

## David Björling Becomes a Singer: USA, Sweden and Vienna 1899-1908

By Harald Henrysson



David Björling in Chicago

In all of its generations the singing Björling family has had close connections with the U.S. It was here it began—when David Björling got the education without which he might not have become a singer and thus Jussi, if he had been born, would have had quite a different future. Very little has been known about David's first period in America, but this article, based on my presentation at the JBS-USA Salt Lake City conference, is an attempt to fill in that gap, as far as sources permit, and add something about his further education.

David Björling was already aware that

his voice might be worth schooling before he left Sweden, for according to his brother Johan, he took a few lessons in Stockholm in 1896-99 while he worked at a metal workshop there. After leaving his job at the Separator factory in September 1899, 26-year-old David Björling left Gothenburg on 4 October on the Wilson Line steamship *Cameo* for Grimsby in Britain. He continued by train to Liverpool and from there to New York on the Cunard liner *Lucania*. David arrived at Ellis Island on 14 October, but in the database of arrivals there, he is not easy to find, for he was registered under the name Karl G D Bjorlin. Karl David was his first names, but the G is unexplained. David was recorded as a laborer and his nationality as Finnish. The reason for this is unclear, for although he

had grown up in Finland, he was not born there: he had spent the last 6 years in Sweden and his parents were living in Borlänge. Maybe his mother was still a Finnish citizen. Like other immigrants, David had to declare whether he was a polygamist and he was not. He stated that he carried with him the sum of 10 USD and that he was going to a cousin in Cambridge, Illinois.

Several close relatives had immigrated to the US before David. In 1888, his cousin Gustaf, who would be called Gust in the US, arrived, and in the next 10 years, four of Gust's brothers. That means that

five of the eight children David's uncle Per Samuel Björling had, who lived to adult age, would settle here. John, Ben and Anton Björling became farmers in western Illinois, in Cambridge, Andover, Galesburg, and other places nearby; Anton for a period in Willmar, Minnesota. Ben also earned his living as a house painter, like his father. In 1920-21, David Björling would visit his relatives in these places touring with his sons. The youngest cousin, who also was called David, had a tragic fate in the US: in 1901 he happened to fatally shoot himself during a theater performance.

There is no reason to believe that David Björling didn't go to Cambridge, as he said he would. In any case, he spent time in Illinois, since a portrait photograph was taken in Chicago some time about the year 1900. Letters were waiting for him at the Chicago post office in May and August 1901, as shown in Swedish-American newspapers. A family legend that he first tried gold prospecting connects him with the Western states, but all further documentation of him in the US in this period comes from New York City.

Choral singing was one of the most important Swedish cultural activities in the US, and several Swedish choirs were active in New York. David joined Lyran (*The Lyre*), which was founded in 1889, and three years later had taken part in founding the American Union of Swedish Singers. During David's time in New York Lyran's conductor was the talented and enthusiastic Arvid Åkerlind, with roots in the choral tradition among Uppsala students. Unfortunately, Lyran's archive seems not to have survived, but its activities were covered by the Swedish-American newspaper *Nordstjernan*. In 1907, Lyran had 30 active members plus 95 supporters and honorary members.



Heinrich Conried in his Met office

The first trace of David Björling in New York after his arrival comes from Nordstjernan's report of Lyran's spring concert at Tammany Hall on 13 April 1902, and is a surprise. Musical events at this time were often followed by dancing, and David was only mentioned as a member of Lyran's dancing committee!

