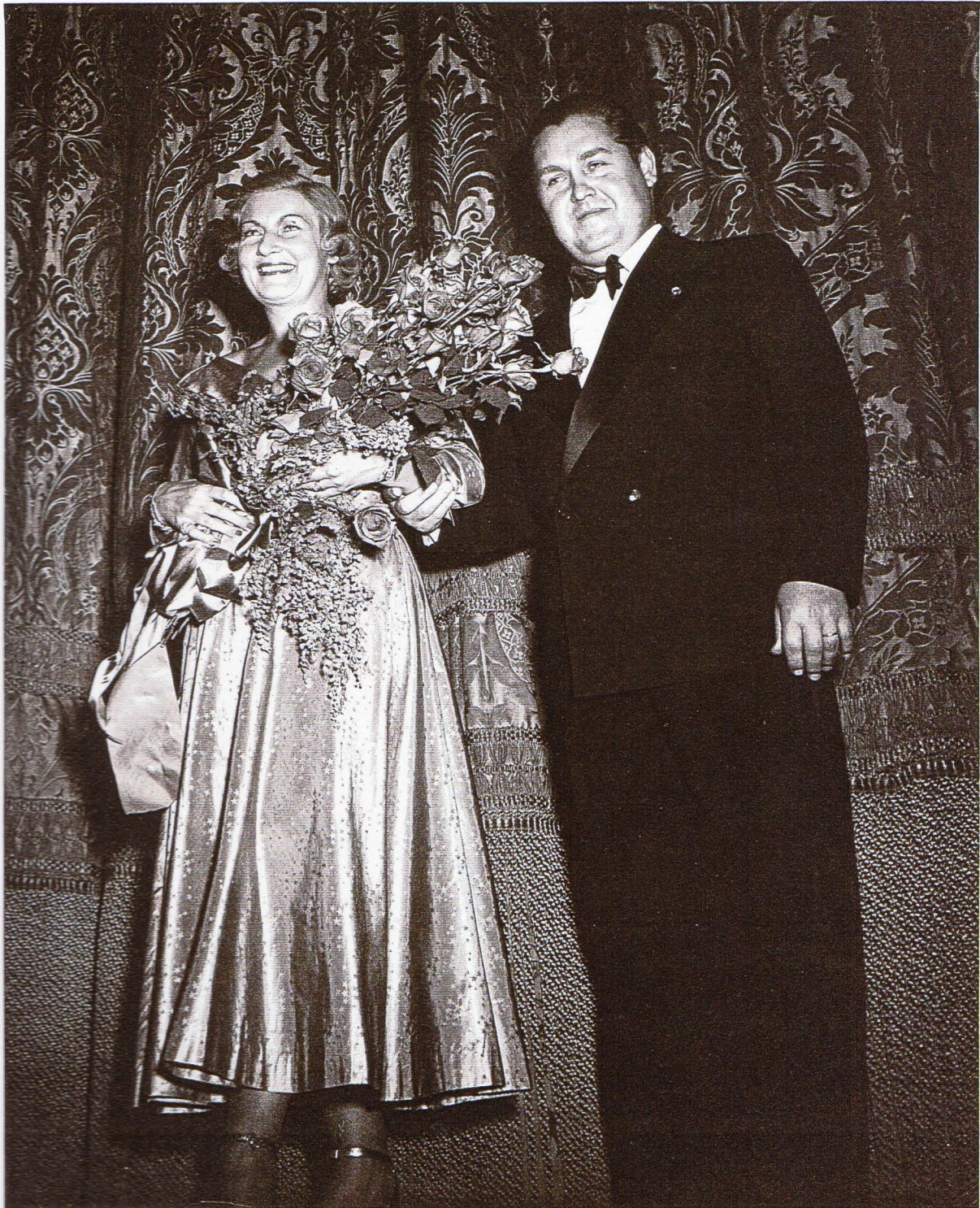


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enough to ask the tenor why he cut "Ma se m'è forza perderti"? Björling's terse answer was, "That's enough singing." Dr. Walter asserts that Björling spoke these words in a matter of fact tone, without taking offense at the question.

Thanks to this information that unexpectedly came my way, I finally had a direct quote from Jussi Björling himself. Although the quick reply does not amount to an explanation for the omission, at least he made a statement on the subject. Happy for the fortuitous timing of the information, I incorporated the new material, and with a sense of accomplishment I mailed the article to OQ.

