

ALC 2001 Puccini: Manon Lescaut / Björling / Albanese/ Perlea (2CD)
 ALC 2002 Handel: Judas Maccabeus/ Harper/ Watts/ Shirley-Quirk/ ECO /Somary (2CD)
 ALC 2003 Handel: Semele / Armstrong / Watts / Diaz / Tear / Palmer/ ECO / Somary (2CD)
 ALC 2004 Verdi; Il Trovatore / Callas / di Stefano/ Gobbi / etc / Vienna / Karajan (2CD)
 ALC 2005 Handel: Theodora / Harper / Forrester etc /Somary (2CD)
 ALC 2006 Donizetti: Lucia di Lammermoor / Callas/ Di Stefano / Berlin / Karajan (2CD)
 ALC 2007 Tchaikovsky: Eugene Onegin / Nesterenko / Atlantov / Milashkina/ Bolshoi (2CD)
 ALC 2008 Peter Grimes/ Pears / Watson / Brannigan / Covent Garden / Britten (2CD)
 ALC 2009 Verdi: Aida / Tebaldi / Bergonzi / MacNeil / Simionato/ KARAJAN (2CD)
 ALC 2501 Le Nozze di Figaro /(3cd for 2) / Gueden/ Della Casa/ VPO/ Erich Kleiber (3CD)
 ALN 1906 La Vie en Rose: Hits of Edith Piaf including also Milord, La Foule etc
 ALN 1912 Dylan Thomas reads his own Poetry: Child's Christmas, Fern Hill etc
 ALN 1913 Ne Me Quitte Pas / (2 hit albums of) Jacques Brel
 ALN 1914 Our Love is Here to Stay (classic Gershwin Songbook) Ella Fitzgerald

JUSSI BJÖRLING: PEARL FISHER'S DUET (Very Best of)

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|---|------|
| 1. Au fond du temple saint (Les Pêcheurs des Perles:Bizet)(1951)**with Robert Merrill | 4.36 |
| 2. Recondita armonia (Tosca:Puccini)(1957) *** | 3.03 |
| 3. E lucevan le stelle (Tosca: Puccini)(1957) *** | 3.42 |
| 4. Non piangere Liù (Turandot:Puccini/compl.Alfano)(1960)*** | 2.54 |
| 5. Nessun dorma (Turandot:Puccini/compl.Alfano)(1960)*** | 3.27 |
| 6. La fleur que tu m'avais jetée (Carmen: Bizet) (1938) * | 3.52 |
| 7. Je suis seul...Ah! Fuyez, douce image (Manon:Massenet) (1945)* | 4.31 |
| 8. Ah! lève-toi soleil (Roméo et Juliette:Gounod) (1946)-* | 3.21 |
| 9. Mi batte il cor...O Paradiso! (L'Africana:Meyerbeer) (1937) * | 3.14 |
| 10. Se quel guerrier...Celeste Aida (Aida:Verdi) (1951)** | 4.41 |
| 11. Solenne in quest'ora (La Forza del Destino:Verdi)(1951)**with Robert Merrill | 4.10 |
| 12. Sì, pel ciel (Otello:Verdi) with Robert Merrill (1951)** | 4.26 |
| 13. Cielo e mar (La Gioconda: Ponchielli) (1951)** | 4.25 |
| 14. Donna non vidi mai (Manon Lescaut:Puccini) (1948)* | 2.26 |
| 15. Che gelida manina (La Bohème:Puccini) (1956) ** | 5.09 |
| 16. O Mimi, tu più non torni (La Bohème:Puccini) (1956) ** with Robert Merrill | 3.04 |
| 17. Mamma, quel vino è generoso (Cavalleria Rusticana:Mascagni) -(1944) * | 3.49 |
| 18. Recitar!...Vesti la giubba (I Pagliacci:Leoncavallo) - (1944) * | 3.41 |
| 19. Mattinata (1944) (Leoncavallo) * | 2.17 |
| 20. Ideale (Tosti:Errico) (1937)* | 3.21 |
| 21. Skogen sover (Alfvén:Thiel) with Harry Ebert (Piano) (1939) | 2.31 |

*Orchestras incl Royal Opera Stockholm conducted by Nils Grevilius (6-9, 14, 17-20)

**RCA Victor Orchestra, Renato Cellini (1,10-13) conducted Thomas Beecham (15, 16)

***Orchestra of the Rome Opera / Erich Leinsdorf 1957 (2-3) 1960 (4, 5)

Produced by Tony Watts, May 2010.

