

John Joubert

Lyrta

Piano Concerto Martin Jones

Symphony No. 3 on themes from 'Jane Eyre'



BBC National Orchestra of Wales
conducted by William Boughton

‘Communication is important to me. I want to be understood, enjoyed and used. I do not want to live in the enclosed and artificial world of “Contemporary Music”, but in the repertory of musicians whom I respect, in the schools, in the churches, and in the theatre’.¹ These assertions by South-African born, British composer John Joubert reflect his desire to speak directly to audiences and they, in turn, have responded warmly to his finely crafted and immediately approachable scores. He would surely concur with Benjamin Britten that it is a creative artist’s job ‘to be useful – and to the living’.²

Deep-rooted and hard won, Joubert’s scores do not rely on outlandish forces or pyrotechnical solo passages to make their mark. Elements of knowing irony or subversive parody are hardly ever admitted into his inherently serious and, above all, sincere musical language. Neither carving a niche in the chilly outer regions of the avant-garde, nor nestling within the suffocating, snugly embrace of the witlessly ‘accessible’, his pieces make their point through such authentic but low-key facets as economy of gesture, idiomatic writing and firm grasp of structure. The high calibre of his material is inextricably linked to its individual, protean ideas.

He was born in Cape Town on 20 March 1927. His father was a descendant of French Protestant settlers and his mother’s ancestors were Dutch. He received his earliest instruction in music from his mother, an accomplished pianist who had studied in London with Harriet Cohen. His schooling took place at the Diocesan College in Rondebosch, an Anglican foundation run along the lines of an English public school. The director of music there, Claude Brown, who had been an assistant to Ivor Atkins at Worcester Cathedral, introduced his young pupil to the choral works of Parry, Stanford and Elgar. Whilst at school, Joubert’s aspirations to be a painter were soon displaced by a passion for musical composition. He studied privately with the distinguished English-born composer William Henry Bell at the South African College of Music in Cape Town.

In 1946 he was awarded a scholarship by the Performing Right Society to study for four years at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where his composition teachers were Theodore Holland and Howard Ferguson and, for a stimulating term, Alan Bush. Whilst

¹ *John Joubert* (London: Novello & Co. Ltd, 1990), p.1.

² Ed. Ian Kemp, *Michael Tippett: a Symposium on his Sixtieth Birthday* (London, Faber and Faber Ltd, 1965), p.29.

at the Academy, he won several awards for composition, including the Lionel Tertis Prize (for a viola concerto), the Frederick Corder Prize (for a work for chorus and orchestra) and the Royal Philharmonic Society Prize (for a *Symphonic Study* for orchestra). During the final two years of his scholarship he composed a String Quartet and a *Divertimento for Piano Duet*, published subsequently as his Op.1 and Op.2, respectively.

Having graduated in 1950 with an external BMus degree from Durham University, he was appointed later the same year to a lectureship at the University of Hull. His music soon began to be widely performed, published and broadcast. In addition to meeting the challenges of a new job and a growing family,³ he continued to compose. Some of his best known and most popular works date from this time, such as the two carols, *Torches!*⁴ and *There is no rose of such virtue*⁵ and the anthem *O Lorde, the maker of al thing*, which won the Novello Anthem Composition Prize in 1952. Chief among his orchestral works from this period is the First Symphony of 1955, commissioned by the Hull Philharmonic Society.⁶ This formative piece is a perfect illustration of the composer's satisfying balance between head and heart, its emotional impulses regulated by a calm and wise intellect. His first full-length opera, *Silas Marner*, with a libretto after the novel by George Eliot, received its world premiere in Cape Town in 1961 and its European premiere in London later the same year. Smaller-scale works of the 1950s and early 1960s include an Octet, a String Trio and a one-movement Piano Sonata.

In 1962, Joubert was appointed to a Lectureship in Music at the University of Birmingham. He was subsequently promoted to a Senior Lectureship and then to a Readership. Commissions continued to come his way and the works he composed at Birmingham comprise the three-act Joseph Conrad opera *Under Western Eyes*, the oratorio *The Raising of Lazarus*, two more piano sonatas, several song-cycles and a considerable amount of church music.

³ Joubert was married in 1951 and his two children were born in 1954 and 1957.

⁴ Decca 448482 (2 CDs).

⁵ Priory PRCD1028 and SOMM SOMMCD 0166.

⁶ Lyrita SRCD322 and SRCG340.

Perhaps his most powerful piece connected with the country of his birth is the Second Symphony of 1970, a compelling, single-movement structure driven by his hatred of the apartheid system of government.⁷ Commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society and dedicated to the victims of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, this deeply personal and emotionally raw piece is also a tribute to Alan Paton's great novel 'Cry the Beloved Country', which Joubert at one stage considered as the basis of an opera.

