



**Jussi
BJÖRLING**

Collection, Vol. 4

**Opera Arias and Duets
1945-1951**

Les pêcheurs de perles

Otello

La bohème

La forza del destino

Don Carlo

L'elisir d'amore

Manon

Jussi Björling: Collection, Vol. 4 Opera Arias and Duets (1945-1951)

Jussi Björling was born in February 1911 (on the 5th according to the midwife's register, though he celebrated his birthday on the 2nd in accordance with the church register). His birthplace was near the centre of what is today the city of Borlänge in Sweden's province of Dalarna. Stora Tuna, often given as his birthplace, was the name of the parish where the family was then living and from which Borlänge had some years earlier been broken out as a separate municipality; today Stora Tuna is part of Borlänge. Jussi's father David was also a tenor and singing teacher, who taught his three oldest boys Olle, Jussi and Gösta to sing from their earliest childhood. He had them perform in public before Jussi was five, and as the Björling Quartet they toured extensively in Sweden, and 1919-21 also in the United States. Jussi's mother Ester had already died in 1917, soon after having given birth to a fourth son. Not long after David Björling's death in 1926, the group, which for some time also included the fourth brother Karl, disbanded and Jussi entered the Stockholm Conservatory in 1928. Here, and at the Opera School, his teacher was the famous baritone John Forsell, also manager of the Royal Opera.

In 1930, at the age of nineteen, Jussi Björling made his official début at the Royal Opera in Stockholm as Don Ottavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and in the next few years he sang a wide repertoire of rôles there. His first major breakthrough came at a recital at Tivoli in Copenhagen in the summer of 1931. As an opera singer, he made his first solo tours outside Sweden in 1936 and 1937, still singing his rôles in Swedish. He then appeared in Czechoslovakia and Germany but primarily at the Vienna Opera and was everywhere greeted with great acclaim. In the autumn of 1937 he gave his first London recital en route to the United States, where his schedule included three General Motors radio concerts from Carnegie Hall and opera performances in Chicago in *Rigoletto* and *La*

bohème. Jussi Björling's successful Metropolitan début came in November 1938 as Rodolfo.

In 1939, Jussi Björling made his Covent Garden début in *Il trovatore* and in 1940 he opened the Metropolitan season for the first time in the new production of *Un ballo in maschera* where he appeared as King Gustaf III of Sweden. During the later war years, however, he mainly remained in his native country, although his Italian opera début took place in 1943 in *Il trovatore* in Florence.

In the autumn of 1945, Jussi Björling returned to the United States for an eight-month tour and during the rest of his life he sang extensively there, as an opera artist with the Metropolitan, San Francisco and Chicago operas but still more in recital and concert, often appearing on radio and television in programmes like *Ford Sunday Evening Hour*, *Voice of Firestone* and *Standard Hour*. Björling always returned to Sweden and spent the summers with his wife Annalisa and their three children at Siarö in the Stockholm archipelago. He also sang often in opera and concert in Sweden and the other Nordic countries, where he enjoyed an enormous popularity. He appeared twice in Milan with the La Scala company (*Rigoletto* in 1946, *Un ballo in maschera* in 1951) but returned to Covent Garden only in 1960 (*La bohème*), though he was heard in recital many times in Britain in the 1950s. In 1954 he made an extensive concert tour to South Africa.

Jussi Björling's complete opera and operetta repertoire comprised 55 rôles, but most of them were, like Almaviva in *Barbiere* or Arnold in *Guillaume Tell*, abandoned on his road to world fame. In fact his total opera repertoire after the war consisted of twelve rôles. He continued to sing ten operas which he had learned in Stockholm up to 1936: *Aida*, *Il trovatore*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Rigoletto*, *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in the Italian repertoire and Gounod's *Faust* and *Roméo et Juliette*

in the French. In later years, he added Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* and Verdi's *Don Carlo*, the latter in the famous production which in 1950 opened the Met's season and Rudolph Bing's era as general manager. Jussi Björling was also an excellent interpreter of lieder and other art songs, and on his concert programmes, songs of mainly German and Scandinavian origin were featured prominently and appreciated along with the opera arias.

