

Collections: Vocal

JUSSI BJÖRLING: A Tribute • Jussi Björling (ten); various artists • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1135-6, mono (6 CDs: 447:11)

MASCAGNI *Cavalleria rusticana* Nino Verchi, cond; Giulietta Simionato (*Santuzza*); Jussi Björling (*Turiddu*); Walter Cassel (*Alfio*); Metropolitan Op O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 11/16/1959

PUCCINI *Tosca* Dimitri Mitropoulos, cond; Mary Curtis-Verna (*Tosca*); Jussi Björling (*Cavaradossi*); Cornel MacNeil (*Scarpia*); Metropolitan Opera O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 11/21/1959.

GOUNOD *Faust* Jean Morel, cond; Jussi Björling (*Faust*); Elizabeth Söderström (*Marguerite*); Robert Merrill (*Valentin*); Cesare Siepi (*Méphistophélès*); Metropolitan Op O & Ch. Live: Metropolitan Opera, New York, 12/19/1959

& **BONUS: ALTHÉN: *Land, du välsignade***. Arias and scenes from *La bohème* (with Ethel Mårtensson), *Aida*, *Faust*, *Cavalleria rusticana* (with Maria Jeritza), *Tosca* (act 3 complete with Kjerstin Dellert), *Rigoletto*, and *Il trovatore* (with Gina Cigna)

by **Henry Fogel**

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Almost all performing artists exhibit differences between their studio recordings and their live performances (and, hopefully, also between different live performances). The degree of that difference can vary mightily from artist to artist. One tenor in whom this difference was very strongly pronounced was Jussi Björling. As fine as his studio recordings are, and some of them are extraordinary, the intensity and musical imagination he brought to live performances invariably increase compared with what we hear on his studio records. This remarkable compilation from Immortal Performances is essential listening for anyone who admires the great Swedish tenor. The three performances in this set celebrate Björling's final Met season. Sadly, 10 months later, at the age of 49, he would succumb to a heart attack.

The prize here is the *Faust*, a role that could have been written with a tenor like Björling in mind, but which he never got to record commercially. This is the only one of the three operas that originates from a Met broadcast, and thus the sound is much better than the others. The performance has been issued before on various

labels. The best of those is on Pristine (PACO064), and comparing it with the new version, I find the actual sound quality similar. Immortal Performances' is a bit clearer, while Pristine's has more ambience, which occasionally muddies detail.

However, one thing you get from Immortal Performances is a greater sense of occasion. Pristine fits the opera on two discs, and one way it achieves that is by cutting short the applause after "Salut! Demeure" and at other places. Since Björling did not commercially record *Faust*, we cannot make comparisons except for the big aria, which he did record. But using that as a guidepost, one notes that he holds the top note longer than he does in his studio recording of the aria. More importantly, throughout the opera we hear a degree of dynamic shading and coloristic imagination that is not always found on Björling's studio recordings. Those listeners who have in their minds the idea that Björling was an exquisitely tasteful singer but lacking the instinct for animal excitement or for specific characterization will find their prejudice challenged severely throughout this set. One example will suffice: In the final scene, when Faust encounters the imprisoned Marguerite, Björling vividly conveys his deep sorrow and sadness at the grief he has caused. He begins the passage in hushed tones that darken the normal brightness of his timbre.

In addition to Björling, the Swedish soprano Elizabeth Söderström is another tremendous asset to the performance. The two singers pay attention to details of articulation and inflection, singing with an unusual degree of specificity. The Garden Scene is not just beautiful music (which it always is) but a real awakening of love and passion. Söderström's bright soprano never turns the slightest bit harsh. That scene is begun by the Méphistophélès of Cesare Siepi in a lovely Invocation to Night, underlining the strength of this cast. Siepi is a dramatic presence as the Devil, but he also exhibits a *cantabile* line that is essential for this music. There is an elegance in Siepi's characterization that is stylistically appropriate to Gounod. In Robert Merrill, the performance may have the richest voice and most musically strong Valentin of any performance. Jean Morel conducts with a deep understanding of the style, but there are a few chaotic moments (he seems to lose control at the end of the second act, for instance). However, Morel's overall shaping of the score is very successful.

