



Jussi Björling **LIVE**

BROADCAST CONCERTS
1937-1960

SPECIAL
4 CDs for the
price of 3

A treasury of rare performances from the U.S. and
Sweden, including previously unreleased material

A TENOR IN HIS GLORY

Jussi Björling's American Broadcasts, 1945-1956 (CDs 1-3)

By Roger Pines

Jussi Björling's exalted position among historically important singers needs no justification at this writing. If evidence were still needed, however, it could be found in these three invaluable discs. Here is that once-in-a-century voice, ennobling even music as hackneyed and sentimental as d'Hardelot's "Because" through sheer vocal glory.

The late Elisabeth Söderström recalled a description used by Jenny Lind when she attempted to describe Swedish voices: "images of bright nights in June, and the scent of fir trees and pine trees." That was indeed Björling's timbre, in a nutshell, yet the tenor could adapt his voice magnificently to meet the demands of non-Scandinavian repertoire. He boasted not only an incomparable upper register, but also superbly even tone down to the lowermost notes, textual clarity, and an expressive range from heart-stopping intimacy to unaffected dignity and infectious exuberance.

Björling's voice took brilliantly to the microphone. It was inevitable, then, that once he was established in America, numerous popular radio programs would be clamoring for him. These discs fill a gap by gathering into one set much of the tenor's best American radio work. Anyone familiar with Björling's career will have heard most of this repertoire on his commercial recordings. Like every great singer, however, Björling gave an indefinable but undeniable extra spark to his live performances.

We begin with the Voice of Firestone, with which Björling made eight appearances from 1945 to 1952. All of them were heard by radio audiences, with the final four also seen on television. Onscreen Björling's demeanor was restrained to a fault, but aurally it's another story: the voice soars, even in the sugary numbers by Idabelle Firestone that opened and closed Voice of Firestone broadcasts. One might wish for "Was ist Silvia?" rather than "Who is Sylvia?" but Björling manages the translation satisfactorily, elegantly employing a degree of portamento that critics would undoubtedly frown upon today (alas). It was still acceptable in 1945 to sing Flotow's "Ach so fromm" in Italian translation; the intensity of this aria's final phrases gets the better of Björling in a climactic high B-flat attacked rather too aggressively for



Jussi Björling at the microphone

comfort. In contrast, the Manon "dream aria" brings forth floated head tones of a sort rarely heard in Björling's operatic recordings. In singing Stephen Foster, the tenor's English pronunciation is generally crystal-clear, even if slightly challenged by the word "zephyr," but we can easily envision Jeanie floating through the summer air in the Swede's exquisite rendering of an American favorite.

The 1/21/46 Firestone broadcast unites Björling with Eleanor Steber, not yet 30 but already possessing the luscious tonal warmth that was uniquely hers. The Romberg duet reveals two voices quite marvelously matched (Steber pops a little mordent into "my dearest one" to charming effect). The absence of a chorus compromises the Trovatore "Miserere" where Steber's Italian is, as usual, somewhat inauthentic, and Björling could have broken his legato line for a few expressive "lifts" (at "A chi desia morir! Addio," for example). The tenor brings true fervency to Geehl's "For You Alone" which, nine years previously, had been the first song he recorded in English.

Thrice-familiar repertoire dominates the Firestone broadcast of 3/25/46, although one can never hear Björling sing "Jeg elsker dig" often enough – Grieg could have written the song for his voice. In the Jocelyn Berceuse it is the breathtaking ascent ending the recitative, even more than the aria itself, that makes the number memorable. Following the aforementioned "Because," Björling proves himself not quite a natural in Victor Herbert, although he lavishes on the "Neapolitan Love Song" vocalism more thrilling than the song has probably ever received.

Originating in Detroit, the Ford Sunday Evening Hour presented Björling on six occasions, with Fritz Reiner, no less, conducting the Mother's Day program on 5/12/46. Appropriately ardent in the half-tone downward transposition of the Faust aria, Björling manages solidly audible low Ds, while the full-voiced top B is spectacularly confident. Rather more stirring, however, are the Peterson-Berger and Althén songs – surely no singer will ever surpass the passionate conviction Björling brings to "Land, du välsignade." The singer concludes most affectingly with Tours's "Mother o' Mine." The Bohème duet recorded in San Francisco on 9/25/49 was included on an LP supporting the Salvation Army. Listen for Björling's magical lightening of this tone on the words "dolcezza estreme." He and Licia Albanese aren't consistently at one in their phrasing, but the "E al ritorno?" "Curioso!" exchange is adorable.

