

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.”

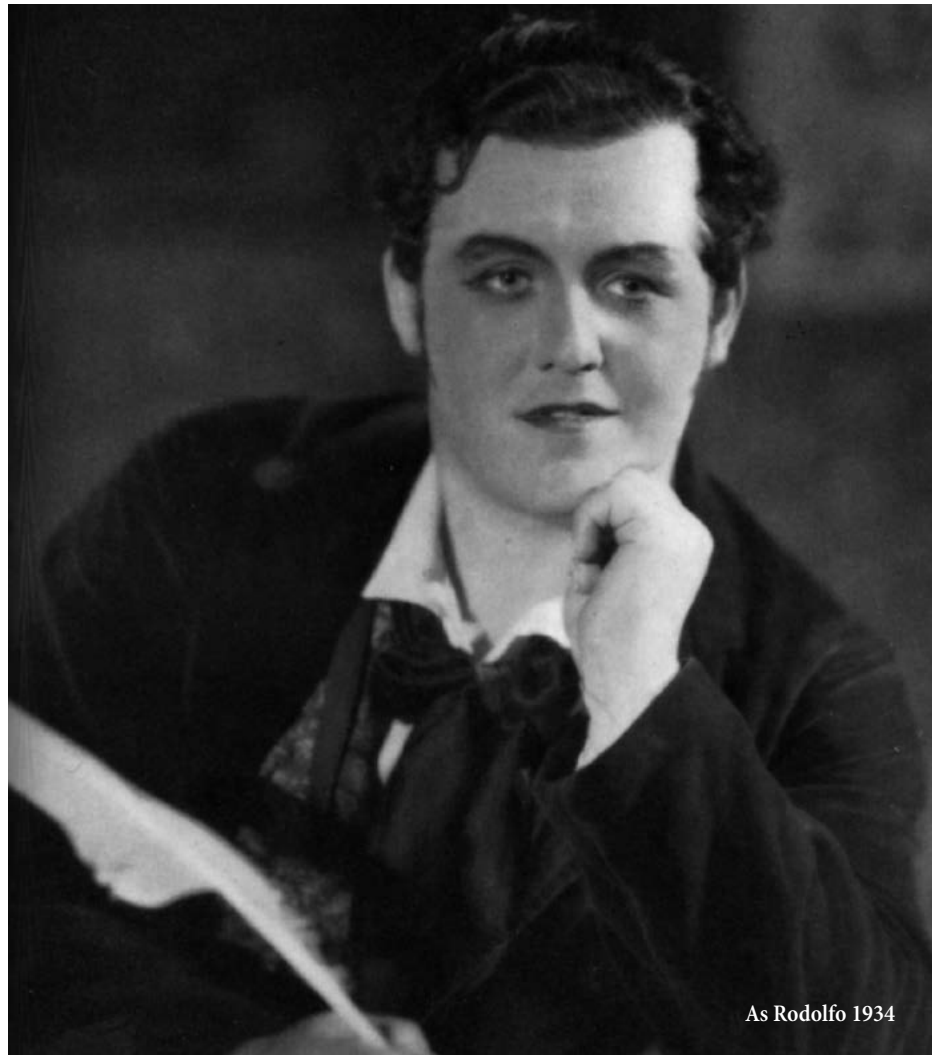
On Friday morning, Annette and I drove to Stockholm in my rental to meet up with her husband, Christer, who was attending a furniture show in the capital (he was the proprietor of a furniture store in Årjäng). That evening, we enjoyed dinner in one of those delightful cellar restaurants in Gamla Stan. 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. ■

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Several Perspectives on Jussi Björling and *La bohème*

By Dan Shea, Contributing Editor



As Rodolfo 1934

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



Make-up for Rodolfo at the
Met 1948 (with Ira Senz)

short “samples” of the sound of some Jussi classics, including this *Bohème*. Listen and see if you’re impressed by their work. If so, compare your own copy of that recording with the *Pristine* samples offered. Whatever you decide to do, Congratulations — you have just reminded yourself how satisfactory your “old” recording is (and you may want to settle down and continue enjoying it); or, you might have decided to change to the new improved model. (Or you might want to consider discussions about other transcriptions, e.g. at immortalperformances.org.)

