

## Jussi Bjorling's autograph

There has always been much interest in signed objects by famous people. It is as if just a small piece of that person is embodied by the autograph so that the interested party is able to feel closer to the particular individual and is able to "connect" with that person who they feel so strongly about. Clearly the artist was there in person to sign the photograph or programme or autograph book and in that the connection is a very real one. In some ways an autograph also acts to keep the past present and this is another attraction of possessing one.

According to Andrew Ramage 2011, who runs an autograph business, "with the advent of the internet, the whole memorabilia industry has undergone a sudden down turn. There are more fakes than ever, coming not only from **dealers**, but from people desperate to make money". This may well be true because recently three Jussi Bjorling autographs appeared for sale on ebay, from the same person and at least one of them I thought was a fake and another was quite unusual. It was this event which prompted me to consider writing this article. However, the fact that three autographs appeared for sale at the same time and from the same vendor is in itself no grounds for suspicion. Collectors collect, and one autograph is often not enough! Some years ago I spoke to an assistant in the Met shop who was keen to sell me a Jussi Bjorling autograph and who referred to the problem that they had had with fakes and forgeries. This was the first time I had heard of the problem and I was a bit dubious of its existence then, even as I am, at least of the scale of it, now. However, it would seem that some forgeries do exist and for us "Jussiphiles" this is cause for concern because we are the group who are most likely to want to purchase an autograph and who amongst us can afford the disappointment or financial loss of buying a fake? The problem is that as desirable as they are to us, Jussi Bjorling autographs are not cheap! The ones on ebay sold for £200 -£300 each, but from a dealer these autographs would sell for as much as £800 or more. It may well be that the ebay items sold cheaply because prospective purchasers were aware that they were taking a chance as to the authenticity of the items, whereas items bought from dealers, particularly well known ones come with an implied seal of authenticity.

Signature forgery is not a new phenomenon and was rife even as far back as Queen Elizabeth I reign, though for somewhat different reasons and it was because of this that her signature was underlined in a fairly complicated manner. The detection of forgeries is a highly specialized branch of graphology where even experts occasionally disagree about authenticity as was the case with the Hitler Diaries some years ago. However, although I am somewhat skeptical about what I perceive as a pseudo-scientific approach to graphology, I feel I must confess that I believe that "intuition" may well play a significant part in the detection of forgeries and that there is undoubtedly some basis to graphology.

Why then should Bjorling's autograph fetch so much? Clearly desirability is a factor, and that desirability in this case is due to the fact that we recognise all the merits of Bjorling's voice and in this recognition we admire the greatest tenor in his particular genre that has ever recorded. There are other factors too, and a major one is rarity value. Thinking of two major examples of tenors who signed much and whose autographs are very desirable but vary considerably in value, I think of Enrico Caruso and Beniamino Gigli, both famous, with exceedingly good voices and reputations. One reason that they differ so much

in value is that Gigli's career came after Caruso's. But the main factor is that Caruso was the first singer to have a major recording career making his autograph especially desirable and consequently his autograph is worth perhaps three times that of Gigli's. So, sometimes fame can overtake the lack of rarity value and desirability becomes the most important consideration.

In some cases a star's rise to fame is so meteoric that they are not inclined to sign much, well that is one reason why they might be disinclined to sign. A short career and a taciturn, difficult personality also increase the rarity factor. So famous, desirable, rare autographs are the most sought after and fetch the most money and Jussi Bjorling's autograph falls into this category and it is here where the trouble really starts because with valuable autographs comes an increased temptations to forge them.

The item which is signed is important too. A photograph connects best with an artist, then a programme and finally an autograph in an autograph book, which doesn't connect in the same way at all really. Sometimes autographs are matted with photographs with attractive results but the connection here is artificial even though the photograph and autograph might be and often are contemporary.

