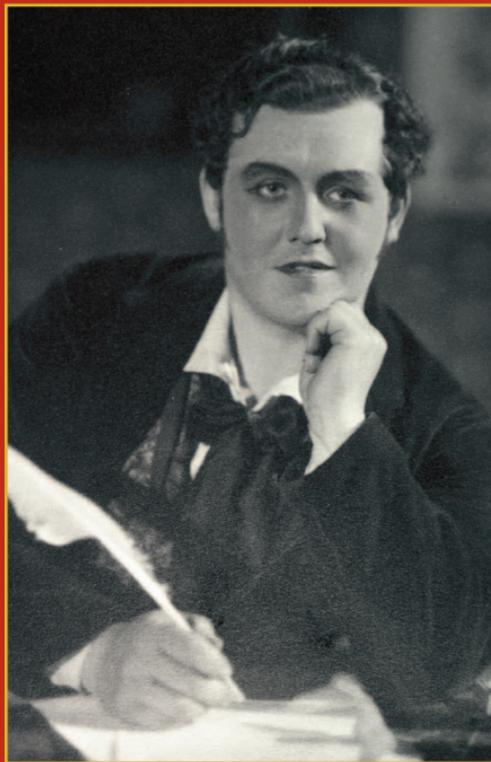




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**Jussi
BJÖRLING**

Collection, Vol. 3

**Opera Arias and Duets
1936-1944**

La bohème

Rigoletto

Tosca

Il trovatore

Aida

Faust

Turandot

- VERDI:** Rigoletto:
21 Questa, o quella 2:10
27th-30th March 1944; DA 1837 (OSB 2401-2)
- MASCAGNI:** Cavalleria rusticana:
22 Mamma, quel vino 3:48
27th-30th March 1944; DB 6163 (2SB 2403-1)
- VERDI:** Un ballo in maschera:
23 Di' tu se fedele 3:15
27th-30th March 1944; DA 1837 (OSB 2404-2)

All with Orchestra conducted by Nils Grevillius

Jussi Björling: Collection, Vol. 3 Opera Arias and Duets (1936-44)

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) in Sweden's province of Dalarna, near the centre of what is today the city of Borlänge. Stora Tuna, often given as his birthplace, is the name of the village where the family was then living and which is now a 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 let them perform in public before Jussi was five and as the Bjoerling Quartet they toured extensively in Sweden, and from 1919 to 1921 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 also for some time 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 Met 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, he mainly remained in his native country, but 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 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 soprano wife Anna-Lisa 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 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

- PUCCINI:** La bohème:
1 Che gelida manina 4:16
 1st or 3rd December 1936; DB 3049 (2SB 439-2)
- VERDI:** Aida:
2 Se quel guerrier ... Celeste Aida 4:23
 1st or 3rd December 1936; DB 3049 (2SB 440-2)
- VERDI:** Rigoletto:
3 La donna è mobile 2:10
 3rd December 1936; DA 1548 (OSB 441-2)
- PUCCINI:** Tosca:
4 Recondita armonia 2:46
 3rd December 1936; DA 1548 (OSB 442-2)
- PONCHIELLI:** La Gioconda:
5 Cielo e mar 4:10
 3rd September 1937; DB 3302 (2SB 570-2)
- PUCCINI:** La fanciulla del West:
6 Ch'ella mi creda libera 2:24
 3rd September 1937; DA 1584 (OSB 571-2)
- MEYERBEER:** L'africane:
7 Mi batte il cor ... O Paradiso 3:11
 (Pays merveilleux ... Ô paradis, sung in Italian)
 4th September 1937; DB 3302 (2SB 573-2)
- PUCCINI:** Tosca:
8 E lucevan le stelle 2:51
 4th September 1937; DA 1584 (OSB 574-2)
- MASSENET:** Manon:
9 Instant charmant ... En fermant les yeux 3:43
 10th August 1938; DB 3603 (2SB 779-2)
- BIZET:** Carmen:
10 La fleur que tu m'avais jetée 3:52
 10th August 1938; DB 3603 (2SB 780-1)
- FLOTOW:** Martha:
11 M'appari tutt'amor 3:23
 (Ach, so fromm, sung in Italian)
 14th July 1939; DB 3887 (2SB 983-3)
- GOUNOD:** Faust:
12 Salut! Demeure chaste et pure 4:37
 14th July 1939; DB 3887
- VERDI:** Il trovatore:
13 Ah sì, ben mio 3:17
 15th July 1939; DA 1701 (OSB 825-5)
- 14** Di quella pira 1:39
 15th July 1939; DA 1701 (OSB 826-5)
- PUCCINI:** La bohème:
15 O soave fanciulla 4:05
 With Hjørdis Schymberg, Soprano
 17th June 1941; DB 6119 (2SB 2034-1)
- VERDI:** Rigoletto:
16 È il sol dell'anima 3:20
 With Hjørdis Schymberg, Soprano
 17th June 1941; DB 6119 (2SB 2035-1)
- GIORDANO:** Andrea Chénier:
17 Come un bel dì di maggio 3:13
 27th-30th March 1944; DA 1836 (OSB 2397-2)
- GIORDANO:** Fedora:
18 Amor ti vieta 2:01
 27th-30th March 1944; DA 1836 (OSB 2398-2)
- PUCCINI:** Turandot:
19 Nessun dorma 3:21
 27th-30th March 1944; DA 1841 (OSB 2399-2)
- LEONCAVALLO:** Pagliacci:
20 Recitar! ... Vesti la giubba 3:39
 27th-30th March 1944; DB 6163 (2SB 2400-2)