If Dr. Walters' contribution was unexpected, Harald Henrysson's cryptic e-mail note of 11 October was even more so. It read: "I suppose you have read the review of the Met *Ballo* premiere in 1940 in 'Progresso Italo-Americano,' but if not, I suggest you contact me."

My reply was even shorter. "No, I have not. Consider yourself contacted."

As the e-mail exchanges began to fly between Jacksonville and Borlänge, I learned of the story behind Harald's question. In preparation for Karl and Toby's impending visit to the Museum and to show them material they may not see elsewhere, Harald pulled out a collection of clippings in English he had accumulated over the years but not yet had the time to organize into scrapbooks. Among those he found a single page — page 102 — from an article, possibly from *The Opera Quarterly*, with the running heading "Recordings" and the handwritten name of David Hamilton. The review was of *Ballo* recordings, and the page contained the following sentence in reference to Björling and "Ma se m'è forza": "The reviews in the Met's press books for the 1940-1941 season do not usually mention this aria, whether absent or present (probably, few reviewers were familiar with the work), but the critic of the *Progresso Italo-Americano*, writing of the opening night, indicates that Bjoerling did sing it."

I can hear all of you out there in reader-land exclaim: "What?!"

But regardless of your actual reaction, *I did* exclaim, I can assure you! Harald, remembering the description of my painstaking search for every scrap of information assumed that I was familiar with this piece, too. He only posed the question "just in case." It was a lucky guess. Just as he had read this page a long time ago and had forgotten about it, so had I.

I immediately contacted OQ Editor Thomas Glasow with the fresh information, asking whether he could pinpoint the issue in which the Hamilton article appeared. No, he could not (he had taken over the editorship only a few years ago), but if I could give him volume and issue numbers, he would look it up in his file. That was not the solution; I had a complete file myself and I could do the same without imposing on him. That is exactly what I did. Going chronologically backwards, I looked at page 102 of every issue. About 45 issues later, I found a ten-page article in the Summer 1986 issue. It was indeed a survey of *Un ballo in maschera* recordings up to that time.

My next problem was to find out if it was still possible to perform plastic surgery on the article. "It is at the printers," Tom replied. But in light of the importance of the discovery, he suggested that I make the corrections after the galleys were returned, as long as the changes were kept to a minimum. This gave me a few weeks of breathing time, so I set about the task of tracking down a copy of the newspaper. With all due respect to reliable Mr. Hamilton, the foundation of research is going directly to the source.

I first consulted Robert Tuggle, Director of the Metropolitan Opera Archives, as much to share with him the news as to ask for advice. Bob is an extremely kind and helpful friend who has saved me from many a self-inflicted embarrassment in the past. When I told him what I was

after, his typical reaction was: "Let me call you back." Within minutes, with pressbook in hand, he read me the Italian text directly from the review in question. Within days, I had a Xerox copy on my desk. And within two weeks, I had the microfilm of the entire year of the paper on loan from a New York library.

The 3 December 1940 issue of the Italian language *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* carried a long review of opening night. The reviewer, I. C. Falbo, begins his report on the international cast with debutant Björling, who has an "undeniably beautiful voice and sang his part well." Falbo then adds,

Naturally he has not extracted from certain pages (such as the *arietta* "È scherzo od è follia") the effects that his great predecessors derived from them. But where the musical lyricism is more intense, the voice of Björling has better means of being appreciated. In fact, it was very pleasing in the magnificent duet of act 2 and in the sorrowful invocation of the 4th "Ma se m'è forza perderti."

There is no compelling reason to question the native Italian reviewer's musical competency. His mention of the opening words of the aria proper should settle the question whether or not Björling sang the piece in his first Met performance of the role, and it also lends credence to Arthur Bloomfield's undocumented claim that the tenor sang the piece in his immediately preceding California performances as well.

Let us now remember that in the second *Ballo* performance of the season, on 14 December 1940, the recitative that precedes the aria continues into the *scena* with Oscar and then the ballroom scene. If Björling sang the aria on opening night, what made him change his mind by the next performance?

One possible explanation comes from an unexpected source, the 4 December issue of *Variety*, yet another piece supplied by Bob Tuggle. "Jussi Björling, considered the best tenor possessed by the Met, was suffering from a severe cold. Much of his singing was forced and brittle, with top notes spreading, and his lovely lyric quality marred by a brassy tone. In none of his principal three arias did he click, and his singing was the most disappointing in the famous quintet, `È scherzo od è follia.'"