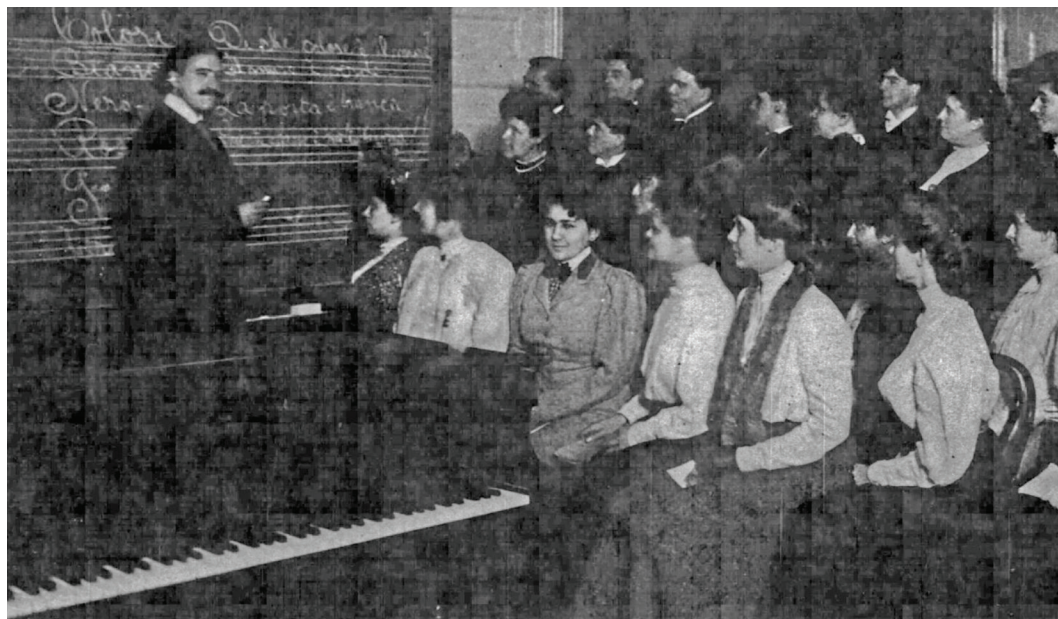
In June 1902, David's older brother Gustav arrived in New York from Sweden. Maybe David had sent favorable reports. Like David, Gustav had to report on arrival where he was going, so we know that David was then living in Turtle Bay at 305 East 40th Street, in a building which no longer exists. Gustav would remain in the US, working in factories in New Jersey. He died in Bloomfield in August 1926, ten days after David had died in Västervik.

On 1 June 1903, Heinrich Conried took over as manager of the Metropolitan Opera. Conried was born in 1855 into a family of Jewish weavers in what was then Bielitz in Austrian Silesia and today Bielsko in southern Poland. He began as an actor in Vienna and showed such talent that he became manager of the municipal theater

in Bremen at only 21. His success there brought him an invitation to the Germania Theater in New York. Conried moved to the US in 1878, where he worked with enormous energy and high artistic ambitions as actor, director, and manager at several theaters, and as teacher and rights-agent. In 1893, he founded the Irving Place Theater,

which played in German. He had little musical education but considerable music experience, especially of operetta, and held the American rights for many successful Viennese operettas.

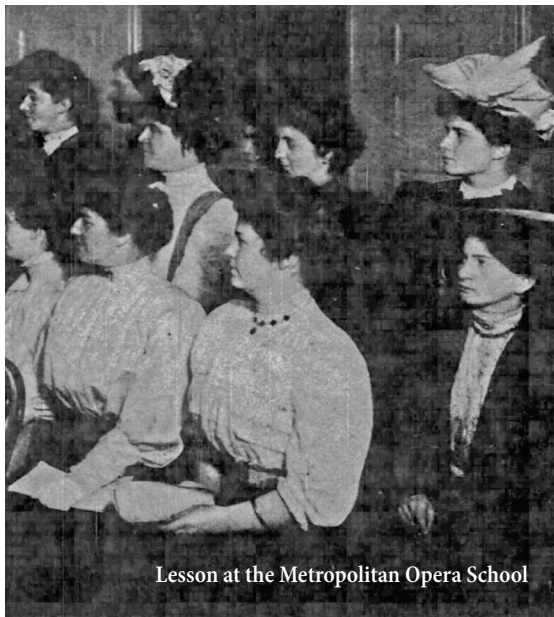
Conried had a 5-year contract with the Met, according to which a company called the Conried Metropolitan Opera House hired the building. Conried agreed to manage and supervise all affairs, although they had to be approved by the board of directors. He would be the last one to run the house as a theatrical entrepreneur and not as a salaried manager. Conried established the Metropolitan Opera School, where David Björling got his basic musical education, and supported his further studies in Vienna. When Conried took Enrico Caruso to the Met, concluding contract discussions begun by his predecessor Grau, he gave David an admired model for his singing. Jussi claimed that David got lessons from Caruso, and that was also stated when David toured the US with his sons in 1919-21. Opening night for the short Conried era, 23 November 1903, was also the date for Caruso's debut at the house as the Duke in *Rigoletto*. Almost half a century later, David Björling's son Jussi would sing in *Don Carlo* on opening night for the Rudolf Bing era, and the same Jussi would inherit one of Caruso's *Rigoletto* costumes as a sign of his upholding the great tenor tradition.