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 minimise the influence of such techniques upon the voice, instruments and overtones. This is what might be termed a 'flat' transfer of the upper, descant-rich register, to reproduce all the rich overtones that a 78-rpm shellac disc can contain, and for this reason some surface noise remains. If you, the listener, wish to experience a nostalgic feeling of how the recording sounded when played on gramophones from the 1930s and 1940s, 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 listen to Jussi Björling in accordance with his or her own preferences and tastes. As a listening reference, we have consulted members of the Scandinavian 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 infancy 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.

season and Rudolf 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 Siarö on 9th September 1960. It is now more evident than ever that the world then lost one of its most outstanding artists, and 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. In October 1929, almost a year before his debut at the Royal Opera in Stockholm, he signed his first recording contract with Skandinaviska Grammophon AB, the Swedish HMV representative. His first preserved tenor recordings were made in December of that year. They were, like most of Björling's recordings in Sweden, including all the operatic ones, 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. The singer praised Grevillius as "extremely inspiring" and thanked him for "much of my musical education" in his 1945 autobiography.

In the spring of 1936, Jussi Björling had already made about seventy recordings for Swedish HMV's Scandinavian X series, all in Swedish. They included opera and operetta recordings, which have already been reissued by Naxos in Vol. 1 of this collection, and songs, many of which are included in the second volume. The successful tour to Prague and Vienna which Björling undertook in March, attracted much European acclaim. Skandinaviska Grammophon AB

wanted to snap up an international star in the making and a new contract was signed the following month. Under this contract, Jussi Björling made his first opera recordings in Italian for the HMV Red Label (DA/DB series) in December (he continued to make recordings in Swedish for the Scandinavian market). The 23 arias and duets in Italian and French from eighteen operas presented on this CD were all recorded in Stockholm between 1936 and 1944.

Jussi Björling's first two Red Label records, released during 1937 on HMV in Europe and on Victor in the United States, immediately established him as one of the world's most talented singers. Both records featured him in Puccini and Verdi: one in *Che gelida manina* from *La bohème* [1] and *Celeste Aida* [2], the other in *La donna è mobile* from *Rigoletto* [3] and *Recondita armonia* from *Tosca* [4]. In Britain, the reviewer in Gramophone wrote about the latter record that past disappointments had made him "extra cautious of assuming the prophet's mantle", but that he "otherwise might be rash enough to speak of HMV having discovered a 'new Caruso'". Stressing that the voice was different from Caruso's, the reviewer did say "that a young singer with such a splendid voice and obvious skill and intelligence should go very far indeed if he takes himself and his art seriously". In the United States, Irving Kolodin expressed his astonishment: "I know no more than you how Sweden and Italy can be reconciled, but paradox or no, the name of Jussi Bjoerling on two HMV discs conceals several of the finest performances of the standard tenor airs on records in the modern era..."

Jussi Björling's voice retained its unmistakable timbre, its beauty of tone from top to bottom and its characteristic freedom of delivery throughout his entire career. Although his recordings from the 1950s can often seem more expressive, his opera recordings from the 1930s and 1940s with their youthful bloom, easy flow of tune, purity of intonation, sweetness, flexibility and careful phrasing will remain classic performances.

La bohème would have a special position in Björling's career: he performed Puccini's masterwork

much more than any other opera in his repertoire, and it marked his débuts both at the Met in 1938 and in San Francisco in 1940. Björling was 25 when he recorded *Che gelida manina* in December 1936, fresh, young and poetic; twenty years later, he would contribute to the most celebrated complete recording of the work under Sir Thomas Beecham. Jussi Björling included the famous aria with his repertoire a few years before he made his début in the opera in 1934. As was the case with all his pre-war débuts, he then sang the rôle in Swedish, but two weeks after this recording was made, he sang the first act of *La bohème* in Italian at the opening of a theatre in Paris, performing classic opera in its original language for the first time. In Björling's first recordings in Italian, his unfamiliarity with the language can be noted, but this soon improved and his singing would in a few years become unusually idiomatic for a non-Italian singer.