Decide to learn more about Björling as Rodolfo.

If you find yourself getting into a mood for more information about this Puccini masterpiece, consider going to your copy of the previous JBS Journal (#27, February 2019) to read Walter Price’s revealing article on the making of that 1956 recording.

Even better, listen instead to Jussi’s earlier approach to Rodolfo in his December 25, 1948, Met broadcast of *Bohème* with Bidú Sayão and Mimì Benzell, Giuseppe Antonicelli conducting. Sometimes we

forget what a treasure this is, his only Met broadcast of this signature role. According to Göran Forsling’s review of the *WHRA* transcription, “He [Jussi] is in glorious form, strong, confident and ardent but in places too virile, too outgoing. There is a certain lack of lyricism in his reading. ‘Che gelida manina’ is superbly vocalized but transposed down [as usual with on-stage performances]. The duet with Mimì, also transposed, is certainly thrilling and here he takes the higher, unwritten option on the final note... He actually finds more of the inherent lyricism in the last two acts and especially in the Act III finale he is soft and caring ... No one else in the cast quite reaches Björling’s splendor.”

Well, that review of this broadcast matinee seems to present Jussi as something of a showoff, at 37, all very uncharacteristic! But we need to listen for ourselves, and decide. Personally, I love Jussi’s whole performance, including his Act I. And there’s a way to guess what another critical view might be, if we’re willing to look at Jussi’s Rodolfo of a week earlier. The cast that evening is identical, except for Marcello (Brownlee) and Schanard (Thompson) rather than the Valentino-Cehanovsky duo we know from the broadcast. Here’s the most relevant part of Noel Strauss’s review* of the December 16 *Bohème*:

“It is a long while since this reviewer has heard as convincing and impressive an account of the crucial first act of this opera. For, the entire scene between Mimì and Rodolfo was projected with an amount of poetry, tenderness and ardor that made it uncommonly touching. Rarely are both the soprano and the tenor parts so sympathetically sung, and every word of the text so consistently accorded its due significance, as on this occasion.

“Mr. Björling, who was in his best vocal form, made the most of his opportunities in the “Narrative,” which was capped by a sustained high C of notable purity, power and beauty. All of his singing could be commended for its tonal perfection, expressiveness and warmth in a most satisfying and finely detailed portrayal, which easily

carried off the honors of the evening.”

Well, maybe this *Times* review was so good that a week later Jussi was overconfident, but still nervous about muffing his “Che gelida” high C for a nationwide audience, and so transposed the aria a half-tone down Gee, wouldn’t it be swell if we could have a good recording of that earlier performance, to compare!

And *mirabile dictu*, that may be true:

Really? A possible Met in-house *Bohème* recording from 16 December, 1948?

If you go to your computer and put into the browser: < *parterre box, the songs of la bohème will live forever* >, then you’ll get a *Parterre Box* blog page that offers a brief August 18, 2014 discussion of two in-house Met *Bohème* recordings, supposedly offered for downloading at that time, one from the 12/16/1948 Sayão-JB performance with “amazing sound-quality,” and one from a Jan. 25, 1988 performance with Freni-Pavarotti/Kleiber that also very definitely occurred. This early *Parterre Box* site might not be above some sort of fraud, but the discussion seems to be consistent with the bloggers having heard some kind of upload. A question would be, is that “in-house recording” real, or possibly just some disguised version of the real 12/25/1948 Met broadcast? Sounds too good to be true!

Jussi’s last Met *Bohème*, another wonder.