This is the only — and heretofore universally untapped — review that mentions Björling suffering from a cold and his alleged substandard singing comes as a surprise. At the same time it allows us to speculate that in his impaired vocal estate he found the aria just one piece too many to sing, and henceforth associated it in his mind with strain. The recorded broadcast shows Björling in optimal voice by the second performance, yet he cut the aria. This is the only fact that would lead one to assume that Björling did not sing it in his remaining 1940-41 performances with the Met, in the house or on tour. The point I made in my presentation, the fact that the absence of any mention of a cut in a review is not a proof that the aria *was* delivered is borne out by the 15 December issue of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* itself. It does review the broadcast performance too, yet while it did single out "Ma se m'è forza" after opening night, there is no mention of the aria having been omitted in the second performance.

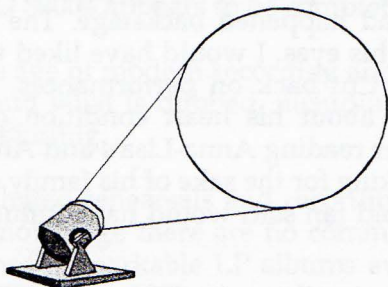
It is hard to decide what is more satisfying: the successful gathering of information through persistent research or when some vital data just falls in one's lap. Regarding this discovery one thing is quite certain: I am happy to have found this review before my article went to press. It would have been most embarrassing to have David Hamilton — or anyone else — write a letter to the Editor saying: "Farkas goes to such lengths only to miss the one crucial piece of information sitting on his shelves!"

To think that without Karl and Toby this is precisely what would have happened! With apologies to G&S for the distorted quote: no, the researcher's lot is not an 'appy one. At the same time I am grateful to everyone who had a role in settling the question for once and for all: Did Jussi Björling *ever* sing the aria in the third act?



In the Spotlight: Leigh Metcalf My Memories of Jussi

Like many others of my generation, opera for me began with *The Great Caruso*, to which my parents took me shortly after its release. I particularly liked the trio that ended Act I of *Il Trovatore*, so I went to the library to check out my first opera recording, the one by RCA Victor. I liked Milanov's voice, and I loved Warren's, but Björling's was something altogether different. Every time his voice entered, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, a lump formed in my throat, and tears came to my eyes. It had nothing to do with the words being said. It was the voice- the beauty, the purity, the perfection, the magnificence, the emotion, to say nothing of the incredible breath control and flawless technique, of that glorious, glorious voice. Over forty-five years later, his voice still has the same effect on me- every time.



Well, I was hooked. Back to the library I went for more records, but there were no more Björling recordings. Oh, well, I thought, a tenor is a tenor, right? Wrong! So I brought home recordings with various other tenors of the day. What a disappointment! I gradually began to realize that, at least when it came to tenors singing Italian opera, I had started at the very top. There was nowhere to go but down. So I gradually began to build my Björling collection. Name any other tenor you care to name. From my own listening experience, I cannot help but feel that Björling had the most beautiful tenor voice of the century.

I heard him in person only once. In October of 1958, he was singing *Il Trovatore* in Chicago when I was eighteen and a college freshman. I skipped two days of classes and took the train. I must admit that I was just too young and inexperienced at that time for me now to remember many details about his performance. At the very beginning, I was disappointed. Because it was my first live opera, I just expected all the voices to be as perfect as they were on my recording. Björling's voice was not as large as on the recording, but of course, it couldn't be. On the recording, he stood before a microphone. On the stage, he had to project his voice to the last row. Fortunately, his projection was marvelous. Also, his voice was somewhat darker than it had been on the recording. But once I had accepted these two facts, the performance was wonderful. From his very first note in "Deserto sulla terra," he worked his magic, and I reveled in that voice. His Act II "Mal reggendo" was heart-rendingly beautiful. Unfortunately, "Ah si, ben mio" has never been a favorite of mine, even when Björling performed it. He sang a gleaming "Di quella pira" with appropriate elan, but I remember being disappointed that he skipped the first high C, though he ended on the second one. I shouted "Bravo!" and it seemed as though he actually bowed toward my box. I was also disappointed that he didn't take a curtain call after the tower scene. Here my inexperience revealed itself, for I later learned that curtain calls were are not taken when the singing occurs off-stage. But for me, the most