Conried intended to found a singing school at the Met comparable with those in Europe, and to create a repertory theater with a real American ensemble that would not be wholly dependent on imported stars. The Metropolitan Opera School started in 1903. Its director and main vocal teacher, Aurelia Jaeger-Wilczek, was engaged from Europe. She had begun her career as a dramatic soprano, and had been married to the tenor Ferdinand Jäger, one of the first to sing Wagner's Siegfried, who died in 1902. Aurelia Jaeger became a respected singing teacher and director at the Conservatory in Vienna. We know nothing about her influence on David Björling's singing, but her connection with Vienna, which she shared with Conried, may have been important for his future studies there. In 1906 Aurelia Jaeger led a corps of nine teachers at the Met, and had 48 women and 15 men as students. The picture shows an Italian lesson at the school, unfortunately without David. Jaeger was a significant influence for singing education in New York and from 1904 was also director of the independent Master School of Vocal Music.

Heinrich Conried arranged that singers from his school could get scholarships paid by the Met directors to go to Europe and attend performances in important cities. In the spring of 1905, five women and one man left for Vienna, Paris, and other cities,



Lesson at the Metropolitan Opera School

led by Mrs. Jaeger. Conried expected them to return for the next season and sing small roles, and later to find them engagements in Europe for a season, after which they might return for larger roles at the Met.

Conried energetically worked to realize his ideas at the Met. It was said that he even masked himself and dressed up as a chorus member to be able to study performances from inside. He did much to introduce Wagner's work and produced the first *Parsifal* outside Bayreuth, against the will of Wagner's widow. But he had limited operatic experience and no doubt some bad luck. In April 1906, the earthquake hit San Francisco while the Met was there on tour and scenery, costumes, and instruments were destroyed. Conried had several conflicts with the directors. He was, for instance, forced to cancel an expensive and artistically successful *Salome* production due to moral objections. *Salome* was then the Swedish-American Olive Fremstad, besides the American Geraldine Farrar, the most famous soprano star that Conried introduced. In December 1906, Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera opened and its relative success displeased the Met board. Such stress may have contributed to the illness which forced Conried to resign his post on 1 May 1908, one year early - about the same time as David Björling finished the studies in Vienna for which Conried had given him support. Conried's successor was the Italian Giulio Gatti-Casazza, during the first years jointly with the tenor Andreas Dippel. Conried left for Europe soon after his resignation and died from a stroke on 27 April 1909, 54 years old, in the city of Meran in Austria.