Turning to *Cavalleria rusticana*, we are confronted by some sonic challenges, but they can be lived with by listeners who have a tolerance for historical recordings. Björling made two studio recordings of Mascagni's one-act thriller. The 1953 effort with Zinka Milanov and Robert Merrill is conducted by Renato Cellini. The 1958 one features Renata Tebaldi and Ettore Bastianini, conducted by Alberto Erede. Both are fine but flawed as well. Milanov's singing is edgy until the big

duet with Turiddu, and Cellini's conducting is idiomatic but somewhat studio-bound. Björling's second recording should have been something special, but it really never gets off the ground, largely due to Erede's lumpish, bar-to-bar conducting. While Tebaldi hurls a terrifying curse at Turiddu at the end of the duet, prior to that she too ladylike.

Björling sings well and is convincing in both sets. However, the difference between his performances in the studio and on stage has rarely been demonstrated as dramatically as it is here at the Met in 1959. And in Giulietta Simionato he has a Santuzza equipped and willing to let loose too. I only wish Nino Verchi's conducting had fully equaled the fire produced by those two. It isn't bad (and surely far better than Erede's), but it doesn't add to the heat in the way someone like Mitropoulos might have.

The November 16, 1959 date of this performance is meaningful because it was Björling's first appearance at the Met after a two-season absence. Although Turiddu is the first voice heard in the opera, he isn't seen off-stage serenading during the Prelude. After that, a good bit of the action takes place before Turiddu's first stage entrance, which is for the duet with Santuzza. The Met audience was prepared to let Björling know how much he was welcomed back, and I for one am glad that Immortal Performances retained the entire ovation that greeted him; it is heartwarming and exciting to feel like a part of the event, even just hearing it. Verchi had to stop the introduction to the duet and restart it after the ovation subsided.

Many points of comparison between this performance and Björling's two studio recordings document the added inspiration he drew from the stage and the presence of an audience. In the duet he sounds at times almost unhinged. Turiddu's dramatic change of mood after the cocky Brindisi, when he seems to foretell his death and asks his mother to look after Santuzza, is a remarkably precise bit of vocal acting from Björling. In Simionato's case, the degree of difference from her studio recording is smaller than with Björling, because she had the ability to create intensity even in the sterile setting of a recording studio. Nonetheless, she surpasses herself here and gives what may well be, vocally and dramatically, one of the finest portrayals of Santuzza ever given. Rosalind Elias is a fine Lola, Walter Cassel an adequate Alfio. He sings the role effectively, but there is nothing distinctive or particularly interesting about the timbre of his voice.

Producer Richard Caniell has performed wonders with this restoration. The recording was made in the stage wings and is thus afflicted with all kinds of problems, including changing balances and perspective, and distortion at climaxes

due to the microphones or electronics in the system becoming overloaded. Caniell has replaced a few of the high notes sung by both together in the Turiddu-Santuzza duet where the overload rendered them unlistenable, using other Björling recordings. Each of these replacements is very brief, and Caniell is up front about them in his recording notes. I have had this performance on HRE LPs and on those could rarely bring myself to listen to it. Now, for the first time, I can actually enjoy it from start to finish.

Björling made a studio *Tosca* recording in 1957, which comes off quite well when heard in Pristine's transfer (the RCA versions I have heard all add to the steeliness in Milanov's voice in the title role). But here again Björling onstage significantly surpasses Björling in the studio. In all three operas you should not make the mistake of thinking that the difference only shows itself in moments of heated passion. There are innumerable details where the tenor milks a phrase just a bit more or reflects tenderness toward Tosca with a little more urgency. In such moments Björling displays a level of specificity in his inflection that is quite special. In more urgent moments he also seems freer, more willing to let loose (at "Vittoria, vittoria!" for example.) The degrees of shading and subtle rubato he employs in "E lucevan le stelle" are beyond those found in the RCA studio *Tosca* and even beyond some of Björling's recital performances. He holds on to the notes at "mi cadea fra le braccia," as if holding on to the memory of Tosca in his arms. The tenderness of the diminuendo at "discoglea" is singularly beautiful. And then at "e muoio disperato," he virtually explodes, then repeats the line with a sense of defeat, only to burst forth with an extraordinarily powerful climax at "E non ho amato" before again descending into sadness on the final "tanto la vita." The whole aria is a lesson in how to give specific meaning through dynamic shading and the application of color to the voice.

