

Press release

Birgit Nilsson Prize awarded to Plácido Domingo

An event in remembrance of a great singer

Stockholm, 14 October 2009

Plácido Domingo has been named the first recipient of the Birgit Nilsson Prize. He was awarded the Prize by H.M. King Carl XVI Gustaf at a festive ceremony held at the Royal Swedish Opera. The audience, many well-known, witnessed a grand evening of celebration – and a very emotional Prize winner.

On the very stage where Birgit Nilsson made her debut, H.M. King Carl XVI Gustaf presented the first Birgit Nilsson Prize to star tenor, conductor and opera house director Plácido Domingo. With a one million dollar award, it is the most generous prize in the world of classical music. "The Prize money will greatly benefit my annual competition Operalia," said a visibly moved Plácido Domingo. In an emotional speech, he said it was "unbelievable" to be standing on the stage where Nilsson had performed so many times, calling her "one of the greatest artists, if not the greatest."

An evening to honour Nilsson

Plácido Domingo paid tribute to the *primadonna assoluta* in his acceptance speech, and the evening's praise of Nilsson extended to include her fearsome business sense that so impressed opera house directors and the humour, kindness and modesty that made her such a beloved friend. In his tribute, Hans-Peter Lehmann, Director and former Artistic Director of the Hanover State Opera, described her singing as a force of nature: "This was where art and nature reached their pinnacle. Time, space, reality – they all simply melted away." In her speech honouring the Prize winner, Royal Swedish Opera Artistic Director Birgitta Svendén recalled how much the two great artists had in common. Although they shared the stage in only three productions, they shared a lifelong mutual admiration: "They were artistic soul mates."

Glittering gala dinner

The award ceremony was accompanied by music from Nina Stemme, who was supported by Birgit Nilsson and Plácido Domingo as a young artist, and from the Royal Swedish Orchestra conducted by Gregor Bühl. Following the ceremony, guests were invited to Stockholm City Hall to dine in the presence of Their Majesties. The menu featured venison from Södermanland, a region south of Stockholm. Guests included Swedish Culture Minister Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth, violinist Julian Rachlin and Eva Wagner-Pasquier, Director of the Bayreuth Festival.

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An auspicious beginning

Professor Rutbert Reisch, President of the Birgit Nilsson Foundation, which organised the event, was happy that the evening's celebration was a great success. "Expectations have been set high for future award ceremonies." The location and date of the next presentation have not yet been determined, but the Prize will be awarded every second or third year for outstanding achievement in opera or concert by a singer or a conductor, or to a specific opera production. Birgit Nilsson selected the first winner herself before her death. "We will now appoint an international jury to name the next Prize winner," Professor Reisch added.

Photos, video clip, and TV and audio material are freely available for download at:
www.birgitnilssonprize.org

Caption for attached photo

H.M. King Carl XVI Gustaf presents Plácido Domingo the one million dollar Birgit Nilsson Prize for outstanding achievement in opera and concert.

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About the Birgit Nilsson Prize

In the early eighties, towards the end of her long and distinguished career, the legendary Swedish dramatic soprano Birgit Nilsson decided to establish a foundation for a Prize to be awarded every second or third year in the amount of one million dollars for outstanding achievement by:

- A singer in the field of opera and/or concert and/or oratorio
- A conductor in the classical field of opera and/or concert
- A specific production by an opera company, as long as this production is outstandingly cast and conducted and, most importantly, staged in the spirit of the composer.

Birgit Nilsson chose the Spanish tenor and conductor Plácido Domingo to be the first winner, but kept her choice a secret during her lifetime. The name of the winner was only revealed by the Birgit Nilsson Foundation on 20 February 2009.

According to the provisions of the Birgit Nilsson Foundation, its Board shall appoint a jury consisting of prominent figures in the classical music field for a three-year term. The jury shall give its recommendation to the Foundation Council. In keeping with Ms Nilsson's wishes, the Prize may be given to two designees, in which case the Prize is split in half. Also, the Prize may never be awarded to the same person twice.

About Birgit Nilsson

Birgit Nilsson (1918–2005) was the world's leading dramatic soprano of her time, excelling in the operas of Wagner ("The Ring Cycle" and "Tristan und Isolde"), Strauss ("Salome", "Elektra" and "Die Frau ohne Schatten"), Puccini ("Tosca" and "Turandot"), Verdi ("Aida", "Un Ballo in Maschera" and "Macbeth") as well as many other operas. During her legendary career, she performed regularly at all major opera houses like Stockholm, Bayreuth, Vienna, Milan, London, Paris, Munich, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Buenos Aires and others.

Following her debut at the Stockholm Opera in 1946, her international career began in the early fifties with debuts in Glyndebourne, Bayreuth, Vienna and Munich, to be followed by debuts in North and South America in the mid-fifties. Her opening of La Scala season 1958 as Turandot, her 1959 New York debut as Isolde at the Metropolitan Opera and her performances as Isolde and Brunhilde in Wieland Wagner's productions in Bayreuth were considered milestones in her career.

Ms Nilsson took her farewell from the operatic stage in the role of Elektra in 1982.

Further information on the Birgit Nilsson Prize and pictures of Birgit Nilsson at www.birgitnilssonprize.org.

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