After Jussi opened the Met’s 1953-54 season with a new production of *Faust* with de los Angeles and Rossi-Lemeni, he sang two additional performances but then had to withdraw after chronic laryngitis settled in. Especially disappointing to us, today, is the fact that Jussi was scheduled for two broadcast performances: the first would have been the December 5 *Faust*, and the second would have been either the December 19 *Bohème* (opposite Hilde Güden) or the January 16 *Trovatore*, opposite Milanov and Warren. Since Jussi’s Manrico is already very well documented with six magnificent recordings, many of us would have wished for a second live Met *Bohème*! In any case, we can at least celebrate information about



Jussi’s next *Bohème*, of February 1, 1954, when he returned to the Met in top vocal form — here is ...

Musical America’s complete review:*

“After hearing Jussi Björling’s *Faust* with mixed emotions earlier in the season it was a benediction to witness his return to the Metropolitan in this performance following a month’s vacation in Sweden. This was the Björling of old, not of last November but of years ago, with solid, sustained highs and beautiful security right down the line. From the moment he opened his mouth the sound was as molten silver, unalloyed, spun out into lines of liquid loveliness. Nowhere did Mr. Björling betray a moment’s strain. Not for a long time have I heard such a well-sung Rodolfo; nor had the audience, on the evidence of one of the most prolonged ovations in recent Metropolitan history. It was a grand comeback. One prays that Mr. Björling will be able to consolidate the gains of his recuperation, and that they will continue to be manifest.

“This was Mr. Björling’s first Rodolfo of the season. It was also Licia Albanese’s first Mimi and Cesare Siepi’s first Colline. Miss Albanese, who was forced to

cancel an appearance in *La Traviata* last week on account of a cold, apparently had not entirely recovered. Her Mimi was unusually restrained, both vocally and dramatically. Like the artist she is, however, Miss Albanese was able to scale her portrayal to whatever resources were at her command, so that her touchingly pathetic characterization was an effective complement to Mr. Björling’s impassioned Rodolfo. Mr. Siepi was an impressive Colline in every way. The remaining principals were as usual: Jean Fenn was a realistically hoydenish Musetta, Robert Merrill a superior Marcello, Gerhard Pechner a hilarious Benoit, and George Cehanovsky a dependable Schaunard. The others were James McCracken, Alessio De Paolis and Algerd Brazis. Alberto Erede conducted in an extremely leisurely fashion.”

Some of JBS’s most enthusiastic members attended this performance. Ed Walter and Karl Hekler both were there and have validated the views in the above rave review!

We realize that we’ve raised a few questions here, more or less substantial — and here’s one more, very minor, mystery: Jussi continued to sing at the Met for 24 perfor-

mances during three more seasons, 1956 - 59, but of his patented Rodolfo there would be no more. Was there a Met decision that he was getting a bit old for the part? Maybe not, although in the remaining 5 years he did sing 10 more Rodolfo's in Chicago, San Francisco, Stockholm, Malmö, Stuttgart, Belgrade, Zagreb.

A look back, to Berlin in 1937.

Karl Schmitt-Walter was a lyric baritone (1900-1985) who sang at the Berlin State Opera from 1935 and then, from 1950, the Munich State Opera, with many guest appearances around Europe. He relates the following story in "Das Musikalische Selbstporträt." (we've told it before, it's too good not to use it again here):

"I worked for a long time in Berlin, including during the war. On one occasion a guest appearance was made there by a tenor who was to become very famous, though, strangely enough, not so much so in Germany.

"He turned up for a 10 o'clock rehearsal at about 10:30, a shortish, plump, blond young man. He was very polite, apologised in broken German for his lateness, and we were able to start rehearsing. Not him though — he just marked his music.

"The director waited for a while but soon went to the management and declared, 'I refuse to take responsibility for this!' The rest of us said to one another — it's just as it always is with official cultural exchanges. We are required to flatter Sweden, and so a Swedish singer gets to make a guest appearance at our opera house whether he can sing or not.