In some ways it is difficult to forge a Jussi Bjorling autograph convincingly. After all it has been more than 50 years now since he signed anything. The paper on which the autograph is signed needs to be at least 50 years old and for that matter so does the ink. However, just consider how many programmes were not signed in comparison to those that were and it is quite easy and cheap to buy an unsigned programme. Mostly though there are things which make it possible to be fairly certain that a signature is genuine. It is really the purpose of this article to make us more aware of what is authentic and genuine, by comparison. Consequently I have studied around 70 autographs of Bjorling in the hope of being able to give very definite pointers as to what is genuine and what is not. The situation is not helped by the fact that Jussi Bjorling signed things in at least two distinctly different ways! Also it is quite conceivable that he might have experimented with his signature from time to time too. For example, I have a photograph signed just "Jussi" 52, and although I have not seen this type of signing by Jussi Bjorling the signature is compelling. One further problem with this signature is that it is signed on the dark part of the photo, otherwise I would include it as an example here.

An autograph can be defined as a person's artistic signature and therein lies the distinction between Autograph and Signature and it may well be the case that Jussi Bjorling realized this distinction, if not consciously then at least practically.

It is only really when we become adult that we have to begin to sign things, from legal documents to cheques. Some of us have to sign more than others and I suppose that the more famous we are the greater the consideration we put into the development of our signature. We want our signature to be representative of our name, we want it to be unique to us and not easily forgeable and we want it to say something about ourselves, or at least not say something negative, for example that we are untidy or have poor hand-eye coordination, or that we are weak physically or willed etc and so our autograph/signature develops. The signature stands for the writer himself and in many ways can be considered the writers persona on paper and how he wishes to be perceived by the world. The signature

is more important to someone young and aspiring and less so to someone who is mature and who has succeeded and this might explain in part why autographs appear to change with age and become somewhat less elaborate and more cursive in style. The signature can to some degree be considered the symbol of the “ego” of the writer on paper. Often a public figure may possess two signature types, one for the public and the other an indication of the private self.

Personally, I am somewhat dubious about considering the graphology of an autograph. There are supposed to be recognised traits and characteristics which are meaningful in determining the characteristics of a person from a specimen of handwriting. I am not convinced about this either, to me it sounds rather like pseudo-science, apart from the obvious characteristics which anyone might imagine. However, when considering an autograph alone one has very little to work with, and what there is, is produced in a very specific atmosphere and circumstance. But there must be some basic traits and characteristics of autographs that are meaningful. The problem is that in the articles and books I have read about the graphology of autographs the author knows of the signatory and he then relates the characteristics of the autograph to the characteristics he is aware of, of the individual. In one account I read where a well known person was described there was no reference to a major criminal defect which has now recently come to light. One would have expected some sort of oblique reference to this major criminal characteristic if indeed there is any real basis to Graphology.

Jussi Bjorling at seventeen years with a well developed signature, that can only be described as elegant.

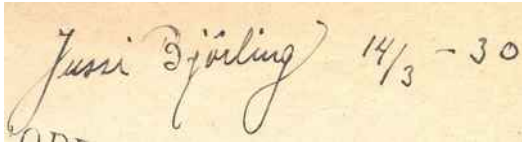
old

So now let us consider this in the light of what we know about Jussi Bjorling. We are told from many sources not the least by his children that he had feelings of unworthiness concerning his education which he knew to be not up to the standard set by the Swedish authorities of the time. He was also a young star with apparent limitless potential. So it was in this general atmosphere that he began to develop his autograph and he perfected the signature I shall refer to as his “classic” signature which remained remarkably constant throughout life. One would expect to see a fairly well developed flamboyant



his

signature with a degree of aesthetic appeal written in a confident, neat, co-ordinated fashion and I think that this is what we get. It is interesting too to note that Jussi got top marks at school when he was 7 years old for penmanship.



Jussi Björling 14/3 - 30



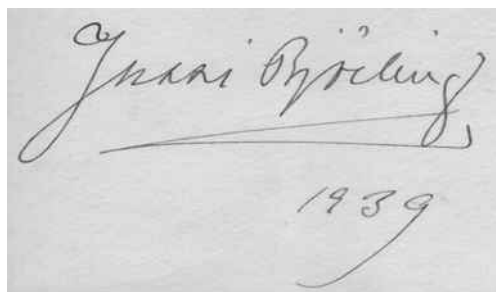
Stockholm den 6 december 1933.  
Opot Kinder  
Jussi Björling