In Mary Curtis-Verna Björling has a more qualified partner than might have been expected. Curtis-Verna was an American soprano (born Mary Curtis, she married her Italian voice teacher Ettore Verna) who made quite a name for herself in the 1950s and 1960s by being willing and able to jump in to replace an ailing singer who cancelled at the last minute. She had a lovely *spinto* soprano voice, evenly produced from bottom to top of her range, and a very natural way with a phrase. Curtis-Verna didn't bring either a unique personality or voice to the stage, but she was a very fine singer. In today's world, when she wouldn't be in competition with the likes of Milanov, Albanese, and Tebaldi, she would probably have a bigger career on records. I heard her many times at the Met during her career, but I must say that my reaction to hearing this performance was "Oh my, she really was quite good." The high C in the last act at "io quella lama" is spectacular—perfectly in tune and with plenty of ring to the sound. (One aside: I have seen Curtis-Verna's

name spelled with and without the hyphen. The logical way to learn which is correct is to google the artist's autographs, and she always used the hyphen.)

Cornell MacNeil is a powerful Scarpia, and Dimitri Mitropoulos's conducting is really wonderful, encompassing all of the emotions in the score, from tenderness to tension, pain, and fury. The recorded sound is quite good; Caniell describes it as a "Met house-line recording." The one problem is the prompter, who must have been negotiating for a spot on the cast list. He is both too loud and badly timed. Caniell has removed the prompter 196 times through careful editing, which results in some musical phrases being shortened by a minuscule amount. I must say I didn't hear any of those excisions.

The three operas in this set represent the entirety of Björling's repertoire in his final Met season. It is shocking to think about how wonderful the voice sounds here, knowing that in less than a year he would be dead.

As is always the case with Immortal Performances, there is a great deal of bonus material and two wonderful booklets. Some of Milton Cross's announcements are included in the *Faust*, which you can skip if you wish. Among the most interesting extracts in the bonus material are arias from *La bohème* and *Rigoletto*, taken from Björling's first U.S. concert, a General Motors Concert radio broadcast from November 28, 1937. He shared that broadcast with Maria Jeritza, and the one duet they perform together is hair-raising. It is an abbreviated version of the Turiddu-Santuzza duet, beginning with "Bada, Santuzza." (A flute takes the part of Lola.) This performance is completely alive, so much so that you willingly overlook that one or two of Jeritza's top notes are a shade flat. A brilliant "Celeste Aida" from another General Motors Concert a month later is also very beautiful, and it is coupled with an exquisite performance of a Björling favorite, Ragnar Althén's "Land, du välsignade."

Excerpts from Swedish performances of *Tosca* (1959, with Kjerstin Dellert in the title role) and *La bohème* (with Ethel Mårtensson as Mimì) are very fine too, even with Björling singing in Italian and the others in Swedish. I should also mention the complete act III, scene 2 from *Trovatore* featuring an absolutely ringing high C at the end of "Di quella pira," and a genuine trill in "Ah! Si ben mio." If you thought of Björling in terms of artistry and finesse to the exclusion of animal excitement, this will provide a corrective! The February 1959 Stockholm *Tosca*, of which we get the entire third act, was the tenor's final *Tosca* in Sweden. As with the Swedish *La bohème*, the rest of the cast is singing in Swedish.

A direct comparison with his Met performance from nine months later reveals many differences of detail. Björling lingers over certain phrases just a bit more in

Stockholm and holds on to the climactic note of “E lucevan le stelle” just a tad longer. Finally, his seductive caressing of the line at “O dolci mani” will melt you. The Tosca, Kjerstin Dellert, does not offer the vocal richness of Curtis-Verna. All these excerpts demonstrate that the tenor never just phoned it in. Each time he sang a role, there were some differences, some new ideas he brought to the music. Also interesting, to those for whom this matters, is that in his earlier concert performances of “Salut! Demeure” Björling sings it in its original key, with a high C. In the 1959 Met performance it is a half-step down.