Jussi Björling

Pearl Fishers' Duet (Very Best of)

Puccini Arias from
Tosca, Manon Lescaut
La Bohème, Turandot

Arias by Bizet, Verdi
Gounod & more

Swedish Folksong
Neopolitan Song



Jussi Björling

Every lover of fine singing has their favourite artists, just as each generation proclaims the preceding generation of singers as being of a Golden Age. When I began collecting recordings of Italian opera in the 1960s I was constantly being told that however fine Leontyne Price sang, she could never attain the heights of Tebaldi or Callas, that however much I enjoyed the carressing and elegant tones of Bergonzi, he could never match the young di Stefano. The one 'hero' that straddled both periods was the remarkable Tito Gobbi. Finally I began to buy recordings of earlier singers and among the first were two LPs of the Swedish tenor Jussi Björling. My reasons for choosing him were twofold: firstly, I kept hearing his recording on the BBC Third Programme and 'Desert Island Discs' of the famous *Pearl Fishers* duet with another of my favourite baritones Robert Merrill and, secondly, my uncle played me his treasured recording of *Il Trovatore* (Björling with Milanov, Barbieri and Warren). Once I heard the top C at the end of 'Di quella pira' I was hooked.

I immediately purchased two of Björling's LPs: a collection of arias recorded early in his career and the famous set of duets with Merrill which came with mouth-watering excerpts from his complete opera recordings. Since then of course my Björling collection has grown, but these two LPs (ALP 1620 and RB 6585) still remain among the most frequently played in my collection. In the case of Merrill, I was present at his London concert in 1975 and remember being astonished how unchanged his instrument was by then from the early recordings made with Toscanini and these duets with Björling.

What is it that remains so unique about the Björling instrument? The Nordic air seemed to provide the bright metallic sound, thrilling in its intensity and powerful enough to cut through the heaviest orchestrations. But there was also a velvety, lyrical, *bel canto* quality that caressed the listener; this quality being especially evident in his recordings of French opera and in the many recordings of songs. A perfect balance of the two can be heard in the superlative recording of Massenet's 'Ah! Fuyez, douce image' from *Manon*. Throughout its entire range there was a miraculous evenness of production with no apparent breaks between the registers. As an actor he was somewhat wooden and he had a notorious dislike for rehearsal. However he remained impeccably faithful to the composer's intentions, and once

he had achieved international fame, paired down his substantial repertoire to around a dozen roles which centred around Gounod's Faust and Romeo, Verdi's Manrico, Riccardo *Ballo in Maschera*, Don Carlos and Puccini's Cavaradossi, Rodolfo and Des Grieux.

He also became a noted tenor soloist in Verdi's *Requiem* and gave a substantial number of recitals featuring German Lieder and Italian and Swedish songs. He also chose to sing items at these concerts not otherwise included in his stage repertoire eg Lenski's aria from *Yevgeny Onegin* and Lohengrin's Narration.

Jussi Björling was born on 2 February 1911 in Stora Tuna in central Sweden. His father, Karl David, was a tenor as were his two elder brothers Olle and Gosta. Karl David Björling had actually performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Jussi sang with his father and brothers both as a treble and as a tenor and the quartet achieved some fame both locally and abroad. Once Jussi's talent became evident to all he was sent to the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm where his teachers included John Forsell and Joseph Hislop. He made his debut as the Lamplighter in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, swiftly following this in 1930 with Mozart's Don Ottavio (at the age of nineteen!). Over the next half dozen years he performed all over Europe, including a magnificent Radames in Vienna under Victor de Sabata, but also made a number of dance band recordings.

His debut at the Metropolitan Opera in 1938 as Rodolfo has become the stuff of legends and he returned there almost every season for the next twenty years (the rift came in 1958 with a row over pay). New Yorkers adored him, and on one occasion following a performance of *Un Ballo In Maschera* they refused to let him leave the stage until he had taken sixteen curtain calls! Luckily many of his performances in the USA were recorded 'unofficially' and have been available for many years – the pride of place going to his *Romeo et Juliette* alongside the delectable Bidu Sayao. For those unwilling to sample the 'live' recordings there are also a number of excellent opera sets including the above-mentioned *Il Trovatore*, *Aida*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca*, *La Bohème* and *Turandot*. Although these form only a small percentage of his repertoire (of about fifty operas) one can sample his extensive range through the many discs of arias and songs.

Occasionally he recorded music that he steered clear of on stage – an example being the stirring finale to the second act of *Otello*, one of the famous records made with Robert Merrill. He had planned to take on this giant among roles but sadly death overtook him prematurely in 1960 at the age of only 49. Sadly performances in Britain were rare: he took the role of Manrico at Covent Garden in 1939 but from then until the year of his death only sang in this country in concert.

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