

Jussi Björling as Gounod's Faust

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Johan Jonatan "Jussi" Björling (5 February 1911 – 9 September 1990) was a Swedish tenor. One of the leading operatic singers of the 20th Century, Björling appeared frequently at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City as well as at many major European opera houses. He was ranked greatest singer of the century by Classic CD (United Kingdom) "Top Singers of the Century" Critics' Poll (June 1999).

Björling was born in Borlänge, Dalarna, Sweden, in February 1911. The midwife's register shows he was born on 5 February; however, the church baptism records erroneously show 21 February, and this was the day on which he celebrated his birthday throughout his life. He was initially taught to sing by his father, David, an accomplished vocalist, and made his debut public appearance at the age of four with the Björling Male Quartet. The group performed in concerts throughout Sweden and the United States for eleven and a half years. He later studied opera with John Forsell.

Björling made his professional operatic debut as the Lampbriber in *Manon Lescaut* at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm in 1930. This was soon followed by Don Otavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Arnold in Rossini's *William Tell* and Alvarado in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. This in turn led to engagements in Europe and the United States. Björling made his American concert debut in Carnegie Hall in 1937. The following year, he made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera as Rodolfo in *La bohème*.

Björling went on to become one of the principal singers at the Metropolitan Opera during the 1940s and 1950s, with an interruption during World War II. He sang many major tenor roles in operas in the French and Italian repertoires, including *Il trovatore*, *Rigoletto*, *Alba, Un ballo in maschera*, *Pagliacci*, *Cavalletta mazziana*, *Fanci, Ramo di juleika*, *La bohème*, *Maddama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and *Manon Lescaut*.

On 15 March 1960, Björling suffered a heart attack before a performance of *La bohème* at London's Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. However, he still performed that night. He died of heart-related causes (enlarged heart) six months later in Sigtuna, Sweden, aged 49. One of his final recordings was the Verdi *Requiem*, conducted by Fritz Reiner for Decca Records which was recorded as late as June 1960 alongside Leonie Price, Rosalind Elias and Giorgio Tozzi. He is buried in the little church cemetery at Sigtuna, Sweden.

Recording and restoration notes

This recording was issued on Robin Hood Records RHR 5021-5023, and is credited as a "private recording" on the record labels. The performance had been broadcast by NBC radio, and there is aural evidence that the present recordings was most likely taken from this transmission. As was standard practice in 1959, the fourth and fifth acts are both cut and rearranged in order from the original score - despite its popularity, Faust had never been performed in its full version at the Metropolitan Opera by the time of this performance. The Robin Hood LPs would appear to have been mastered from what I would expect to be acetate LP recordings, with little or no evidence of any processing or remastering at the time - some clicks from those original masters were evident on the LPs used for these transfers - clearly distinct from the surface clicks of the RHR sides.

The sound quality of the LPs was somewhat muted and lacking in bass, something I've rectified as much as was possible. The top end extends to around 12kHz, which suggests a broadcast source; bass was variable but noticeable throughout - slightly more so after XR re-squaslation brought out top end clarity in the recording. Some of the disc sides displayed a greater degree of high frequency hiss than others, and there was a tendency for the pitch to droop somewhat towards the end of each LP side, something which is now correctable. I've used very mild pitch stabilisation throughout - taking into account of course the inappropriateness of "correcting" vocal vibrato! I've also been able to fix some occasional dropouts. The final result is a complete transformation of the sound heard on the original sources to something which I hope does full justice to a great performance from one of the greatest singers of all time.

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GOUNOD

Faust

Jussi Björling
as Faust

Elisabeth Söderström
as Marguerite
Gesare Siepi
as Méphistophélès

Robert Merrill Valentin
Mildred Miller Stéphen
Thelma Voitypla Martine
Roald Reitan Wagner

Orchestra & Chorus of the
Metropolitan Opera
Conducted by Jean Morel

Live performance,
19 December 1959

Gounod Faust

- [1] **ACT ONE** Introduction (5:33)
- [2] Rien!... En vain j'interroge (8:16)
- [3] Mais ce Dieu, que peut-il pour moi (10:17)
- [4] **ACT TWO** Vin ou biere, biere ou vin (4:22)
- [5] O sainte medaille (1:43)
- [6] Avant de quitter ces lieux (4:53)
- [7] Le veau d'or est toujours debout (2:01)
- [8] Merci de ta chanson! (5:34)
- [9] Attendons! - Ainsi que la brise legere (6:34)
- [10] **ACT THREE** Faites-lui mes aveux (4:44)
- [11] C'est ici - Suivez-moi! (2:02)
- [12] Quel trouble Inconnu me penetre (7:46)
- [13] Je voudrais bien savoir quel etait ce jeune homme (7:20)
- [14] Ah! je ris de me voir si belle (4:06)
- [15] Seigneur Dieu, que vois-je! (2:07)
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- [1] Ne m'apportez-vous rien de lui? (8:25)
- [2] Il se fait tard! Adieu! (4:18)
- [3] O nuit d'amour! Ciel radieux! (8:34)
- [4] **ACT FOUR** Seigneur, daignez permettre a votre humble servante (9:38)
- [5] Deposons les armes (7:48)
- [6] Vous qui faites l'endormie (3:02)
- [7] Que voulez-vous, Messieurs? (3:58)
- [8] Par ici, mes amis! (6:14)
- [9] **ACT FIVE** Dans les bruyeres, dans les roseaux (3:31)
- [10] Jusqu'aux premiers feux du matin (4:30)
- [11] Que ton ivresse, ô volupté (1:11)
- [12] Qu'as tu donc? (1:30)
- [13] Va t'en! Le jour va luire (5:11)
- [14] Mon coeur est pénétré d'épouvante (6:36)
- [15] Alerte! Alerte! (4:58)