Ernie Photographic  
Jussi Björling  
Wien 29-30-31 1936



Jussi Björling  
PROGRAMME  
Roumanian Rhapsody



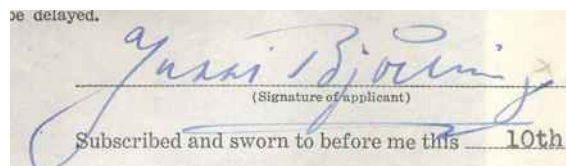
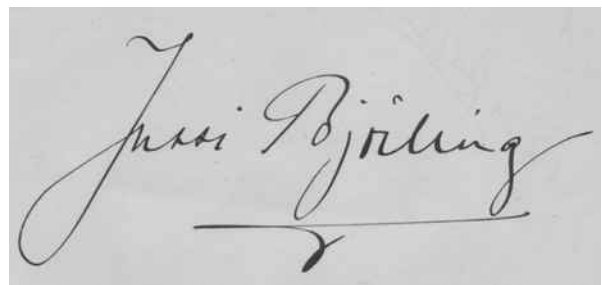
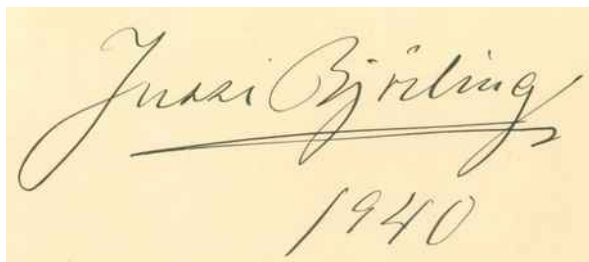
Jussi Björling  
1939

The first five autographs which are pre 1940 indicate how Bjorling developed his signature. The first one when Jussi was 17 years old is a fully formed elegant signature and then there seems to have been a period of signature experimentation. The second dated 14.3.30 is the most basic, undeveloped one. The down stroke of the B is missing. The signature is very clear and comes from a music sheet. The third autograph of the series is less carefully made. It is from a contract that Jussi Bjorling made with an impresario Olof Linder for 1934 and is dated 6.12.33. Here again our attention is drawn to the down stroke of the B. There are several characteristics of this autograph which remain fairly constant throughout the remainder of Bjorling's life. The umlaut over the o is never penned as two dots but always as an upward curve, the ends of which signify the dots. The J is shown in a form something like its classic form and the autograph is underlined, yet another common characteristic.

In the autograph from Vienna we see a signature that could well have come from a much later period. Again the down stroke of the B draws our attention because as a stroke it is absent and has become an integral part of the B. This situation with the B occurs time and time again, sometimes the down stroke is present and other times it is just an integral part of the B.

The fifth autograph was donated to the museum in Borlänge by Lars Björling. It is on a programme which marked Bjorling's Carnegie Hall debut recital 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1937. Its authenticity is therefore as guaranteed as any. The programme appears to have been signed with a crayon at least a couple of times and illustrates perhaps an "embryonic" attempt at what was to become Jussi's "classic" autograph style. As Jan-Olof Damberg put it "it looks rather childish" and actually it does.

The final autograph from this pre 1940 section is one from an autograph book dated 1939. Here we find the fully developed "classic" style.



Programme 25.10.42

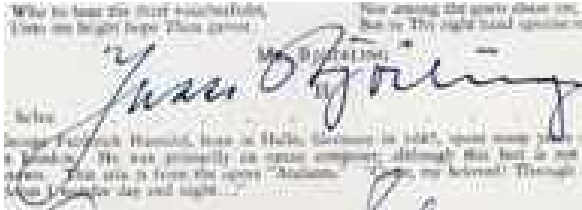
Contract 10.9.46



PC Rigoletto c. 1948



Photo Trovatore c. 1948



Programme 17.1.47 Montclair N.J.