During his last years, Jussi Björling suffered from heart disease. His life was prematurely ended by a heart attack in his sleep at his beloved Sjäro on 9th September 1960. It is now more evident than ever that the world then lost one of its most outstanding artists; for instance, in several polls in different countries he has been selected as the greatest tenor or even the greatest singer of the last century.

Fortunately Jussi Björling left behind a vast recorded output through which we are able to experience his artistry. He began to record very early, even if one disregards six childhood recordings he and his brothers made in 1920 during their American tour. His first published tenor recordings were made in December 1929 in Stockholm for Skandinaviska Grammophon AB, the Swedish HMV representative. These recordings were, like almost all recordings in the first three volumes of the present series and the first nine on this CD, conducted by Nils Grevillius (1893-1970). Grevillius, appointed Royal Court Conductor in 1930, became more closely associated with Jussi Björling than any other conductor, in opera and concert as well as in the recording studio.

In September 1945, after a hiatus of one year, Jussi Björling resumed recording with Grevillius in Stockholm, a few weeks before his return to the United States. Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* was one of his most popular operas in Stockholm, and Roméo's cavatina in Swedish had been his very first opera recording. It seems natural that he now recorded the cavatina in the original language, since he would the next year add the rôle to his repertoire in America. Massenet's *Manon* did not belong to Björling's performance repertoire, but the aria where Des Grieux, having entered the priesthood

after being abandoned by his beloved, tries in vain to free himself from her memory, *Ah! fuyez, douce image*, was often performed by him in concert. One of the very few arias by pre-Verdi composers in Björling's concert repertoire was *Una furtiva lagrima* from Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, where the peasant hero Nemorino sings about the tear in his beloved's eye that confirms her love for him. At the very beginning of his career, Jussi Björling had sung the rôle on stage in Stockholm.

It was more than two years, until November 1947, before Björling and Grevillius made their next recordings. The only opera aria recorded then was *Federico's Lament* from *L'arlesiana* by Francesco Cilea, an opera based on the same drama for which Bizet had written music which is better known today, *L'arlésienne*. Federico laments his unhappy love and complains that he is unable to find oblivion in sleep. Two more Italian arias were recorded in September 1948. In *Donna non vidi mai* from Puccini's breakthrough opera *Manon Lescaut*, Björling conveyed Des Grieux' passionate account of how he was enchanted by Manon's beauty at their first meeting. In 1949 Des Grieux became one of the two rôles which Jussi Björling performed for the first time outside Sweden (in San Francisco); Don Carlo would be the other. From the same 1948 session comes Turiddu's sicilianiana *O Lola* from Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*. Björling sang it then, unlike most tenors, in a standard Italian version, but would later use Sicilian dialect in his two complete recordings of the opera. *Jocelyn*, an opera by the French composer Benjamin Godard, is remembered today through the beautiful *Berceuse* (lullaby). Jussi Björling had performed the aria in English on American radio before he recorded it in 1949, again using the translated version.

In early 1949 Jussi Björling signed a two-year contract with the American company RCA Victor, which would be important for his future recording career. After that, most of his recordings were made outside Sweden. He was now able to take advantage of the new tape recording techniques as well as the new recording media, 45 and 33 rpm discs, though most of

his recordings still remained available on 78s for some years. RCA Victor cooperated with HMV in Europe; Björling's earlier HMV recordings had been issued in the United States by Victor, and until the mid-1950s his new American recordings were issued in Europe by HMV.

Under the new contract Jussi Björling began to make new versions for RCA Victor of arias which he had recorded in the 1930s and 1940s. The first examples here are Don José's *Flower Song* from Bizet's *Carmen* and Turiddu's farewell to his mother in the finale of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*, both recorded in the autumn of 1950 in Stockholm with Grevillius. These arias have not previously been released on CD.

In the winter of 1950–51, Jussi Björling made his first opera recordings in New York (in 1940, he had recorded songs with piano accompaniment there). The RCA Victor conductor was Renato Cellini (1912-1967), an Italian active at the Met under whose baton Björling would in the next years make several recordings, including three complete operas. These American recordings began with five classic tenor-baritone duets with the six-years younger American baritone Robert Merrill. Merrill had made his Met début in 1945 and quickly became one of the opera house's most popular singers. In 1946 he had sung with Jussi Björling for the first time in *Faust* and in 1948 in *Trovatore*. Merrill's warm baritone blended very well with Björling's tenor and they also became good personal friends. The duets had an enormous success, and they have maintained their position against other recordings of the foremost singers of other times, including those of Enrico Caruso, who recorded them all with various baritones.