Very much of its time is the interview from the "We the People" program (2/16/51), with Dorothy Caruso's grandly old-fashioned New York accent and the obviously scripted remarks delivered by her and by Björling himself. The tenor's "Vesti la



Licia & Jussi, Jan. 10, 1951 – NYC



Jussi Björling with Dorothy Caruso,
Enrico's Rigoletto costume



Jussi Björling & Dorothy Caruso, Feb. 16
'51 TV program, *We the People*



Jussi Björling, San Francisco
Standard Hour, 10/23/49

giubba" is exciting, certainly, although his dramatic commitment in Italian doesn't quite scar the listener as do the excerpts from his Canio in Swedish (Vienna Staatsoper, 1937), and a complete 1954 broadcast from Stockholm's Royal Opera – both musts for any Björling devotee. It's a distinct relief, however, to hear a Canio actually stay right on the written notes rather than sobbing through the aria's final phrase.

In San Francisco the Standard Hour hosted Björling twice, both times with the San Francisco Opera's orchestra sensitively conducted by that company's founder and general director, Gaetano Merola. On 10/23/49 Björling doesn't offer his greatest-ever "Che gelida manina," especially textually, but the top C is stupendous in its effortlessness – seemingly Björling just can't wait to sing it. In the duet, no Mimi could ask for a sweeter declaration of "Sei mia!" and it comes as no surprise that Björling's partner is his wife, Anna-Lisa, a sympathetic vocal presence here. The Manon monologue has some passing vocal blemishes, but the Roméo et Juliette duet offers further proof that Gounod's hero may ultimately stand as this tenor's greatest operatic achievement. Anna-Lisa sings Juliette presentably, but the duet projects far greater urgency when Björling is joined on 9/30/51 by Bidú Sayão (his partner from the legendary 1947 Met performances). The Gioconda aria is spinto tenor material, for which Björling provides all but the last ounce of expansiveness and heft, the excitement of "Vieni al bacio" notwithstanding.

Cavaradossi's third-act aria, however, finds Björling utterly persuasive vocally, while giving the aria's emotional content full value. Tosti's "L'alba separa dalla luce l'ombra" is still more memorable – indeed, definitive.

We end the disk at Carnegie Hall, with the "Sweden in Music Concert" of 4/11/49. Björling's contributions here are characteristic of his work in the Nordic song literature, with a confident mastery of the style and heartfelt projection of text. The pristine timbre illuminates all the Swedish songs, and Björling repeatedly demonstrates that he can make the most awkward Swedish vowel formations sound genuinely mellifluous. The pick of the songs is the most dramatic of the group, Rangström's "Tristans död," electrifying both vocally and interpretively.

The announcements inform us of Björling's two encores, but the audience's enthusiasm cannot derail the program: Conductor Fritz Busch is impatiently waiting to bring on his orchestra and our tenor gives a final wave to this audience that seems eager for much more of him.

Björling made seven appearances on the Telephone Hour, between 1948 and 1951, and our Disc #3 begins by presenting five of these programs. (We present one further Telephone Hour program on Disc #4, since its sound quality is not quite up to the standard we are maintaining on Discs #1-3, and we continue to search for an acceptable source for the missing program from November 15, 1948.) Björling is in resplendent form in all his Telephone Hour appearances and seems to respond especially well to the thoroughly professional Donald Voorhees on the podium.

