

PUCCINI *Manon Lescaut* • Nils Grevillius, cond; Hjördis Schymberg (Manon); Jussi Björling (Des Grieux); Hugo Hasslo (Lescaut); Royal Op Ch & O, Stockholm • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1110-2 mono (2 CDs: 155:40) Live: Royal Op House, Stockholm 11/1/1959

& Jussi Björling: Arias and Songs

PUCCINI *Tosca*: E lucevan le stelle. MASCAGNI *Cavalleria rusticana*: Mamma, quel vino è generoso (Ivor Newton, pn; Palladium, London 1/4/1959). HANDEL *Serse*: Frondi tenere ... Ombra mai fu. PUCCINI *Turandot*: Nessun dorma! (Izler Solomon, cond; Los Angeles PO; Hollywood Bowl, Los Angeles, California 8/23/1949). WAGNER *Lohengrin*: In fernem land. PETERSON-BERGER *När jag för mig själv*. NORDQVIST *Till havs*. ADAM *Cantique de Noel* (Harry Ebert, pn; Södersjukhuset, Stockholm 12/20/1954). SIBELIUS *Var det en dröm* (Sten Frykberg, cond; Swedish RO; Stockholm 10/3/1952). TCHAIKOVSKY *Evgenii Onegin*: Kuda, kuda (Nils Grevillius, cond; Gothenburg SO; Gothenburg 8/5/1960)

By Henry Fogel

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I have previously only heard excerpts from this 1959 *Manon Lescaut* as issued on the Caprice label, and the sound quality here is a very significant upgrade. Without hearing it, one might question the wisdom of issuing it at all. Two famous Met broadcasts have circulated with the great Swedish tenor Jussi Björling as Des Grieux (one from 1949 with Dorothy Kirsten, the other from 1956 with Licia Albanese), along with a fine studio recording for RCA from 1954, also with Albanese. Here we have a bilingual performance (Björling in Italian, everyone else in Swedish) with a lesser-known soprano in the title role.

The value of this release becomes clear fairly quickly, however. The illustrious tenor, heard here less than a year before his death at the age of 49, sings with an abandon and incisiveness that exceeds those earlier efforts. Also, while Hjördis Schymberg did not have the major career of Albanese or even Kirsten, she is an impassioned Manon with an evenly produced and bright lyric soprano voice that is used with intelligence. This recording may not displace the other versions, but it is an important complement to them. Nils Grevillius's sympathetic and idiomatic conducting is another plus. His beautiful shaping of the Intermezzo (which

he places between the third and fourth acts, a theatrically sound decision) is very special.

The role of Des Grieux fits Björling perfectly. It benefits from the golden glow of his timbre, his innate feel for phrase-shaping, and his flair for dramatic vocal acting (as opposed to his physical acting, which could be stiff). It is also possible that he felt singularly comfortable in his “home” opera house. He made his debut with the Stockholm company in 1930, singing the tiny role of the Lamplighter in this same opera. Whatever the reason, this performance has about it a freedom and intensity that goes beyond his other recorded performances, while retaining all of their vocal beauty. The passion is palpable in “No! No! pazzo son! Guardate, pazzo son!,” and he also conveys the agony of the final act.

Schymberg and Björling had a very strong artistic partnership. They sang together in over 100 performances in Sweden, starting in 1934 in *La bohème*. In addition to Manon, she was his preferred Gilda, Juliette, and Marguerite in Stockholm. While the listener must adjust to hearing the performance in two languages, it is worth the effort in part because of Schymberg’s impassioned singing. At times she reminds me of Albanese, fragile and intense at the same time. She can apply pressure to the voice without losing its basically attractive sound. The chemistry between the two singers, after a quarter-century of singing over 100 performances together, is evident throughout, and it makes this account very special.

Hugo Hasslo is very strong as Lescaut, a better singer than one often gets in that ungrateful role. The overall recorded sound is, as noted above, far better than the prior incarnation with which I am familiar, and in fact is reasonable monaural broadcast quality from the 1950s. The unmistakable timbre of Björling is apparent from the first note he sings.