On 6th November 1950 the Metropolitan Opera season opened with a long-awaited new production of Verdi's *Don Carlo*, broadcast on television, in which Jussi Björling sang the title rôle, with Merrill as Rodrigo. A couple of weeks later they recorded the great scene from the opera's first act. In this scene, Don Carlo confesses his unhappy love for his stepmother Elisabeth, the French princess who was promised to him in marriage but who instead has been taken in marriage

by his father, Philip II, King of Spain. Rodrigo enters expressing his concern for the oppressed people of Flanders, and the scene ends in a fiery duet where both swear to live and die together in the cause of freedom.

The other four duets were recorded on 3rd January, 1951. The oath duet from Verdi's *Otello* was the only part of that opera which Jussi Björling ever sang. He had occasionally performed the duet in concert in the early thirties and already mentioned in his 1945 autobiography that *Otello* tempted him, but that he wanted to wait "until my voice has developed in a natural way for such an undertaking". It is sad that his early death deprived us of the opportunity to hear him in the complete rôle. Robert Merrill has described how they prepared especially for this duet: Jussi Björling had the recording with Caruso and Titta Ruffo as an example, and he was so nervous before the recording session that they walked around the block several times before he was willing to go into the studio. In the duet the scheming Iago brings the intense jealousy he has just provoked to a white heat by telling Otello that he has seen a handkerchief which Otello gave to Desdemona in another man's hand. He hypocritically swears to help Otello seek revenge. The intensity of Otello's cry for blood ("*Sanguè!*") in this recording is especially breathtaking.

Jussi Björling performed the rôle of the poet Rodolfo in Puccini's *La bohème* more than any other in his stage repertoire. Here he is heard in two excerpts from *Bohème*, first with Merrill in the duet from the last act where Rodolfo and his painter friend Marcello try to work at the same time as they are overwhelmed by thoughts of their lovers, Mimì and Musetta. In 1956 both singers would participate in a legendary recording of the complete opera. Björling never performed Don Alvaro in *La forza del destino* (The Force of Destiny) on stage, but he had sung the beautiful duet with Don Carlo a few times in concert both in Sweden and in the United States. Alvaro, injured in battle, believes he is dying. In the duet, he entrusts his valise to Carlo who promises to destroy letters hidden there. They take a heartfelt farewell of each other, but in the shrine Carlo

will find proof that Alvaro himself is actually the man who abducted his sister and killed his father, and on whom he will take revenge.

Remarkably enough, probably the most famous tenor-baritone duet recording ever made was of a piece of music which was not otherwise in Jussi Björling's repertoire, *Au fond du temple saint* (In the depth of the sacred temple) from Bizet's *Pearl Fishers*. This opera, first given in 1863, is coloured by the epoch's taste for the exotic and set among pearl fishermen in Ceylon. In the duet (somewhat abridged in the recorded version), Nadir (the tenor) and Zurga recall the beauty of a Brahma priestess who attracts them both so much that it once damaged their friendship, but they are now reconciled and swear eternal friendship. In 2001 the British magazine *Classic fM* published a poll in which Jussi Björling was voted by their readers the best tenor of all time, and the critic Jeremy Nicholas expressed his

feelings about this recording: "The stirring affirmation of friendship ... has never been bettered. ... Björling sings with ecstasy, constantly driving the accompaniment along, anticipating phrases and never indulgent. It's that life-affirming exultancy which sends a shiver down the spine and, forty years after his death, is still able to reduce you to tears."

Ten days after the duets Jussi Björling re-recorded with Cellini three well-known arias of which he already had made famous versions with Grevillius in Sweden (issued in Vol. 3 of this collection). These arias conclude this CD: Rodolfo's *Che gelida manina* from *La bohème*, Radamès' *Celeste Aida*, and Enzo's *Cielo e mar* from *La Gioconda*. The two latter recordings were never issued on LP or CD by RCA / HMV.