Programme Swedish Concert 29.9.48



Photo SF 1948



Photo 1948

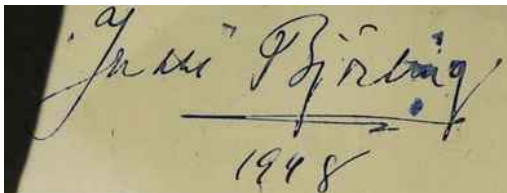
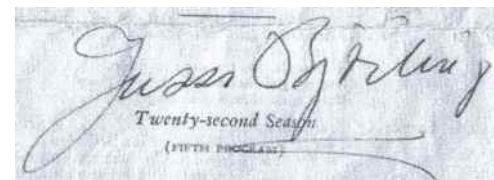
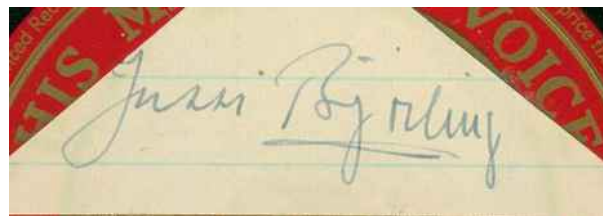


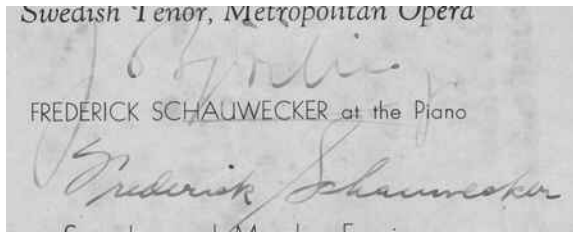
Photo 1948



Programme 1.4.49



Record label Unknown date c. 1949 when released

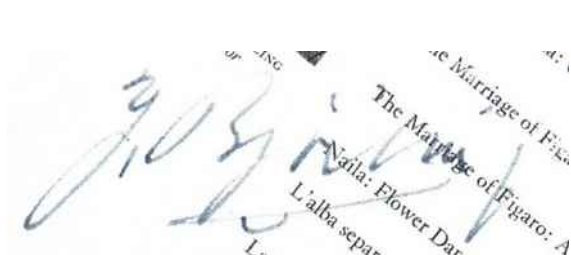


Metropolitan Opera concert programme 8/10.4.50 Don Carlo 1950 signed Met opera photo

The cursive signature on the 1950 Don Carlo photo is probably the worst example of Bjorling's signature that I have seen but there are characteristics which support its authenticity.



Programme La Scala May 1951



Standard Hour programme 30.9.51

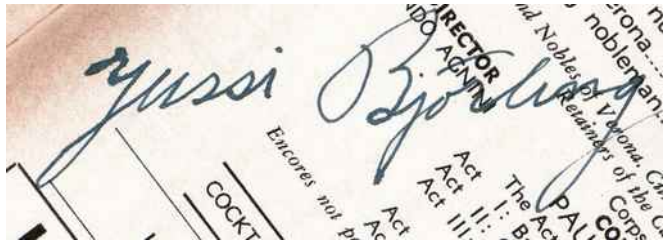
As we mature, how our persona is perceived becomes less important to us. This was undoubtedly the case with Jussi Bjorling too. He had achieved an unassailable position on the world's operatic stage and found that he had little more to prove, certainly via his autograph. He was not an especially generous autograph giver and so two types of autograph or signature developed. One was his "classic" autograph which was probably used when signing for friends or when he sat down especially to sign, his considered, planned autograph, and another signature emerged which he probably used "on the run" and which illustrates a far more cursive form of his autograph.



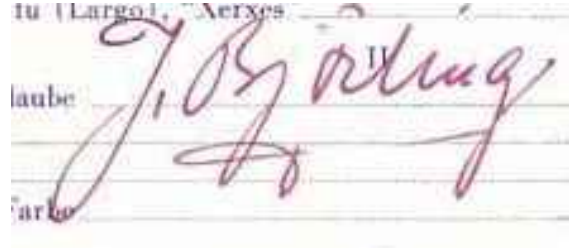
Both of these two signatures were ostensibly penned on the same occasion at a concert at the Royal Albert Hall London, 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1952.

Neither of these two autographs looks compellingly genuine and yet there is just enough similarity to authenticated versions to consider them both so. These programmes could well have been signed at the

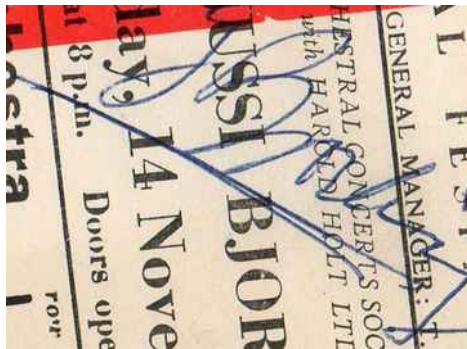
beginning and end of a signing session or perhaps the feint one was penned when Bjorling was rushing out the door intent on going back to his hotel for a rest.