Just before David Björling returned to Sweden in the spring of 1907, the New York Sun published the first printed account of how he got into the Met Opera School. The article said that he was then working as a mechanic but didn't have much left after he had sent money home. Jussi confirmed in his autobiography that his father had been a mechanic, but added that David had also proved himself as a boxer, and a niece of David remembered that for some time he helped to receive patients at a Swed-

ish doctor's practice. The Sun described how David came to try a singing career as follows: "When he was more than usually downcast, he went into a saloon to drink away his longing for home. His spirits rose and he began to sing. There were several men in the room. All stopped to listen, and as chance would have it, there was one there capable of appreciating good singing. He took David aside and talked to him: 'You have a wonderful voice,' he told David. 'Get it cultivated and you will make a great singer. Then will come money and fame and all the good things.' David became interested, but how to cultivate his voice without money bothered him. 'Why, that is easy enough,' said his mentor. 'Save a part of your small wages each week and in a few months you will have enough to begin with, and I will put you in the way of getting an instructor,' and he handed David his card with name and address." In a Swedish version of this story, Conried's name was written on the card. Conried would hardly have appeared at a saloon, but the card may perhaps have had "Conried's Opera School" printed.

The meeting at the saloon took place according to the 1907 article "almost three years ago," thus in the summer or autumn of 1904, and David's studies probably began in 1905. Regarding his audition, his son Olle claimed that Caruso was a member of the jury, and that David had no suitable song or aria in his repertoire but was accepted after singing a scale. On 15 February 1906, David's name was on the Met bill for the only time, as one of 36 male and 13 female students from the school who took part in a performance of Johann Strauss's *Gypsy Baron*. They might have been needed since the chorus went on strike the month before. This was the Met premiere of the operetta and the annual benefit for Heinrich Conried. He added all his stars as guests, who appeared as prisoners of war, singing for their ransom. Caruso joined Antonio Scotti in the *Forza del destino* duet.

Another student in this performance was Alfredo Piccaver, who also began his studies in 1905 and later got a scholarship from Conried. Piccaver became one of the

most popular singers at the Vienna Opera. When the Opera School gave a concert after its third year in May 1906, Piccaver took part but not David. Still, there were Swedish songs on that program, performed by the Norwegian-born soprano Inga Örner. Since Conried wanted his students to get stage experience, and due to the chorus strike, the students took part during that season in 61 performances, alone or in ensemble. Therefore we can assume that David sang more on the Met stage than the *Zigeunerbaron* premiere. Conried also had members of his Opera School perform scenes in the lobby of the house.

Just as David Björling stood on the Met stage before his son Jussi, it is very likely that he stood on the Carnegie Hall stage before him as well. Lyran performed there several times. One example is a sold-out concert in 1902 devoted to works by the Swedish composer Gunnar Wennerberg, whose popularity at the time is mirrored in the repertoire of David and his sons. An-

other Lyran concert at Carnegie Hall, where David probably took part, was a farewell concert in November 1906 for the touring soprano Anna Hellström-Oscär, called “the second Swedish nightingale.” 2000 people attended this event.

David Björling’s debut in a major role did not take place at the Met or Carnegie Hall but on 1 December 1906 at the Kings County Democratic Club Theater on Schermerhorn Street, which was in the advertisement called “the best and finest theatre in Brooklyn”. David’s role was Erik, one of the main roles in the Swedish light opera *Värmlänningarna* (*Vermländigarna* in the old spelling used, *The people from Värmland*) from 1845. The piece has been given more than 800 times at the Royal Opera, had five film versions and still retains some of its popularity in Sweden. It was not the first time it was staged among Swedes in New York either. Jussi recorded *Ack Värmland du sköna*, but did not appear as Erik on stage, as his brother Gösta did. In New

York, *Värmlänningarna* was produced by actor and singer Hilda Hellström-Gagnée, who also sang the main female role, Anna. The production was a success, even if the fact that more tickets had been sold than there were seats caused some irritation. Thus, a second performance was given on 26 January 1907, this time at the Murray Hill Lyceum. The advertisement from that occasion is shown.

A review of the first performance did not give any assessment of David, but a review of the second said that “on the whole, his performance was good, though the zeal which should have characterized him was sometimes lacking.” The participants gathered at a cafe some days after the first performance, and then David Björling was one of ten who signed a decision to found a Swedish Dramatic Society.