Harald Henrysson & Sue Flaster

Producer's Note

Our intention when restoring this recording was to recreate as much as possible of Jussi Björling's unique voice and his rich spectrum of overtones. We have been extremely economical with noise reduction in order to minimize the influence of such techniques upon the voice, instruments and overtones.

If you, the listener wish to experience a nostalgic feeling of how the recording sounded when played on gramophones from the 1940s and 1950s, we suggest that you turn down the treble on your amplifier. Try turning it down considerably – perhaps even to the minimum adjustment – until you find a setting that corresponds to your memory of how it used to sound. The intention is for the listener to have the opportunity to hear Jussi Björling in accordance with his own preferences and tastes. As a listening reference, we have consulted members of the Jussi Björling Society.

Stefan Lindström

Stefan Lindström

Stefan Lindström has worked in the field of recording techniques and sound reproduction since the 1970s, and has made many gramophone recordings of everything from pop and jazz to chamber music. At an early stage he started to act as a consultant on the restoration of old recordings for various archives and institutions. During the past decades he has worked with sound restoration and archiving, and has restored a large number of reissues of old material from wax cylinders, wire recorders and shellac going back to the earliest days of recording technology.

The Naxos historical label aims to make available the greatest recordings in the history of recorded music, in the best and truest sound that contemporary technology can provide. To achieve this aim, Naxos has engaged a number of respected restorers who have the dedication, skill and experience to produce restorations that have set new standards in the field of historical recordings.

- GOUNOD:** Roméo et Juliette:
1 Ah! lève-toi, soleil 3:18
 6th September 1945 – DB 6249 (2SB 2535-2)
- MASSNET:** Manon:
2 Je suis seul!... Ah! fuyez, douce image 4:28
 6th September 1945 – DB 6249 (2SB 2536-1)
- DONIZETTI:** L'elisir d'amore:
3 Una furtiva lagrima 4:06
 7th? September 1945 – DB 6714 (2SB 2537-2)
- CILEA:** L'arlesiana:
4 È la solita storia 3:49
 27th November 1947 – DB 6714 (2SB 2882-1)
- PUCCHINI:** Manon Lescaut:
5 Donna non vidi mai 2:21
 15th September 1948 – DA 1908 (2SB 2936-2)
- MASCAGNI:** Cavalleria rusticana:
6 O Lola 2:30
 15th September 1948 – DA 1908 (2SB 2937-1)
- GODARD:** Jocelyn:
7 Berceuse 2:51
 11th August 1949 – DA 1931
- BIZET:** Carmen:
8 La fleur que tu m'avais jetée 4:02
 19th September 1950 – LM 105 (49-3375-B)
- MASCAGNI:** Cavalleria rusticana:
9 Mamma! ... Quel vino è generoso 3:49
 19th September 1950 – LM 105 (49-3375-A)
- VERDI:** Don Carlo:
10 Io l'ho perduta... Qual pallor... 10:23
 Dio, che nell'alma infondere
 with Robert Merrill, baritone
 Emil Markow, bass
 and RCA Victor Chorus
 30th November 1950 – LM 7007
 (E0-RC 1946-1, E0-RC 1947-1)
- VERDI:** Otello:
11 O mostroosa colpa... 4:24
 Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro
 with Robert Merrill, baritone
 3rd January 1951 – LM 7007 (E1-RC-2104-1)
- PUCCHINI:** La bohème:
12 In un coupè... O Mimì, tu più non torni 4:09
 with Robert Merrill, baritone
 3rd January 1951 – LM 7007 (E1-RC-2305-1)
- VERDI:** La forza del destino:
13 Solenne in quest'ora 4:08
 with Robert Merrill, baritone
 3rd January 1951 – LM 7007 (E1-RC-2106-1)
- BIZET:** Les pêcheurs de perles:
14 Au fond du temple saint 4:33
 with Robert Merrill, baritone
 3rd January 1951 – LM 7007 (E1-RC-2107-1)
- PUCCHINI:** La bohème:
15 Che gelida manina 5:02
 13th January 1951 – LM 105 (E1-RC-2124-1)
- VERDI:** Aida:
16 Se quel guerrier io fossi... Celeste Aida 4:38
 13th January 1951 – DB 21563 (E1-RC-2125-1)

PONCHIELLI: La Gioconda:

17 Cielo e mar!

4:22

13th January 1951 – DB 21563 (E1-RC-2126-1)

- 1-3, 5 & 6** with the Royal Opera Orchestra conducted by Nils Grevillius
4 & 7 with the Stockholm Concert Association Orchestra conducted by Nils Grevillius
8-9 with the Swedish Radio Orchestra conducted by Nils Grevillius
10-17 with the RCA Victor Orchestra conducted by Renato Cellini

You are welcome to contact one of the Jussi Björling Societies!