The booklets include articles by Harald Henrysson and the tenor’s son Lars, extensive recording notes by Caniell, plot summaries, artists’ biographies, and wonderful photographs. Henrysson is the former curator of Sweden’s Jussi Björling Museum and the author of the Björling phonography. The details of Björling’s history in America make for fascinating reading, and Henrysson’s notes offer exemplary illumination on the recordings included in this set. Lars Björling’s “personal reminiscence” is both educational and moving. His recollections of being backstage with his father and artists like Leonard Warren (in 1945), and his personal reminiscing of the tenor’s final Met season, are just the kind of things we opera lovers eat up. Immortal Performances is selling the six-CD set for the price of five. Frankly, it would be recommended enthusiastically were it six CDs for the price of seven or eight! No matter how well you think you know Jussi Björling’s art, you will learn new things and deepen your love for his unique talent through this set.

Five stars: A superb package of live Jussi Björling material

Review by **Ken Meltzer**

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A glorious six-disc (priced as five) set from Immortal Performances features complete recordings of three Met performances by the brilliant Swedish tenor Jussi Björling, all from his final season at the Met. In a March 1958 interview with J. S. Harrison of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Björling observed: “my greatest response from the public has always been at the Metropolitan.” Recordings documenting several Björling performances at New York’s Metropolitan Opera are testament to the special relationship between Björling and his Met audiences.

Perhaps the rarity of these occasions intensified the emotional bond. Björling made his Met debut on November 24, 1938 as Rodolfo in Puccini's *La bohème*. His farewell took place on December 22, 1959, as Turiddu in Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. But Björling gave just 90 performances in the Metropolitan Opera House (plus 30 tour appearances) during his 21-year career. This was the product of numerous factors, including the challenges of international travel, the onslaught of World War II, Björling's numerous health issues, and fee disputes with Met GM Rudolf Bing. In any event, when Björling returned to the Met in November of 1959 after a more than two-year hiatus, everyone sensed how special the occasion was. Shortly after the series of performances, Björling confided to his son Lars (who provides a beautiful and touching essay in an IP booklet accompanying the set): "I feel that was the last time I will sing at the Met." It was not like a prediction; rather, it just slipped out of his mouth, like he was thinking aloud." On September 9, 1960, Jussi Björling died of the heart condition that had long plagued him, at the age of 49. All told, Björling sang eight Met performances between November 16 and December 22, 1959; trios of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* and Puccini's *Tosca*, and two of Gounod's *Faust*. The new IP Björling six-disc tribute includes the three performances that were recorded. The December 19, 1959 *Faust* was a nationwide Saturday afternoon broadcast. The November 16, 1959 *Cav* and November 21, 1959 *Tosca* were preserved courtesy of in-house microphones. Jussi Björling sang beautifully right to the end of his life. The color of his tenor voice darkened over time, but still maintained its silvery beauty. The high notes, delivered in later years with a more effortful production, continued to ring out with impressive security and authority. Even if these Met performances "merely" captured Björling in a vocal estate similar to his commercial recordings of the period, their historic importance would command interest. But as I've commented in *Fanfare* on previous occasions, while Jussi Björling was a sterling artist in the recording studio, he was a different performer when interacting with a live audience. While it might be credible to find Björling a somewhat reserved interpreter in his studio recordings (I don't), he was a fiercely committed onstage performer, giving unstintingly of himself both vocally and emotionally. And to my ears, that added intensity is only further magnified in these extraordinary Met farewell performances.

The set opens with Björling's 1959 Met return performance on November 16, 1959. Björling made two excellent studio recordings of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1953 RCA: Zinka Milanov, Robert Merrill, Renato Cellini, conductor; 1957 Decca: Renata Tebaldi, Ettore Bastianini, Alberto Erede, conductor). Both find Björling surrounded by first-rate colleagues and in excellent voice, offering a beautifully sung and convincing portrait of Turiddu. But in the 1959 Met

