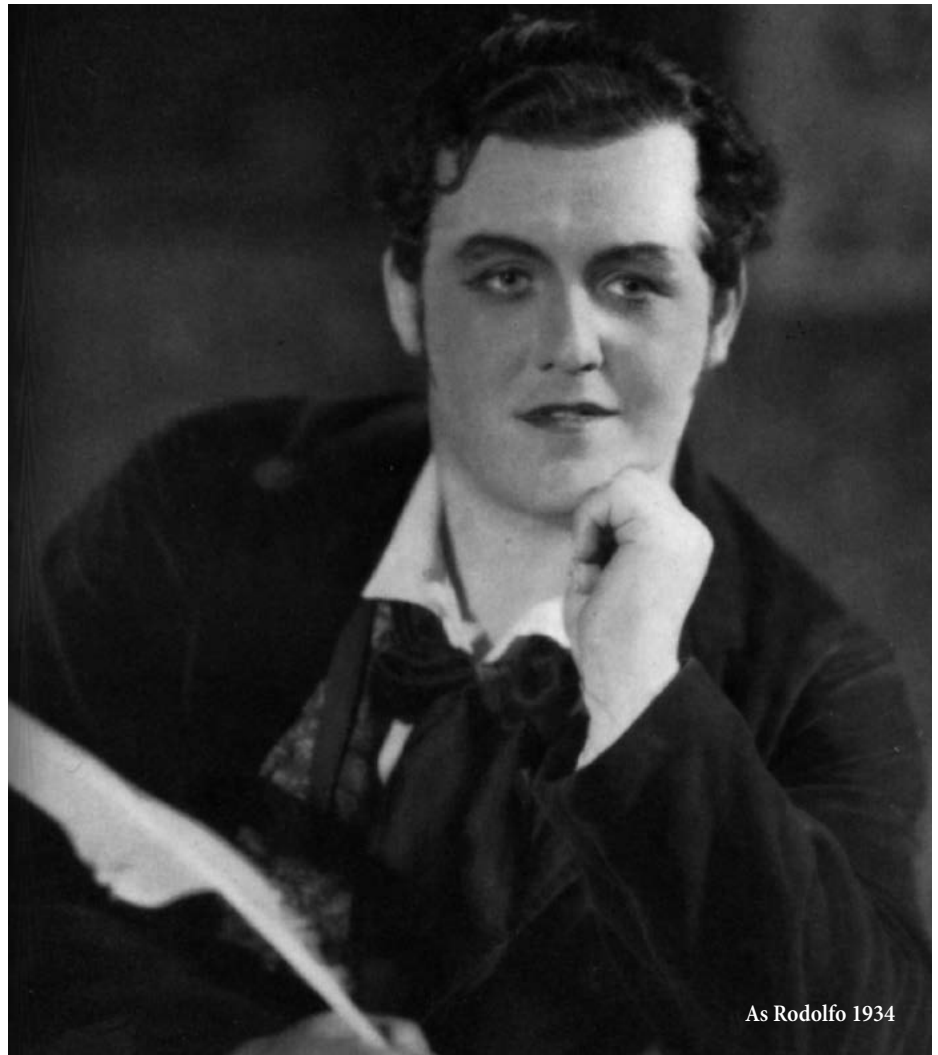
On Friday morning, Annette and I drove to Stockholm in my rental to meet up with her husband, Christer, who was attending a furniture show in the capital (he was the proprietor of a furniture store in Årjäng). That evening, we enjoyed dinner in one of those delightful cellar restaurants in Gamla Stan. We then enjoyed a frigid walk down Västerlånggatan (the Western Long Street), the narrow, brick-lined street of Gamla Stan, with its many enticing shop windows, before heading over to the Scandia Park Hotel for my last night in Sweden. On Saturday, I took a train to Arlanda Airport for my return flight.

Thanks to Harald, I had a once-in-a-lifetime experience. In place of my modest expectations for, perhaps, attending some Jussi-related events on the occasion of Jussi’s 75th birthday, or some opera performances, I found myself the center of attention for bringing videos of Jussi on American television to Sweden for the first time. Harald arranged for me to meet Per Öhnell, Lars Björling, and Anna-Lisa Björling, and cement a friendship that has lasted for 36 years. For that, I will always be grateful. ■

Kendall Svengalis is the retired Rhode Island State Law Librarian, a writer and publisher of books on law and history. He has also written two vocabulary-building espionage novels featuring the 17-year-old Swedish-American girl detective, Ellen Anderson, each of which contains references to Jussi. He discovered Jussi Björling at the age of 16, is a founding member of JBS-USA, and a member of its board since 2002. He is also president of the RI Swedish Heritage Association and performs Swedish ballads with his wife, Ellen, including those of Carl Michael Bellman and Evert Taube.

Several Perspectives on Jussi Björling and *La bohème*

By Dan Shea, Contributing Editor



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Browsing the internet recently, I noticed *Pristine Classical's* announcement of their new remastering of the “Beecham *Bohème*” and wondered how powerful modern sound engineering might affect the glorious vocalism of that 64 year old recording. The transcript engineer in charge, Andrew Rose, has built up a substantial catalogue of renovated recordings, mostly from the early LP era, often having surprising clarity and spatial ambience. Mr. Rose definitely seems to have very good taste concerning the artists his company features, including 13 of Jussi’s

recordings from the era 1940-1957.

Certainly these audio engineers can do some interesting improvements based on steadily improving technology, and they are motivated partially by the fact that most of Jussi’s recordings continue to be popular. Thus multiple versions exist, and most of them are advances over the original 78s, tapes, and LPs.

What’s a Björling fan to do with all these choices?

Here’s one suggestion: go to that website pristineclassical.com and listen to their