

Four Generations in A Family of Musicians

Raymond Björling, a Swedish opera singer, and grandson of the world-renowned tenor Jussi Björling (1911-60), spoke at the concluding panel of the Schiller Institute conference in Berlin on Feb. 26.¹

It's nice to be here in Berlin, it means a lot to me. When I was seven years old, we moved here to Berlin—me, my mother, my sister, and my father. My father was a good opera singer and he was engaged at the Deutsche Oper, here in Berlin, where we lived in Königsallee, near the big forest, Grünewald. It was a fantastic time, because we came here straight from America, where I was born in 1956.

My father made his debut in 1962 in Gothenburg, Sweden performing as Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly*, and then he was engaged to move down here, where I went to the Deutsch-Amerikanische JFK-schule, where I learned to speak the language fluently in those days, which is one of the reasons I am back here.

Ulf [Sandmark] wanted me to speak on singing and my background, but it is so interesting to learn that the LaRouche movement is integrating music and art into its political work. That is fantastic, because music and art are so very, very important to human beings, more than we would actually believe. It has been the main purpose for my family.

Great-Grandfather David Björling

My grandfather's name was Jussi Björling, and he was considered the world's greatest tenor in his day. The work, however, had begun before Jussi. His father, David, was a great singer, a very special man. He wanted to sing at a very early age, and he was very stubborn. He was only 15-16 years of age, when he started to sing professionally, with choirs, and he wanted to go to [music] school.

His father had a problem with that, because in those days you had to learn a trade. In our family, we were



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Raymond Björling addresses the Schiller Institute conference, with a photo of his grandfather Jussi Björling on the screen behind him.

blacksmiths, so David was supposed to become one too, against his will. His father didn't know what to do with him, because without an education, would not be able to support himself or a family. His father was so upset, that he sent him off to a friend of his, a very tough man, who said he would make a man out of this boy. After a month, though, he sent David back, saying: "I can do nothing with him, he's too stubborn! He only wants to sing and play music."

David therefore left his family for Stockholm, where he began to study music. He was a smart man, because every time that the King appeared publicly, David would be there too, singing. The King of Sweden in those days, Oscar II, himself wanted to be a tenor; because he was so impressed with David's singing, he ended up paying, out of his own wallet, for him to study at the conservatory of music in Vienna. There he studied, got a good degree, and came back to Sweden, to make his debut in Gothenburg, on the eve of World War I, performing Pinkerton in "Madame Butterfly," as my father did after him. He was a great singer, and I have read the great reviews he received. But when the conductor later tried to instruct him, he refused stubbornly, and therefore, shortly after, his opera career ended, because he was considered too difficult to work with.

Instead, he found work making machines that separate cream from milk, until he grew tired of that, and suddenly, one day, he disappeared. Nobody knew where he went, so that after a few years, a death certificate was

1. The video of his presentation is at <http://www.schiller-institut.de/seiten/201202-berlin/bjorling-english.html>

almost written out. But he had taken the boat to America, and had started to sing, just to make a living, in restaurants and all around.

Somebody was impressed, and took him to the Metropolitan Opera school, where he ended up studying under [Enrico] Caruso himself. However, when Caruso began to instruct him, he would become very stubborn again, saying, “No, I want to sing in my own way.” At one point, there was a big disagreement, to the degree that Caruso slapped him in the face and David slapped Caruso back, and he packed his bags and went back to Sweden.

In Sweden, they only now discovered that he had been to New York. He went back up north, to Borlänge, Dalarna, and met a beautiful lady by the name of Esthersund. She was singing in a choir, in which they met; they fell in love, and all of a sudden began to produce all of these boys! [shows photo] There had been four boys, but the fourth boy, Karl, died at birth, and his mother died of tuberculosis. Therefore David was left alone with these three boys.

He started singing with them at a very early age, 4-5 years old. He taught them how to sing, and took them out to perform concerts. This constellation was called the Björling Male Quartet, and they sang all over, and the small boys, standing on boxes to elevate their height, would cause many ladies to cry. David would perform with them, although unfortunately, there’s no recording of him—it was said that he had a marvelous voice. As the boys grew older, after a while, he took them back to America.

They toured all over America for 18 months. In the Swedish and Scandinavian regions of the U.S., a lot of people recognized the popular Swedish songs. They became so popular, that you could make an analogy to Michael Jackson and the Jackson family. It was just like that. . . . It was a very remarkable family, who all sang. Olla, the smallest one, only started his singing career later; my father was an opera singer, my aunt was an opera singer, so I think that we’ve had nine family members who sang professionally.

‘Music Is So Important. . .’

Music has meant so much for my family, and also gave us a chance to stay alive, by the little money it offered. Music is very, very important, and it’s sad to see the modern culture, the pop culture, that just wants to make a profit and simplifies everything, instead of trying to find art that talks to your heart and gives you something. . . .

A man who has written one of the most beautiful

songs regarding art and music is Franz Schubert, “An Die Musik,” which I would like to perform for you. . . .