At Jussi Björling's 1934 *La bohème* début in Stockholm, he was partnered by Hjördis Schymberg. Björling and Schymberg soon became a celebrated couple in the great romantic rôles at the Swedish Royal Opera, and appeared there together more than a hundred times, including Björling's last Stockholm opera performance in 1960. It seems natural that Schymberg became Björling's partner in his first duet recordings, of which two opera duets from 1941 are included on this CD, *O soave fanciulla* from *La bohème* [15] and *E il sol dell'anima* from *Rigoletto* [16].

Jussi Björling had stage experience also of the three other arias with which he introduced himself early in 1937 on the international record market. Radamès in *Aida*, with its heroic demands on the voice, was not one of his most frequently performed rôles; except in Stockholm, he sang it only a few times in Europe before the Second World War (one of which, a festival performance in 1936 in Vienna under Victor De Sabata, certainly helped in launching his international career), and three times in Chicago in 1958. He had already performed *Celeste Aida*, however, as a conservatory student. To the British critic John B. Steane, this "ringing, full-bodied and ardent ... firmly placed,

controlled, broad and refined" recording became "an introduction to the most exciting new tenor voice for years".

When Jussi Björling first sang the Duke in *Rigoletto* in 1932, at the age of 21, he took up the first of the dozen rôles that would comprise his repertoire on stage after the war. In the same rôle, he made his American opera début in 1937 in Chicago. Björling had made early recordings in Swedish of both the arias featured here; his brilliant 1936 recording of *La donna è mobile* was followed eight years later by *Questa o quella* [21]. Cavaradossi's two arias in *Tosca*, *Recondita armonia* [4] and *E lucevan le stelle* [8] were in Jussi Björling's concert repertoire before he performed the complete opera in 1934. The elegiac quality in his voice helped in making Cavaradossi's farewell to life genuinely moving without mannerisms.

Jussi Björling never sang Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* on stage, but *Cielo e mar* [5] was one of his concert favourites, and the recording is representative of his best singing. J.B. Steane's description of its qualities can be applied also to other Björling recordings: "The legato is unflawed, there is none of the aspiring that mars most Italian performances, and the flow is helped by broad phrasing ... the phrases are shaped and shaded ... there is gentleness and exaltation; the high notes are generously held but not flaunted". *Ch'ella mi creda* from Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* [6] and *O paradiso* from Meyerbeer's *L'africane* [7] were found early on Björling's concert programmes and he later also included the complete operas in his repertoire. When he recorded the *Fanciulla* aria in 1937, he had already sung the opera for the last time on stage, while *O paradiso* was recorded before his six stage performances of Vasco da Gama's rôle in 1938, the last rôle he studied in Swedish.

In 1938, Jussi Björling made his first recordings in French, *En fermant les yeux* (The Dream) from Massenet's *Manon* [9] and Don José's Flower Song from Bizet's *Carmen* [10]. These arias were from operas which he never sang on stage, unlike Faust's cavatina *Salut! Demeure* [12], recorded the following year.

Björling established himself as one of the greatest tenors also in the French repertoire through his acclaimed performances of the two Gounod rôles Faust and Roméo, in which he appeared frequently especially in Stockholm. The recordings here show his mastery of the French style, lyrical but virile, emotionally sustained and expressive, elegantly phrased, and sung in an idiomatic manner in spite of the fact that the singer had not yet performed any rôle in French on stage.

The very first opera aria Jussi Björling sang in public, in 1926, when he was only fifteen and still touring with his father and brothers, seems to have been *M'appari* (to use the Italian text he would later prefer) from Friedrich von Flotow's *Martha* [1]. When Björling recorded it in 1939, he had also sung the opera a few times in Stockholm.

In Verdi's *Il trovatore*, just as in *Aida*, Jussi Björling showed his ability to express all the beauty of the lyric moments while providing great dramatic intensity, when needed, without sacrificing the quality of the tone. *Ah sì, ben mio* [3] and the following *stretta, Di quella pira* [4] give examples of this. When Björling recorded the arias in 1939, he had already had great success in the rôle at the Met in New York and, only a few months earlier, at Covent Garden in London. He recorded *Di quella pira* in Swedish in 1934; a comparison of the top note, transposed down a tone then, with the brilliant high C in the present version gives an idea of his technical development in those few years.