performance, Björling sings with a vocal and dramatic intensity that puts the two commercial recordings in the shade. Turiddu's offstage serenade to Lola is sung with gorgeous tone, impressive breath control, and the unrestrained fervor of a man in the throes of erotic love. If anything, Turiddu's first onstage appearance, the confrontation with Santuzza, is even more electrifying. Björling is greeted by the Met audience with an extended and ecstatic ovation that brings the performance to a halt (Björling, perhaps temporarily overwhelmed by the ovation, sings "A Francofonte! A Francofonte!," instead of the correct sequence, "Che vuol tu dire? A Francofonte!" Richard Caniell addresses this error by retaining the first "A Francofonte!," and eliminating the second.) In the duet, Björling's Turiddu battles his spurned lover, Santuzza, sung by the great Italian mezzo Giulietta Simionato. Here, Björling and Simionato deliver one of the greatest and most scintillating versions of this scene ever recorded. It's a blend of vocal glory, technical assurance, and interpretive abandon rarely achieved even by the greatest artists. Turiddu's Brindisi, his confrontation with Alfio, and the Farewell to Mama Lucia all find Björling again in sterling voice, and eclipsing the dramatic impact of his studio recordings. It's fascinating (and most welcome) to hear a singer sometimes described by critics as "taciturn" invoking the Italian tradition of verismo tenors, but without ever crossing over into bombast. Giulietta Simionato creates a believable and wholly sympathetic character in Santuzza. Simionato was a fearless singer, and she unreservedly pours her rich, Italianate voice into Mascagni's *verismo* masterpiece. Baritone Walter Cassel, a valuable singer at the Met for many years, is a first-rate Alfio, sporting a rich, powerful, and gruff vocal and dramatic persona entirely appropriate for the role of the brander who kills Turiddu. Two other Met stalwarts, Thelma Votipka and Rosalind Elias, are both fine in the lesser but still dramatically important roles of Turiddu's Mama Lucia and Lola. Conductor Nino Verchi leads the performance with a sure hand, giving Mascagni's rich and colorful score its full due, but never at the expense of the opera's overall momentum. Richard Caniell has seamlessly replaced a few seconds of mike overload/distortion with apposite excerpts from other Björling performances.

As in the case of *Cavalleria rusticana*, Jussi Björling's role in *Tosca* (Cavaradossi) is documented in a fine studio recording, made for RCA in 1957, and co-starring Zinka Milanov and Leonard Warren, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting. And as in the case of *Cavalleria*, the November 21, 1959 Met performance displays Björling not only in superb voice, but singing with an intensity and abandon not found in the RCA studio production. Björling's *Tosca* on this occasion is the American lirico-spinto soprano, Mary Curtis-Verna. Perhaps Curtis-Verna lacked the individuality and star power of such singers as Licia Albanese, Milanov, Renata

Tebaldi, and Leontyne Price. But Curtis-Verna was an artist capable of singing a wide variety of roles in a manner worthy of the finest international stages. In the 1959 performance, Curtis-Verna hits all the marks, with a voice that lacks neither for power, attractiveness, or security in the upper register. Perhaps this is not an especially individual interpretation, but Curtis-Verna still proves a worthy partner to Björling's fervent and gorgeously sung Cavaradossi. At the time of this performance, Cornell MacNeil possessed one of the world's most beautiful and imposing baritone voices. In later years, MacNeil studied the role of Scarpia with Tito Gobbi, and his interpretation assumed a level of subtlety not evident in the 1959 performance. It is true that MacNeil's Scarpia on that occasion is of a generalized sort. But what a voice! The opportunity to hear MacNeil in the act I *Te Deum*, or in any of the great moments of act II is something every opera lover should have the opportunity to savor. The conductor is Dimitri Mitropoulos, a master of many scores, including Puccini's *Tosca* (his January 7, 1956 Met broadcast with Tebaldi, Richard Tucker, and Warren is a must). Mitropoulos's vision of *Tosca* has a power, sweep, and intensity that rivals Victor de Sabata in the iconic 1953 EMI recording with Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano, and Gobbi. How wonderful it is to hear a conductor who both revels in Puccini's masterful orchestral score and understands at every turn how to pace the work to allow the singers to shine their brightest.