On 10 March 1907, the Murray Hill Lyceum was the forum for a Large Scandinavian Concert. Before the concert, David Björling gave a first proof of that PR talent

DEN ODÖDLIGA FÖLKPIESEN

# VERMLÄNDINGARNE

gifves uti MURRAY HILL LYCEUM, 34de gatan, nära 34de Ave., New York.

Lördagen den 26 Jan. 1907, kl. 8.15 e. m. precis.

PERSONERNA:

Herr John Hallberg  
Herr Lajos Jansson  
Herr Alms Oton  
Herr C. G. Bergqvist  
Herr Edv. Jonsson  
Fru Anna Gustaf-Johansson  
Herr DAVID BJÖRLING  
Herr Harald Nordqvist  
Fru G. Bergström  
Herr Herman Rosenberg  
Fru Hilda Hellström-Gagnée  
Herr Rich. Lindström  
Herr Gust. Petersson  
Fru Mathilda Carlström  
Herr Albin Adolfsen  
Herr Ernst Björklund  
Herr Harald Nordqvist  
(Hondfolk af begge könen.)

AXEL HAGNÖREN, Stig-Manager,  
Knut Jansson, Akkompagnatör.

Frykdalspolskan,  
Fjällnåpolskan,  
Jösschäradsölskan,  
Vingåkersdansen  
samt Hallingen  
Körerna att dansas under ledning af  
Herr ERNST BJÖRKLUND,  
f. d. medlem af Skansen-Dansarne.

Efter föreställningen  
**STOR BAL.**  
Danstmusiken utföres af Prof. Emil Lidens  
Orkester.

"ANNA"  
Biljetter à 75 & 50 Cents till 800 i NEW YORK hos C. A. Peterson, 266 3d Ave.; Frank, 443 3d Ave.; C. G. Anderson, 518 2d Ave.; Alf. Werners, 530 2d Ave.; C. Dahlin, 637 3d Ave.; samt Ernst Wnberg, 192 E. 14th St.  
i BROOKLYN hos Fru Lundberg, 192 South St.; Elias Johansson, 494 Atlantic Ave.; Scandinaviska Bokhan-  
dels, 144 5th Ave.; samt C. Björkman, 402 2d Ave.  
Lager à 5 Cents & utspälat, \$2, 99 och \$5, till sale endast på "Nordstjernans kostor, och skänks pr post om  
Händelsebiljetter beaktas inte.  
OBS! BILJETTUCKAN ÖPPNAS KL. 5 E. M. REPRESENTATIONSFÖRTÄNEN. HILDA HELLSTRÖM-GAGNÉE.

## Stor Skandinavisk Konsert

—gifves af—  
MURRAY HILL LYCEUM, 34th St., nära 3d Ave., N.Y.

Söndagen den 10 Mars kl. 8 e. m.,  
med biträde af Miss LUCY LEE CALL från  
Metropolitan Opera House,  
Mr. ALFRED FREEBERG, Bas, från Metropolitan  
Opera House,  
Mr. DAVID BJÖRLING, Tenor, från Metropolitan  
Opera skola,  
FREDERIC G. SHATTUCK, Ackompagnatör från  
Metropolitan Opera House,  
SVENSKA GLEE KLUBBEN I BROOKLYN,  
ARVID ÅKERLIND, Direktör,  
FINSK BLANDAD KÖR,  
MANSKÖREN HUMU,  
under ledning af JOHAN PAANANEN, Sångdir. fr. Helsingfors,  
MANHATTAN KVARTETT,  
(A. BJÖRLING, 1sta tenor; JOHN HELLBERG, 2dra tenor;  
O. ÅKERMAN, 1sta bas; NILS LOWENMARK, 2dra bas.)

Efter konserten **STOR BAL.**  
Musiken utföres af en utmärkt orkester, 22 man.  
Biljettuckan i Murray Hill Lyceum öppnas kl. 4 e. m. på Konsertdagen  
Biljetter à 50 Cents ånnas tillhanda hos alla svenska bokhandlare  
i New York samt hos Mrs. A. Lundberg, 103 South St., Brooklyn.