So, you see music is very important to all of us. Of course it’s very important to us who sing and perform it, but even for young people nowadays, think about how important music can help to soothe people. Music is a universal language, and if you know music, you can talk with anyone in the whole world who understands music. We don’t need scores with notes, we just need the music, and then we can perform together.

That’s fantastic and should be a part of politics in this world, because it can break up the ice. The problem in the world is that we don’t understand each other. If everybody could speak the same language, it would be easier. It’s the same for these boys—these boys didn’t have an education, but with the music, they could perform together. They could go all over the world and people could understand them. All of these three boys became great singers. You have of course heard of the three tenors, but these three boys, actually, could have been the three tenors.

There is something to say about the color of their voices. The only way that their voices differed, was that Gösta, the oldest one, his voice sounded like gold; Ulla sounded like silver; but Jussi had a sound like steel. That’s how they were divided in character, but otherwise, it’s very hard to tell the difference among the three. It came from their father, who had this idea of how you should sing, and that gave them hope for life, and meant that they could travel the world and communicate through their music.

Grandfather Jussi Björling

Jussi started very young; he was only 17 years when he came to the opera school in Stockholm. Now, that is a very young age, so the head of the school, John Forsell, only reluctantly let the boy audition. After performing, Jussi came up to Forsell, who was quiet—not a word was said. After a couple of minutes, he looked up from his desk and said: “Mr. Björling, I cannot do anything for you!” So that Jussi thought that he had done a bad audition, but Forsell continued: “No, I cannot do anything, God has already done everything.” So, he was accepted at the opera school, which was tough for such a young person with all the tough competition, but the quality of his voice was so good, that nobody picked on him, in any way, shape, or form.

One day, when he came late to a choir session in a big church, the conductor told him they could not use him,

that he should go home and never come back. Jussi walked out and slammed the door, but then he opened the door again and said, “Okay, I am going, but try to find a better tenor, if you can!”

So, he knew of his greatness, and his voice took him all the way to the Metropolitan Opera. This, of course, was a big thing, because when you go to the Metropolitan, you don’t just go to the Metropolitan, but you tour all the big opera houses in the United States. So, in this way he became world famous.

He was back in Sweden during the [Second World] War, and couldn’t go back [to the United States], because he was afraid of crossing the sea and getting bombed, so he stayed in Europe and toured all over. He once sang here in Berlin, after the war, and became a star in Europe.

Once there was a young man in Italy, by the name of Luciano Pavarotti, who listened to one of the old recordings of Jussi Björling and was inspired to try to become as good as Jussi. I met Pavarotti once, and he told me that he would have otherwise become a professional football player. There are pictures where you can see him dressed up for football, very slim and tall. But, then the opera took over, and he became a little bit bigger.

‘I Couldn’t Stop Singing’

All of this has of course colored my life and myself as a singer. I didn’t want to sing, actually, because I grew up in the backseat of a car with my mother, touring all over, with my father in the front seat and a pianist next to him. We did this for a couple of years, which was very boring for a young boy. I didn’t want to have the same kind of grown-up life, where you always have to sit there at the concerts, not allowed to laugh at anything, because it was very serious business.

And so I decided not to start singing. I tried to do something different after school. I tried to become a salesman and did a lot of jobs, up until the day that my father became a little bit nervous about all of this. One day put his arm around my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and said, “Please, you have to try to sing.” I agreed, and then from that day on, I just couldn’t stop. That is what hap-



Jussi Björling (1911-60), was considered the world’s greatest tenor in his day.

pens when you start with music: It grabs you, and once you’re in there, you cannot leave.

So, I’m here. I’m still going to sing. Now nobody else wants to hire me, because I don’t know anything else apart from singing, but it’s a fantastic world. I want to sing a little Swedish song for you, which can be compared with “An die Musik,” by a Swedish composer named Carl Leopold Sjöberg, and the song is called “Tonerna,” meaning “the tones.” In life, we have a lot of thoughts that go around in our mind and often mess us up, but as the text says, the tones, the music, soothes and heals. . . .

Here’s another picture of Jussi. I am very, very proud of

him. Proud to be his grandson. This is my father, Rolf Björling, when he sang here in Berlin. I really wished I could have stayed longer or even permanently here, but times were hard and my father had gotten a job in Sweden, as both he and my mother were longing for Sweden, with their family and everything. We moved back in 1965. My sister, who actually started singing first, was sent to a music school, which I wasn’t, because they thought I was too young. My sister and I then ended up doing a concert together, in which she was so nervous, that she ended up quitting singing completely, even though she had a very beautiful voice. Instead, she became an interior decorator, and works with that and with art in Sweden. My mother is a very good painter, so art is in our family.

Art is not easy, these days, because most people think of it as a hobby, which is really sad, since that holds people back. There’s not much money in art and music, unless you’re a big star, of which there are only few. . . . That’s something we have to change. We have to see art as something big in our lives, which means something to us. Everywhere you look, there’s an artist behind it, which we tend to forget. . . .

Finally, before I leave, I want to perform one last song, which has always been one of my favourites, namely Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Adelaide.” And that is my final word today. It has been a pleasure talking to you today and I hope to see you all again.