There is another presence in the 1959 *Tosca* I must acknowledge. The placement of the microphone recording the performance vividly captures the work of the prompter assigned with the task of cueing the singers. Richard Caniell found the prompter's work distracting in the extreme: "I removed the prompter in substantial vocal lines and spaces. This thereby shortened the phrase. In no instance did I do this with Björling and only once with Curtis-Verna. In Act I, I removed the prompter 81 times, in Act II 90 times and Act III 25 times for a total of 196 excisions. Thus the number of occasions that you hear him are instances when he cannot be removed without musical damage." My preference would have been to leave the prompter's contribution as is. While each of the prompter's cues takes but a fraction of a second, they occur within the flow of the music. Removing them alters the pace and momentum as Mitropoulos intended, albeit microscopically. However, if you are among those who like your prompters to be neither seen nor heard, you will be most grateful for Richard Caniell's expert work here.

Unlike *Cav* and *Tosca*, Björling never made a commercial recording of Charles Gounod's *Faust*. In addition to the December 19, 1959 broadcast included on this set, Björling sang in a December 23, 1950 broadcast co-starring Dorothy Kirsten, Anne Bollinger, Frank Guarrera, and Cesare Siepi. Björling is in more youthful voice in the 1950 broadcast. Nevertheless, I prefer the 1959 performance. It is in

better sound, quite excellent in fact. And the overall casting is stronger. Björling's opening "Rien!" (Naught!) is delivered in a tired and throaty manner. Is this a deliberate portrait of the aged and weary Faust, or merely a vocal hiccup? In any event, Björling is in sterling voice from that point forward. It's impressive to hear Björling make the transition from the verismo characters of Turiddu and Cavaradossi to a role that demands the poetry and elegance essential to the art of 19th-century French opera. Björling achieves this transition in seamless form, with beautiful phrasing and French diction, while maintaining the ability to summon *verismo* power and passion when needed, as in Faust's invocation of Satan in act I. Unlike in the 1950 Met performance, Björling transposes a portion of the great aria "Salut! demeure chaste e pure." An ingenious transposition in the aria's "B" section at "Tu fis avec amour" takes the music down a half step. The climactic note in the phrase "Où se divine la présence" is thus a B (rather than the written C), and a glorious one at that, inspiring a prolonged ovation. Throughout, Björling is sensitive to the music and text, once again creating a compelling and convincing portrayal.

Marguerite is Björling's fellow Swedish artist soprano Elisabeth Söderström. A superb singing actress, Söderström here is in glorious voice, a rich and beautiful lyric soprano that easily encompasses the role, fine trills in "Ah! je ris de me voir" included. And Söderström brings a Lieder singer's sensitivity to the music and text, with every phrase capturing the myriad of emotions Marguerite experiences throughout the opera. I think this is one of the finest Marguerites preserved on recordings. As in the 1950 broadcast, Méphistophélès is sung by Cesare Siepi. The Italian basso lavishes his rich, gorgeous voice and charismatic personality onto the role of the Devil. In the early portions of the opera, Siepi emphasizes Mephisto's playful, ironic side and seductive qualities, a reminder of what a singular Don Giovanni this great artist was. And so, when the more dangerous and fearsome Devil emerges from the Church Scene to the opera's conclusion, the contrast is all the more stunning. How wonderful it is to have a baritone of Robert Merrill's stature perform the relatively brief but crucial role of Marguerite's brother, Valentin. Merrill sails through "Avant de quitter" and "C'est une croix" with a vocal splendor few can match. And Merrill also proves a convincing actor in Valentin's curse of Marguerite. Rounding out the cast of principals is the wonderful lyric mezzo Mildred Miller in the trouser role of Siebel. When I interviewed Miller for my Pittsburgh opera radio show, she told me how impressed she was that before the start of act II of this broadcast, Björling took time backstage to offer her support and encouragement before she sang the aria "Faites-lui mes aveux." Miller was especially touched because she knew that Björling had his own demanding aria ("Salut! demeure") coming up after hers. Miller sings her

aria, and all the rest of Siebel's music, with a beautiful voice, marvelous French diction, and irrepressible youthful energy; a wonderful portrait of a lovesick boy. Veteran Thelma Votipka contributes a sharply characterized Marthe. I wish I could be more enthusiastic about Jean Morel's conducting. The tempos tend to be on the slower side, and there are moments of precarious coordination between pit and stage, as in the opening of the act II *Kermesse*. But Morel certainly doesn't get in the way of his marvelous cast. The Walpurgisnacht Scene, often cut in performance, is a welcome addition.