During the war Jussi Björling temporarily ceased recording for almost three years. He began again in March 1944 with two arias from operas by the veristic composer Umberto Giordano which he never sang on the opera stage. *Come un bel dì* from *Andrea Chénier* [7]

and *Amor ti vieta* from *Fedora* [8] were both, however, often heard in his concerts. Puccini's *Turandot* is another opera which Björling did not sing on stage, though he would study Calaf's rôle for a complete recording in 1959. His 1944 version of *Nessun dorma!* [9] retains its position as a great recording, even if this aria has in later years been connected in the public consciousness with the Three Tenors.

As Canio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, Jussi Björling made one of his most vivid portrayals on his Stockholm home stage. He sang the rôle in Swedish between 1936 and 1955 but would never perform it in Italian except in the recording studio. Both Canio's *Vesti la giubba* [20] and Turiddu's farewell from Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* [22] exemplify Björling's ability to invest an aria with great emotional intensity without resorting to non-musical effects. His avoidance of such means may have contributed to the complaints about alleged Nordic coldness which used to be heard especially from Italian critics, but there is ample evidence in his recordings of how he could immediately communicate the emotions in the music.

In Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, Jussi Björling had great triumphs, as for example on the Metropolitan's opening night in 1940 and at La Scala in Milan in 1951. In New York, he appeared as the Swedish King Gustaf III, according to Verdi's original intentions, but in Stockholm he remained Riccardo, governor in Boston, since his début in the rôle in 1934. Unfortunately, planned complete recordings never materialised, and the only excerpt Björling recorded was the barcarolle *Di' tu se fedele* [23], sung here with the elegance, lightness, agility and sense of rhythm that Verdi's music demands.

Harald Henrysson and Sue Flaster



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ADD

Jussi Björling (1911-1960)

Opera Arias and Duets

(1936-1944)

Playing
Time
65:34

- 1 **PUCCHINI: La bohème:** Che gelida manina
- 2 **VERDI: Aida:** Se quel guerrier ... Celeste Aida
- 3 **VERDI: Rigoletto:** La donna è mobile
- 4 **PUCCHINI: Tosca:** Recondita armonia
- 5 **PONCHIELLI: La Gioconda:** Cielo e mar
- 6 **PUCCHINI: La fanciulla del West:** Ch'ella mi creda libero
- 7 **MEYERBEER: L'africane:** Mi batte il cor ... O Paradiso
- 8 **PUCCHINI: Tosca:** E lucevan le stelle
- 9 **MASSENET: Manon:** Instant charmant ... En fermant les yeux
- 10 **BIZET: Carmen:** La fleur que tu m'avais jetée
- 11 **FLOTOW: Martha:** M'apparì tutt'amor
- 12 **GOUNOD: Faust:** Salut! Demeure chaste et pure
- 13 **VERDI: Il trovatore:** Ah sì, ben mio
- 14 **VERDI: Il trovatore:** Di quella pira
- 15 **PUCCHINI: La bohème:** O soave fanciulla
with Hjördis Schymberg, Soprano
- 16 **VERDI: Rigoletto:** È il sol dell'anima
with Hjördis Schymberg, Soprano
- 17 **GIORDANO: Andrea Chénier:** Come un bel dì di maggio
- 18 **GIORDANO: Fedora:** Amor ti vieta
- 19 **PUCCHINI: Turandot:** Nessun dorma
- 20 **LEONCAVALLO: Pagliacci:** Recitar! ... Vesti la giubba
- 21 **VERDI: Rigoletto:** Questa o quella
- 22 **MASCAGNI: Cavalleria rusticana:** Mamma, quel vino
- 23 **VERDI: Un ballo in maschera:** Di' tu se fedele

By Spring of 1936, Jussi Björling had already made about seventy recordings for Swedish HMV's Scandinavian X series, all in Swedish. They included opera and operetta recordings (available on Naxos 8.110722) and songs (many of which are to be found on Naxos 8.110740). The 23 arias and duets from 18 operas presented on this CD were all recorded in Stockholm between 1936 and 1944 at a time when Björling was in great demand on the European stage. Although his voice retained its unmistakable timbre, its beauty of tone from top to bottom and its characteristic freedom of delivery throughout his career, the opera recordings from the 1930s and 1940s, with their youthful bloom and purity of intonation remain classics of the gramophone.

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Stefan Lindström SSR AB
Special thanks to Harold Löwing and Jussi Björlingmuséet for the loan of the records

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A complete track list can be found in the booklet
Cover image: Björling as Rodolfo in La Bohème (Private Collection)