Programme Romeo SF opera 29.10 51



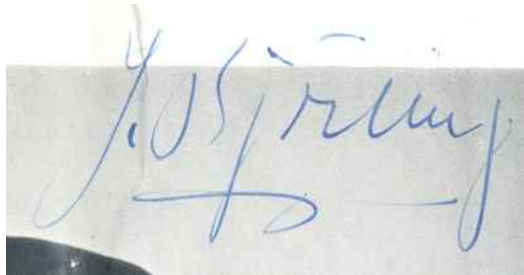
Programme 1.4.52



Concert ticket 14.11.52



Programme Philips Memorial Auditorium 12.12.53



Programme London June 1953



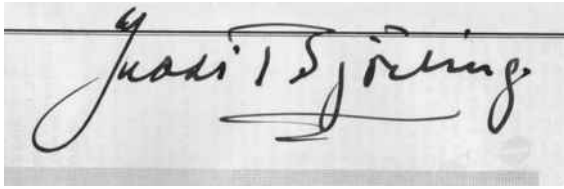
Programme South Africa August 1954

It is interesting to compare the signatures given on Programmes about a year apart, above, because although these signatures are of a cursive nature they are remarkably similar, whereas the two signatures given in South Africa in August 1954 are rather dissimilar.

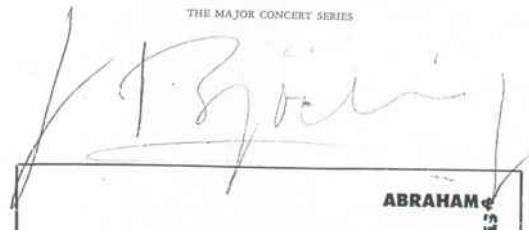


EP ERA134 c. 1954

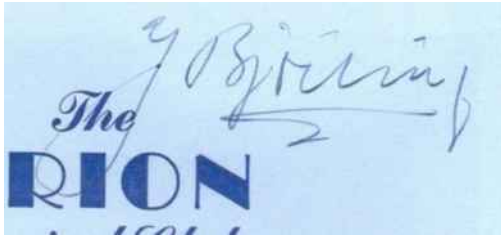




Programme South Africa 1954



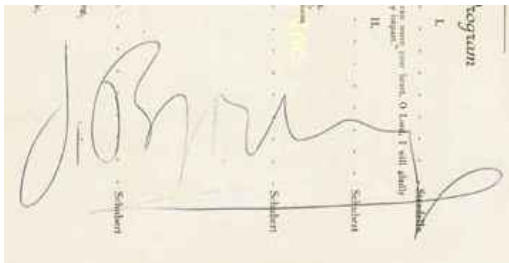
Programme 11.12.56



Programme 24.2.56



Programme 14.4.56



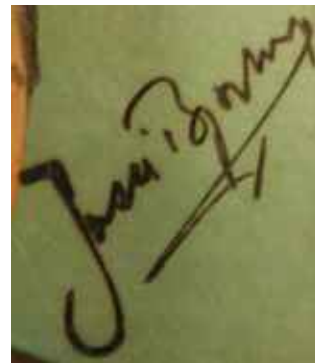
Programme 24.11.56



Programme 6.4.58



Photo c.1958 Jussi and Anne-Charlotte

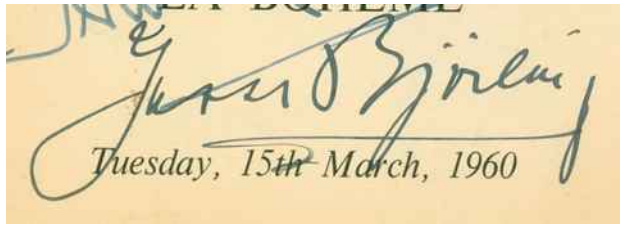


LM2003 c.1956

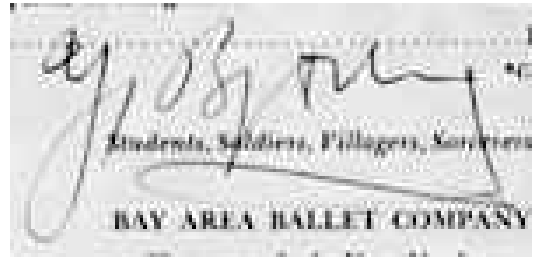
And signed by Anna- Lisa also

It does seem undeniable that as time went on Jussi cared less about his signature. More of the cursive type of signature appeared and the Jussi was often replaced with a simple J. When I first saw Jussi's signature on the photo with Ann-Charlotte at the piano and Jussi looking on some years ago, I thought it was a forgery. However in the light of all the signatures contained here it is clear that it is genuine even

though it had become almost a caricature of itself. Its authenticity is further confirmed by the signature of Anna-Lisa just below it. Her signature varied very little throughout her signing life.



Royal Opera House Programme 15.3.60



Programme Faust 1.4.60

Undoubtedly, the most sought after of Jussi Bjorling's signatures are the elaborate "classic" ones. Not only is the autograph more aesthetically pleasing but one gets the impression that Bjorling was concentrating more on producing a good autograph which as well as being less "slap-dash" would seem to contain more of the Bjorling essence. A good signature on a nice 8" x 10" print is the most desirable item for the collector and is therefore the most expensive to buy. However, novelty too may play a part, a signed programme from an event you yourself have attended is indeed a priceless item!