David's US concert debut advertisement

Värmlänningarna 1907 advertisement



which would be useful during his tours. Nordstjernan published a notice signed by him where he claimed that “artistically and musically, this will be one of the best and grandest concerts ever given here in New York.” What David didn’t write, but Nordstjernan added in its review, was that the concert was actually arranged by David himself as a benefit for his further studies. He was one of three soloists, the others were American. One of them was Lucy Lee Call, another pupil of the Opera School, who had begun to sing at the Met in 1904, and would have a teaching career at the Eastman School of Music for 30 years. A male “Manhattan Quartet” also took part, where David was most likely the first tenor though his first name was given with an initial “A.” The program further included the Swedish Glee Club in Brooklyn, two Finnish choruses, and a Finnish orchestra.

Did the concert live up to David’s promises? In any case, the audience was not disappointed, for “the hall was filled by an animated and extremely enthusiastic audience,” Nordstjernan wrote. Especially the choruses and the quartet were well received, but the reviewer noted that the audience was mostly Finnish and thought it a mystery why the concert was called “Scandinavian.” Miss Lee Call was found singing with technical skill but without feeling. David’s concert debut as a soloist, in one Finnish and one Swedish folksong, was called “successful,” but the reviewer added, a little ambiguously, that he deserved special praise for not choosing too difficult items, something that should be recommended also to other debutants.

On 13 April, David Björling was again the soloist, this time at Majestic Hall and together with Lucy Lee Call and the Finnish Humu chorus. Afterwards, he took part in an Odd Fellows arrangement and “sang some of his beautiful songs in a fine and appealing way.”

Next Saturday, the 20th of April, the Swedish Theater Association gave at the Murray Hill Lyceum a “popular comedy” called *Norrlandslif* (*Norrlandsliv* in modern spelling, *Norrland Life*), which was written especially for them by an anonymous

author. Norrland is the northern part of Sweden from where David came. In his role as the log-floater Matts, the reviewer found him to be “a good singer and artist on the accordion.”

On 4 May 1907, David Björling arranged a second “Large Scandinavian Concert” at Tammany Hall. This time he was open about the purpose and wrote in the big advertisement, which he had signed, that the concert was given for the benefit of his further education in song and music. His own contribution consisted of arias from *Aida*, *Martha*, and *Rigoletto* with a Swedish folksong as encore. David was described as having “a strong and high tenor voice, which with good coaching, as intended, promises to become softer and more flexible in the future.”

The program also offered the Estonian soprano Maria Mieler, the violinist Martina Johnstone, the Swedish Glee Club in Newark, and Swedish folk dancers. Nordstjernan was very pleased with the whole concert and 800 people in the audience were enthusiastic. The reviewer wrote with great admiration especially about Johnstone, who was born as Jonsson in Gothenburg in Sweden, but already had a successful career in the US. The voice and appearance of Mieler, who made her New York debut and sang in Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish, were also praised. She had been an actress in Moscow, studied music in Dresden and been jailed in Russia for singing a forbidden song before coming to the US, where she would marry a Russian music critic.

The already cited New York Sun article of 20 May 1907 was captioned “Conried’s Swedish Tenor” and began: “A recent caller at the office of Clerk Donovan at the Naturalization Bureau was David Bjarling [sic] (as he was misspelt throughout), a Swede, who wanted to take out his first citizen’s papers before he sailed for Vienna.” Now he was already “on his way to Vienna, sent by Herr Conried,” so he probably left just before. David would first go to Sweden, then to Vienna for two years, and thereafter back to America. The article ended by letting him say: “I can take out my second papers then.”

This gives new evidence that David Björling actually didn’t plan to continue his career in Sweden, but to return to the US after two years in Vienna and become a US citizen. But soon after coming back to Borlänge he began to give concerts, and did so for 5 months before going on to Vienna. He stayed at the conservatory there only half a year, not two years as planned, and continued his career in Sweden. No further plans to return to the US are known, until he did so with his three sons at the end of 1919. But during that tour, a newspaper wrote that he had briefly returned to the Metropolitan school to finish a course.