* The Jussi Bjorling Society-USA

www.jussibjorlingsociety.com. To join, write to Mickey Dove, 109 Melrose Rd.,
Broad Brook, CT 06016 USA, or email her at mdove9@cox.net

* The Jussi Bjorling Appreciation Society

To join, write to Eric Wimbles, Glenaire, 58 Mill Road, Crowle, North
Lincolnshire, DN17 4LN, UK, or email him at erickwimbles@onetel.net.uk

* Jussi Björlingsällskapet (The Scandinavian Jussi Björling Society)

www.jussibjorlingsallskapet.com. To join, contact the Jussi Björling
Museum (see below).

You are welcome to visit or contact the Jussi Björling Museum, which has
the world's largest collection related to Jussi Björling.

Address: Borganäsvägen 25, SE-78433 Borlänge, Sweden.

<http://www.borlange.se/kommun/jussi/>

Playing
Time
73:37

Jussi Björling (1911-1960)

Opera Arias and Duets
(1945-51)

8.110788

ADD



8.110788

JUSSI BJÖRLING: Collection, Vol. 4

NAXOS Historical

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MADE IN
CANADA

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- 1 **GOUNOD: Roméo et Juliette:** Ah! lève-toi, soleil
- 2 **MASSENET: Manon:** Je suis seul!... Ah! fuyez, douce image
- 3 **DONIZETTI: L'elisir d'amore:** Una furtiva lagrima
- 4 **CILEA: L'arlesiana:** È la solita storia
- 5 **PUCCINI: Manon Lescaut:** Donna non vidi mai
- 6 **MASCAGNI: Cavalleria rusticana:** O Lola
- 7 **GODARD: Jocelyn:** Berceuse
- 8 **BIZET Carmen:** La fleur que tu m'avais jetée
- 9 **MASCAGNI: Cavalleria rusticana:** Mamma!...
Quel vino è generoso
- 10 **VERDI Don Carlo:** Io l'ho perduta... Qual pallor...
Dio, che nell'alma infondere * †
- 11 **VERDI: Otello:** O mostruosa colpa... Sì, pel ciel marmoreo giuro *
- 12 **PUCCINI Bohème:** In un coupè... O Mimì, tu più non torni *
- 13 **VERDI: La forza del destino:** Solenne in quest'ora *
- 14 **BIZET Les pêcheurs de perles:** Au fond du temple saint *
- 15 **PUCCINI: La bohème:** Che gelida manina
- 16 **VERDI Aida:** Se quel guerrier io fossi... Celeste Aida
- 17 **PONCHIELLI La Gioconda:** Cielo e mar!

* with Robert Merrill, Baritone

† with Emil Markow, Bass and RCA Victor Chorus

Considered by both critics and public as one of the greatest tenors of the 20th century, Jussi Björling left behind a vast recorded legacy. Volume 4 in the Naxos Jussi Björling Collection features his final recordings of opera arias for HMV (Tracks 1-9), two of which, *Carmen* and *Cavalleria rusticana*, have not previously been available on CD. Also included are his first recordings for RCA Victor, including the five classic tenor-baritone duets made with Robert Merrill in New York. Volume 1 of the series (8.110722) features his complete recordings of opera and operetta in Swedish, Volume 2 (8.110740) a selection of songs in Swedish from 1929-37, while Volume 3 (8.110754) focuses on the opera arias and duets Björling recorded in Stockholm between 1936 and 1944.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Stefan Lindström SSR AB
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www.naxos.com

A complete track list can be found in the booklet
Cover image: Jussi Björling as Otello (Photo: Bruno of Hollywood)