When I started this article I expected to find far more of the "cursive" style of signature than I have and it might be that these signatures have just not survived. They may well have been considered forgeries or simply overlooked because they differ significantly from the neat "classic" style that we are all familiar with. The feint Albert Hall programme signature 1952, was bought by me as a programme only, it was only later that I discovered the signature. This survey has shown the variation within the two autograph types and actually how difficult it is to be absolutely certain of authenticity.

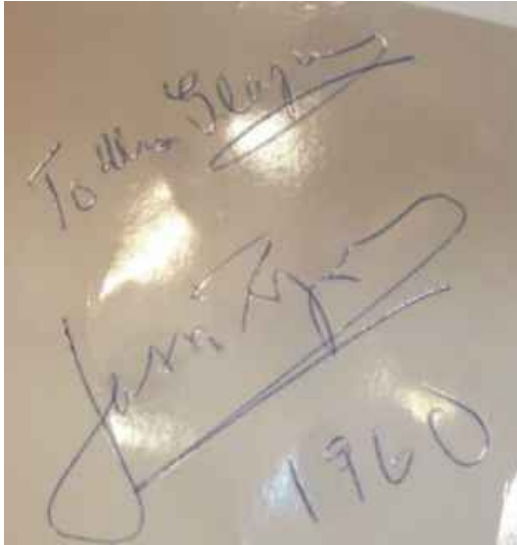
To return to the original question and the reason for writing this article, there were three Bjorling autographs for sale on ebay recently. Which ones were genuine?



£164



£196



£312

There are undeniable common traits in Bjorling's autograph, however although these are common they are not always present. For example Jussi is common especially in the autograph whereas J often suffices in the signature. The J has a couple of manifestations from flamboyant to a very simple form.

The B and the way the j joins it is often quite reliable.

The umlaut above the o is seldom if ever written as two dots but is commonly written as a line and often an upward curved line.

A line, underlining the signature is another common trait, with an embellishment in the end stroke often a feature of the autograph.

The ss of Jussi are always written in a certain way where there are no loops at their tops.

Consequently, it seems most unlikely that the middle autograph above is genuine.

Fortunately, it is fairly easy to date most of Jussi Bjorling's signatures, mainly through dated signatures, or where the date is implied from, for example, an opera or concert programme. There are some undated signatures and I have resisted the temptation to include those when considering my conclusions of how his autograph developed. They are represented in the addendum.

## **Addendum**

This addendum contains all the autographs that I was not able to date with any accuracy. However, there were things about them which encouraged me to order them in what I thought was chronological order.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this article including Richard Copeman, Ray Harsant, and Harald Henrysson and especially Jan-Olof Damberg.

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