Another quote in the Sun article shows that David had gained more than a little self-confidence: “He told his story and demonstrated the powers of his voice from the lowest to the highest note. ‘You are a regular Caruso!’ Donovan said to him. ‘Well, why shouldn’t I be? I will sing as good as Caruso when I finish studying, and that’s a little better than being a mechanic, isn’t it? I’m going to spend a few weeks in my old home in Hudiksvall. My mother wants me to sing in some church affairs there, so that her friends may hear me.’”

Hudiksvall, the town near the village of Strömsbruk where David was born, must have been a misunderstanding, since his parents were now living in Borlänge, where David gave his first Swedish concert on 16 June 1907. The club house where he appeared was also used for church services, and it seems likely that mother Matilda was there and took pride in her son. “Tenor singer David Björling from the Metropolitan Opera School in New York” was joined by the Stora Tuna male chorus, of which he had earlier been a member. The advertisement shows that he sang in four languages: Swedish, German, Italian, and Finnish. The local paper wrote: “Mr. Björling, who is equipped with a fine and well trained voice, sang two opera arias and a few folksongs, all of which were very well performed,” and the program was received with great acclaim.

In July, David contributed to a concert by a male chorus in Grängesberg, southwest of Borlänge, which happened to have the same name as his New York one, Lyran.

**Stor**  
**Konsert**  
gifven i Föreningslokalen vid Domnarfvat söndagen den 18 juni kl. 5 em. af  
**Tenorsångaren David Björling**  
fr. Metropoloperaskolan i New-York  
med benäget biträde af lektor D. F. Nylund från Falun (ackompanjator)  
och Stora Tuna manskör, som utför sina glansnummer.  
Hr Björling sjunger bl. a.:  
Aria ur op. Aida af . . . . . Verdi. Ital. täxt.  
» » Martha af . . . . . Flotow. Tyaktäxt.  
»Om dagen vid mitt arbete». Svensk folkvisa.  
Viola af . . . . . Benson.  
»Ack, arma moder». . . . . Finsk folkvisa.  
Svensk täxt.  
Aftonstämning. . . . . Körling.  
Aamulla varhain. . . . . Finsk folkvisa.  
Finsk täxt.  
Entré: 50 öre, reserverad plats 1 kr.  
Biljetter köpas vid ingången.  
1857

David's Borlänge debut advertisement

Evidently he needed more money for his studies in Vienna, for the concert was given for his benefit. The applause was described as “quite thunderous and well deserved.”

On 31 August, David sang again in Borlänge, at Folkets Hus. He had hired the place – which opened in 1905 and with the choir loft not yet finished – for 20 kronor (about \$125 today). David sang solo but also as a member of a quartet. Borlänge Tidning described the concert as very successful and admitted that David had a voice which “doubtless after further training, might become very good, especially in the higher parts of the range, where his voice already in many places, is flexible and warm.” At the same time, the reviewer had certain reservations: “it would not have been harmful if there had been a little more feeling and life in the singing, which together with Mr. Björling's appearance would have given more color to the performance.”

The following day, David sang at the high school in nearby Falun with great suc-

cess. The audience was impressed by “his beautiful voice together with his, especially for a Swedish-American, simple manners!” For the first time, David's voice was then analyzed in some detail. The reviewer considered an effortless top register to be his greatest asset, with a beautiful crescendo-diminuendo on high B especially mentioned. The lower register would gain from getting stronger and brighter, and the voice had sometimes a tendency to be a little guttural, but this could disappear with further training. David's intonation was clean and secure, but his sense of rhythm ought to be improved. In any case, the reviewer saw a bright future for him.