Richard Caniell, Immortal Performances’ proprietor, has also chosen the bonus material wisely. There are arias and songs from recitals Björling gave at the London Palladium in January 1959; the Hollywood Bowl in August 1949; in Stockholm at a benefit for the Southern Hospital in 1949; in Stockholm again in 1952; and his final broadcast concert, from Gothenburg in August 1960, about a month before he died. All are thoroughly identified in the booklet.

Much of this bonus material has been issued before, but where I have been able to make comparisons, the sound here has more presence and a more natural aura than on the previous releases. Anything Björling sang is worth

listening to, but there are some especially beautiful and impressive excerpts here. The *Tosca* aria from the London Palladium recital is magnificently sung, despite some ham-handed piano playing by Ivor Newton, featuring a lovely decrescendo on “disciogliea dai veli.” “Nessun dorma” from the Hollywood Bowl concert demonstrates that Björling had plenty of power and thrust when he chose to unleash it. The Scandinavian songs are lovely, several of them longtime favorites of the tenor, and after hearing him sing “Var det en dröm,” one is not surprised that Sibelius inscribed a photo “To the genius, the great singer, Jussi Björling.”

The final selection on the disc, Lensky’s sorrowful aria from *Evgenii Onegin*, which comes just before the duel that will kill him, is taken from that last Gothenburg concert. The tenor had been experiencing symptoms of the heart problems that would turn fatal a month later. Whether or not he had any premonition of his impending end, one cannot avoid being struck by the sharp poignancy of his performance and the impending reality. Caniell, in his eloquent appreciation of the singer, notes the opening words of the aria: “Where have you gone, O golden days of my spring? What does the day coming have in store for me? Shall I fall to the deadly arrow, or will it pass by?” Whatever the actual state of Björling’s mind, his singing is devastatingly beautiful and expressive. As listeners we are affected but what we cannot un-know about his immediate future.

As usual, Immortal Performances’ booklet is an important addition to the discs. Its 36 pages contain two knowledgeable essays about Björling and the performance by Stefan Johansson and Kristian Krogholm, along with notes about the recording, Caniell’s appreciation, complete documentation of each track, and wonderful photos. Even if you own other Björling *Manon Lescaut*, I can recommend this one as an important complement to those. There is no denying the electricity generated by a supreme artist when singing with his home company.

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Review by Ken Meltzer

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I’ve mentioned in previous reviews that my first exposure to opera was thanks to my high school French teacher, who included Gounod’s *Faust* as part of his curriculum. Our reference recording was EMI’s first stereo version of the opera, conducted by André Cluytens, with Nicolai Gedda, in

the title role. And so, Gedda was the very first operatic tenor I ever heard. Around that time, I was at my local library, searching through opera recordings. A gentleman struck up a conversation, and asked me to name my favorite tenor. When I responded, "Nicolai Gedda," the gentleman smiled and said, "Ah, but wait until you hear Björling!" To this day, I retain my keen admiration for Nicolai Gedda, one of the 20th century's greatest and most versatile tenors. But after hearing his fellow Swede, Björling, for the first time (as I recall, via Seraphim LP reissues of various arias, and the classic mid-1950s Beecham complete *La bohème*), the gentleman's point was made. Here was a tenor possessing a voice of singular arresting beauty, and of the special kind that, like the young di Stefano, can move a listener to tears. Add to that Björling's flawless technique, brilliant high notes, and an elegant musicianship that served him well in a variety of opera roles and song. As time progressed, I discovered another layer to Björling's artistry. And that is, no matter how fine the studio recordings, Björling's greatest achievements were to be found in his live performances. By all accounts, Björling did not have an imposing stage presence. But when performing before an audience, Björling was a more dramatically, and even musically, engaged artist.