MYTO previously issued the 1959 Met *Faust* in very fine sound, but without Milton Cross's broadcast commentary. The IP release restores Cross's contribution, enhancing the experience of this historic performance. MYTO also released Björling's portions of the 1959 *Cav* and *Tosca* (as appendices to, respectively, a 1949 Met *Manon Lescaut* and 1948 *La bohème*). Again, the recorded sound is comparable to the IP; in these two cases, not the equal of contemporaneous broadcasts, but quite listenable. Still, as I've tried to make clear, both the *Cav* and *Tosca* are performances worth hearing in their entirety. The complete Met *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Tosca*, and *Faust* would alone merit purchase of the Immortal Performances Björling tribute. But in addition, IP gives us a series of bonus tracks documenting Björling at the height of his powers. Following the complete Met *Cav* is an excerpt from a September 24, 1944 Royal Opera Stockholm performance of *Faust*. A portion of Faust's aria, "Salut! Demeure," gorgeously sung by Björling, is completed by his equally fine 1951 RCA studio recording. Caniell does a masterful job of matching the sonics of the two sources.

As an appendix to the Met 1959 *Tosca*, IP opens with a lovely spoken greeting by Björling, anticipating his American debut as an adult (Björling sang in the U.S. as a child). Björling's first U.S. concert, a November 28, 1937 General Motors broadcast announced by Milton Cross, features Björling in excerpts from *La bohème*, *Rigoletto*, and *Cavalleria*, the latter with soprano Maria Jeritza. Next is Björling's fifth U.S. concert, on December 19, 1937, again courtesy of General Motors, with commentary by Cross. Here, Björling sings Verdi's "Celeste Aida" and Althén's *Land, du välsignade*. From Hilversum, Holland, on June 8, 1939, Björling performs "Salut! demeure" (in Swedish) and "Che gelida manina" from *La bohème*. The selections conclude with Manrico's great scene from *Il trovatore*, part of a complete Covent Garden performance on May 12, 1939. All of the excerpts, reproduced in excellent sound, find Björling in his absolute prime and in sublime voice. The Hilversum concert (available complete from Bluebell) and Covent Garden *Il trovatore* (complete, Bel Canto Society) are two of my absolute favorite Björling recordings. It would be hard to imagine anyone singing with a more glorious synthesis of vocal beauty, poetry, and electrifying freedom in the

upper register (note, for example, the soft attack and crescendo on the high “C” in “Salut! Demeure,” or the trills and blazing high Cs in *Trovatore*).

After the complete Met *Faust*, the IP Björling tribute concludes with the complete act III from a February 12, 1959 Royal Opera Stockholm *Tosca* and excerpts from acts III and IV from a September 30, 1957 Malmö Municipal Theater *La bohème*. In each case, Björling sings in the original Italian, while the remainder of the cast performs in Swedish translation. The Stockholm *Tosca* documents Björling in even finer voice than the Met performance of the same year, with the tenor giving one of his most intense and voluptuously sung versions of “E lucevan le stelle.” Those familiar with Björling’s great 1956 EMI studio *Bohème*, conducted by Thomas Beecham, will recognize the heightened intensity and immediacy of the tenor’s Stockholm Rodolfo. Once again, the sound on these excerpts is excellent.

As always, the documentation accompanying this IP release is first-rate. Björling scholar Harald Henrysson provides a lengthy, informative, and engaging essay on Björling and the featured recordings. Lars Björling’s personal reminiscence of his father’s last season at the Met is a treasure trove of insights, anecdotes, and touching remembrances. Complete plot synopses, and Richard Caniell’s always engaging and thought-provoking Recording Notes, join photos and artist bios. Caniell concludes his observations with the following: “For me, [Jussi Björling] was the greatest of his genre and this collection of his final performances is the best honor I can deliver to his memory.” By doing so, Richard Caniell and Immortal Performances have gifted us with a remarkable treasure trove of recordings that I think are essential to an understanding and appreciation of a tenor for the ages. Magnificent.

5 Stars: Jussi Björling’s final Met season, plus other treasures