The advertisement for a large concert at a sports hall in Borlänge on September 15, again together with the Stora Tuna men's chorus, included David's portrait. This was not common and indicates some self-assurance. No review was published, but after David's next performance at Rommehed on Sept 18, joint with a violinist, both the extensive and beautiful program and the good execution were praised. Before David left Sweden again, he gave his first concert at Stora Tuna church on 28 September together with the Dalarna Regiment band, for the benefit of a children's home. Unfortunately, the concert was not very well attended due to “an inappropriate time”.

David's repertoire in these early concerts is incompletely known. All opera arias he is known to have performed were common tenor favorites, which Jussi would also take up, from *Martha*, *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore* and *Aida*. Two of the songs found on these programs were also inherited by his son, *Aftonstämning* and *Som stjärnorna på himmelen*. Not surprisingly, there were also some Finnish one—partly with original Finnish lyrics, unlike the Sibelius ones to Swedish texts which would become an important part of Jussi's song repertoire.

In October of 1907, David Björling went to Vienna for seven months of further singing education. Jussi stated in his autobiography that before leaving, his father had sung a concert at the royal palace in Stockholm together with John Forsell, and

that the concert inspired King Oscar to give him a study stipend. But no evidence has been found for this. Some years later, in 1910, David was reported to have a royal stipend, but then King Gustaf V reigned, the king who would closely follow Jussi's career and gain his great respect. King Oscar had died when Jussi was in Vienna. And in 1911, David sang in a concert attended by both the Swedish and the Danish royalties, but at the foreign minister's residence, not the royal palace. Could this have contributed to a misunderstanding? In a notice about David's return from Vienna, no royal stipend was mentioned, only Conried's contribution.

In Vienna, David got the protection of the Swedish minister Count Joachim Beck-Friis, who had once been legation secretary in Washington. In November of 1907, Beck-Friis made a formal request for a free pass for David to attend the Vienna Opera, where Jussi would have such success 30 years later. David didn't forget the help, and in 1922, when Beck-Friis had moved as minister to Copenhagen, David and his sons would cross the Sound and visit him there when they were touring in Swedish Skåne on the other side. From Vienna, it is also reported that David worked at the Separator factory (this was an early Swedish multinational company and he had worked for them in Stockholm) and that he sang for the Swedish colony.

In the autumn of 1907, David Björling began his studies at the Vienna Conservatory, which was managed by the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde. The annual report of the Conservatory for 1907/08 proves that in his major subject, singing, David Björling received the highest mark, “Vorzüglich” (excellent), and in his minor subject, piano, the mark was “Genügend” (satisfactory). Two other minor subjects were noted without grades, choral conducting and Italian. David's main teacher in Vienna was professor Franz Haböck, who is known for a standard work on the castratos and their art and gave instruction in the “Old Italian” school of singing.

At the beginning of May 1908, David returned to Sweden. Jussi believed, accord-



ing to his autobiography, that his father had stayed in Vienna for two years, as intended, and it is unclear why the period was limited to seven months. Were the reasons financial, in spite of support from Conried or his directors, benefit concerts for David in the US and in Sweden, and possibly also free studies at the conservatory, as Nordstjernan claimed when they reported about his departure? Free studies might perhaps have been offered through influence from the former conservatory

director Mrs. Jaeger, or from Conried. We can only speculate about David's reasons for changing the plans he had early in 1907, but we should be happy that he stayed in Sweden, met Ester Sund and fathered four musically talented sons with her.

On 24 May 1908, David Björling resumed his career in Borlänge. In less than a year, his first son, Olle, was born. David didn't think his education finished, for later in Stockholm, he took lessons from the baritone and pedagogue Oscar Lomberg.

David Björling would sometimes be called "the Swedish Caruso", but his planned debut at the Royal Opera in 1910 never took place and he would gain most success as teacher of his sons and as founder and member of the Björling Quartet with them. However, one of his sons would stand up to the comparison by which his father was honored and a century later several gramophone companies would still label Jussi "the Swedish Caruso." ■



1956: Jussi with Roberta Peters (Gilda) and Robert Merrill (Rigoletto), recording *Rigoletto*