This is not to say that all of Björling's live recordings are ideal. During the 1950s, Björling struggled with the heart condition that would take his life in 1960, at the age of 49. There are live performances in which it is clear that Björling is battling physical challenges. And by all rights, the November 1, 1959 performance of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* at Stockholm's Royal Opera House should have been one of those occasions. In the early autumn of that year, Björling collapsed during recording sessions of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* in Rome. When Björling arrived for the *Manon Lescaut* performances, he was pale and thin, and limited in his ability to move about the stage. There are four complete recordings of Puccini's early operatic triumph that feature Björling as Des Grieux. In addition to the 1959 Stockholm performance that is the centerpiece of his Immortal performances release, there is the 1954 RCA studio recording (Albanese, Merrill, Perlea conducting), as well as Met broadcasts from December 10, 1949 (Kirsten, Valdengo, Antonicelli conducting), and March 31, 1956 (Albanese, Guarrera, Mitropoulos conducting). Des Grieux, a fiercely challenging role, well suited Björling's considerable and unique gifts. As impressive as the Swedish tenor is in all these versions, Björling is at his best in the 1959 Stockholm *Manon Lescaut*. Despite advancing years and serious health issues, Björling is here, almost as if by a miracle, in his freest, most youthful voice. In addition, Björling delivers an interpretation of greater variety and nuance than in the studio recording and pair of Met

broadcasts. That is clear from the moment of Björling's entrance, and his beguiling rendition of "Tra voi, belle." In this brief aria, Björling lavishes bewitching rubato, dynamic contrast, and a relishing of the text that place his other performances in the shade. Björling maintains those lofty standards and qualities throughout. On the occasion memorialized in the Immortal Performances release, Björling is the vocal embodiment of Puccini's smitten, tragic young hero, offering perhaps the finest assumption of the role I have heard. For Björling's magnificent performance alone, this release is a must.

There are some caveats. First and foremost, while Björling sings in the original Italian, the rest of the cast performs in Swedish. That said, Björling and his colleagues interact as naturally and seamlessly as if it were an all-Italian rendition. The wonderful orchestral Intermezzo is transplanted to precede the opera's final act, in which some cuts are also made. Soprano Hjordis Schymberg, a frequent collaborator with Björling, was 50 when she sang the title role in this performance. Unlike Björling on this occasion, Schymberg's voice does not convey the impression of youth (to be fair, neither does Albanese in the studio recording and 1956 broadcast). Nevertheless, Schymberg gives a credible performance, singing with admirable commitment and dramatic involvement, and a moment or two of insecurity aside, vocal assuredness. Hugo Hasslo, a first-rate baritone, is a rich-voiced and characterful Lescaut. Arne Tyrén likewise brings impressive vocal resources to the role of Geronte, all the while avoiding the caricature and buffo mannerisms frequently applied to this role. The smaller parts are admirably performed as well. Conductor Nils Grevillius, another longtime Björling colleague, leads a brisk performance, but one also attentive to the singers' expressive flexibility in phrasing.

The recorded sound is broadcast mono, quite fine for its era, with admirable detail, dynamic range, and sonic richness. It certainly offers a wonderful documentation of Björling's vocal magic. There is occasional broadcast hum, but that is not at all intrusive. As an appendix, Immortal Performances includes several excerpts of Björling in live concert, performing arias and songs. As in the case of the Stockholm *Manon Lescaut*, they find Björling in magnificent voice, and in especially generous and communicative form. A haunting and gorgeously sung rendition of Lenski's farewell aria from *Evgenii Onegin*, given just a month before Björling's death, provides a moving and most fitting conclusion. Occasional broadcast announcements, and of Björling's spoken remarks to the audience, enhance the sense of occasion. All of these excerpts are in good sound as well. Essays by Stefan Johansson, Kristian Krogholm, and

producer Richard Caniell offer welcome and often touching insights into Björling's life and career, and the featured performances. A plot synopsis for *Manon Lescaut* is included, as are artist bios and photos. Among the four Björling *Manon Lescaut* recordings, the 1956 Met broadcast, sung in Italian by a wonderful cast, and galvanically conducted by Mitropoulos, would be my overall first choice (there is a fine reissue by West Hill Radio Archives). But for the best of Björling in one of Puccini's finest tenor roles, the 1959 Stockholm performance takes the prize. Thanks to Immortal Performances for offering it complete, in fine sound, and in the company of treasurable Björling recital material. Warmly recommended to all who love Björling and therefore, by definition, tenor singing that scales the heavens.