"I went to that evening's *La bohème* performance feeling very skeptical. My first lines to Rodolfo, who was standing by the window looking out over Paris, ended with [in German]: 'What are you doing?' He replied in Swedish, 'I'm looking at the sky, seeing how the smoke from a thousand chimneys is wafting over Paris ...'

"I was almost speechless — the voice was so beautiful! He sang and sang. Gradually everyone gathered in the wings, listening and waiting for the big aria. He sang the

famous aria so incredibly beautifully that we all asked in amazement, 'Who is this young man with his unbelievable voice?' It turned out that he was Jussi Björling, who was to become one of the world's most famous tenors.

"We got together after the performance, and he thought it was a great joke that we actually had taken him for a poor devil whom we would have to help through the performance. But he had eclipsed us all!"

[The performance took place on Friday, 6 February 1937. This translation was done by Gail Campaign from a Swedish translation of the original German, as published in Issue 21 of the Jussi Björling Sällskapets Tidning.]

OK, here's the aria in one favorite version (Hilversum 1939).

There are so many great versions, maybe this one from 1939 fits Schmitt-Walter's 1937 story especially well. Play your own favorite, or if you have a computer handy put these three words into your browser: *youtube, Hilversum, bohème*.

Have we missed anything rare and good?

Sure, there's lots of *Bohème*-material from Jussi's career — here are some hints:

1. The *Producer's Showcase* NBC Concert, Jussi and Renata sing the last 15 minutes of Act I *Bohème*, VAI DVD: [Wonderful, talent and experience rule!]

2. On March 21, 1940, Swedish Radio recorded the complete Act I of *La bohème* as performed at the Royal Opera House with JB, his Mimi Hjördis Schymberg, and 4 assisting artists; Nils Grevillius, cond. This is available on a beautiful *Immortal Performances* set # IPCD 1134-3, in decent 1940 sound that is much improved over the early LP choices that long ago went out of print. If you have *Bluebell* ABCD 013, you'll find 18 minutes of highlights of that performance nicely preserved. To hear Jussi at that fairly early stage make his way through "Så kall" (= "Che gelida") is a real treat. And his Mimi does very well too. They finish with a tender "O soave fanciulla." Also on this disk: 38 minutes from an excellent complete *Roméo et Juliette*, March 27, 1940,

in Swedish. Another real treat!

3. *Bluebell* ABCD 078 preserves 45 minutes of highlights from a lovely 1957 *Bohème* in Malmö, the Mimi and other Bohemians are competent, and Jussi's voice is gorgeous, aging like fine wine. Also on this disk: most of Act 3 of a 1959 Stockholm *Tosca*. (Adding to the fun: JB sings in Italian, all others in Swedish.)

If you love the sort of material in Numbers 2 and 3, then either you have a copy of Harald Henrysson's *Phonography*, or you need to get one, successful Jussicology requires this amazing volume in one of its forms. Loving item Number 1 is easy, similarly to loving the Beecham *Bohème* itself.

Jussi's recordings keep surprising us with the kinds of special emphases he often adds to his performances — already this can be seen in the 1930's material and right up to his August 1960 concert in Gothenburg — ultimately that stems from his masterful command of technique. We are listening to examples of "the free voice as an expressive instrument" as Albert Innaurato put it in his lecture at the 2002 JBS conference in New York City. His idea was simply to play a collection of Jussi's live broadcasts, pointing out the especially delectable vocal coloring and phrasing of his examples. And we can do this for ourselves, — to be sure with many fine musicians we are able to hear — but very reliably with the singing of Jussi Björling! ■

* The reviews here of past Met performances are taken from the Met Archive Database.

Editor's Note: Jussi's last Mimi, Rosanna Carteri, passed away in October 2020. See page 41 for a Met tribute to this lovely soprano.



As Rodolfo, Covent Garden, March 1960