The tenor "debuted" with the Telephone Hour on 3/15/48, opening with one of his most entrancing performances of "Mattinata." Is it definitive? Well, there is Caruso – but even the Swede's legendary Italian predecessor surely never sang Leoncavallo's captivating song with a more astonishing

San Francisco Opera, 9/30/51,
Bidú Sayão and Jussi Björling



San Francisco Opera, 10/23/49,
Anna-Lisa Björling, Jussi Björling





Jussi and Anna-Lisa after the San Francisco Roméo et Juliette performance on Sept. 27, 1951. Photo: Paul C. Tracy, S.F.

confidence – this is vocal glory, pure and simple. Next is Rachmaninoff's "Lilacs," yet another instance of this listener treasuring the tenor's treasureable directness of address while longing for Russian instead of the English translation. Orlando Morgan's "Clorinda" seems hardly worthy of Björling's talent, but we return to high-quality material with "Ah, fuyez" from Manon. Here is one of Björling's most emotionally vivid performances, if not quite his most vocally aristocratic one. There are unexpected breaks in certain phrases ("Respectez/ un remords," for example), and Björling takes the final "loin de moi" simply at a steady mezzo forte rather than pulling it back into a diminuendo.

Moving on to 4/4/49, Björling is in fine voice for Schubert's "Ständchen," and if some lieder specialists may have brought more insight to this particular serenade, has anyone else ever sung it with more shining tone and good humor? This performance is straightforward to a fault, and yet the second half of the last verse thrills undeniably. Even with a spoken introduction partially preserved here from the original program, it's distinctly jarring to move from the Schubert to a reprise of the "Neapolitan Love Song" (could this really have been Björling's favorite operetta number?)

The tenor then blazes into verismo mode for the Cavalleria rusticana farewell, enormously affecting in those all-important words "un bacio" and even giving just a hint of a sob at the first "addio."

Another "Ständchen," this one by Strauss, opens the 11/7/49 appearance – a performance of unforced charm that, more than the Schubert, makes clear what special qualities a first-class voice like Björling's could bring to these songs. In "Jeanie" we have Björling reprising this favorite encore with sweetness and affection. Next Björling gives us again the Bohème aria, where one might wish for a more conversational, line-by-line specificity (especially in the "Che cosa faccio" section). Voorhees really lets Björling have his way, with that long-held C and the extreme lingering over the last phrase.

On 10/23/50 Björling offers "O paradiso," an aria he was born to sing. Rachmaninoff's "In the Silence of the Night" suffers when orchestrated, and Björling is tempted into treating the song

altogether too operatically. Strauss's "Zueignung," of course, can work marvelously in the orchestral setting, as the tenor demonstrates. Andrea Chénier's fervent fourth-act aria gives ample cause to regret Björling's not recording more of this role.

Björling made his penultimate Telephone Hour appearance on 1/8/51 (this was in the studio – he ended his association with the program two months later at Carnegie Hall). He returns to Des Grieux's "Rêve," again floating to exquisite effect at "les feuillages" and "il y faut." Such is the beauty of the performance that the audience can't resist applauding before he ends the final note, Björling's usual superb "Jungfrun under lind" is followed by "For you alone" and then, as a lovely contrast with the Manon, he ends with the "other" Des Grieux; the soliloquy for Puccini's version of the character is genuinely lovestruck, even if Voorhees doesn't always manage to follow Björling ideally.

The disc ends sublimely, with the audio portion of a 1/30/56 NBC television concert in the "Producer's Showcase" program: Björling and Renata Tebaldi in the Rodolfo-Mimi scene that closes Act One of La bohème. The first part of that scene is omitted, where Mimi comes to Rodolfo's door hoping to get her candle lit, faints and drops her key, then revives and leaves with her lit candle. For us the music starts with Mimi knocking again, apologetically explaining that she's carelessly lost her key: "O sventata," and needs Rodolfo to help her find it. Björling gives his all to "Che gelida" – clearly in glorious form vocally and exulting in the occasion. Tebaldi, also in rare form, is intimate, endearing (that nervous laugh at "E perchè non so"!), and dreamy in Mimi's aria. Certainly many listeners may prefer her voice's lushness in this role to the leaner tone heard from Sayão in this music. The end of the duet is taken down a half-step; the heroine's high C becomes a B, in which this Mimi is joined by her Rodolfo. One can only imagine how many times, when onstage with Björling, his soprano partners must have felt buoyed and inspired by that effulgent, incomparably confident voice.



Renata Tebaldi, Jussi Björling, Jan. 30, '56

Roger Pines, dramaturg and broadcast commentator for Lyric Opera of Chicago, has written program notes for many major recording companies, as well as articles for The Times (London), International Record Review, Opera News, and program booklets of major opera companies throughout America.