In the early 1980s he began to feel that the increasing demands of his twin professions were becoming too onerous for him and he took early retirement from the University of Birmingham in 1986 in order to devote his time exclusively to composition. Since his retirement he has completed, as well as numerous smaller works, the full-length oratorio *Wings of Faith* and the large-scale choral-orchestral work *An English Requiem*, premiered in Gloucester Cathedral as the climax of his tenure as composer-in-residence at the 2010 Three Choirs Festival. His setting of the *St Mark Passion* received its first performance at Wells Cathedral as part of a service on Palm Sunday 2016, his 89th birthday.

Among his academic accolades are Honorary Doctorates from Durham University (1991) and the University of Birmingham (2007). He was made a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in 1957 and awarded an Honorary Fellowship of Birmingham Conservatoire in 2014.

The fact that his distinguished academic career was located outside the metropolitan musical scene, in Hull (1950-1962) and Birmingham (1962-1986) may explain why he has largely escaped the attention of the London-based 'British musical establishment' and consequently why most of the acclaim rightly afforded to his creative achievements has tended to be localised. In any event, quietly and with formidable determination and patience, he has built an impressive, consistently fine catalogue which is nearing 200 opus numbers.

A traditionalist by inclination, he is drawn to long-established formats such as sonatas, quartets, symphonies, concertos, carols, anthems, operas and oratorios. As he once put it, with characteristic modesty: 'Far from being stifled or overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the historical past, I have been inspired and energized by it to the extent

⁷ Dutton Vocalion CDLX7270.

that I can begin to see myself as a part – however insignificant – of a tradition which is not only alive, but which provides me with the material and subject-matter of my art'.⁸

Concertos dominate Joubert's orchestral music. These distinctive contributions to the genre temper the traditional elements of display in the solo part and the customary combative scheme of instrumentalist pitted against orchestral forces with a deep understanding of the symphonic attributes of long-range tonality, exploration of intervallic implications and formal integrity. The examples for violin (1954) and bassoon (1974) have yet to find a modern-day champion but his two most recent concertante works are available on disc: the elegant Concerto for oboe and string orchestra (2006) was included on a release by the Guild label,⁹ whilst Lyrita have recorded the elegiac Concerto for cello and chamber orchestra (2011) with soloist Raphael Wallfisch, for whom the work was written.¹⁰

It was after hearing the premiere of Joubert's First Symphony given by the Hull Philharmonic under Vilem Tausky in Hull City Hall on 12 April 1956 that Russian-born pianist Iso Elinson invited the composer to write him a **Piano Concerto**.¹¹ Completed in the summer of 1958, the resulting score is dedicated to Elinson, who gave the first performance of the work with the Hallé Orchestra under George Weldon on 11 January 1959 in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester. An orchestra of modest dimensions is required, consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (two players: side drum, bass drum, clash and suspended cymbals, gong) and strings.

In keeping with Joubert's instinctively symphonic approach to large-scale forms, the concerto is more of a *sinfonia concertante* than a bravura vehicle for pianistic display. The material exploits familiar, elemental forms such as arpeggios, scales and octaves. Several opportunities for bold rhetoric are provided by the piano's impressive

⁸ Ed. Brian Morton and Pamela Collins, *Contemporary Composers* (London: St James's Press, 1992), p.458.

⁹ Guild GMCD7383.

¹⁰ Lyrita SRCD344.

¹¹ Soloist in the Grieg Concerto during the first half of the concert, Elinson (1907-1964) stayed to hear the first performance of Joubert's symphony programmed after the interval and was duly impressed.

passagework, which deftly avoids extravagance or banality. By contrast, there is a beguiling innocence about the music's more tender moments.

Nearly all the main themes feature some prominent, accented repeated notes which give the work a close thematic unity. The material has a mercurial energy and the listener is given the impression of an imposing structure evolving bar by bar. There is no room for padding in a tightly-knit piece teeming with incident and felicitous invention.

The vigorous opening *Allegro* begins with an important four-note rhythmic motif in the upper strings, followed immediately by a second, related motif introduced by the lower strings that launches a sequence of rising fifths. The piano enters, taking up the rising fifth sequence and embellishing it with notable virtuosity. In the meantime, a third motif, also derived from the original, is heard in the lower strings. After this has abated, a more lyrical and extended secondary theme appears on the flute which in its turn is adopted by the piano. Both the development and the recapitulation sections are based on one or other of the thematic elements already outlined in the exposition. This turbulent movement does not conclude with a grand gesture, preferring instead a throwaway ending with the sort of droll, whispered distillation of the main motif with which Beethoven drew a discreet veil over the otherwise dynamic opening movement of his Eighth Symphony, as if to wonder, 'is this what all the fuss was about?'

Offering a satisfying, lyrical contrast to the rhythmic and dynamic energy of the concerto's outer movements, the central *Lento* begins with a theme on the piano lightly accompanied by the orchestra. In its use of repeated notes and intervals of fifths and octaves, it has a strong kinship with the first three motifs of the preceding movement. A second melody, expressive and songlike, follows on the orchestra, the piano now accompanying. In the subsequent impassioned exploration of this material, the dotted rhythm and the triplet rhythm (both from the first melody) have a prominent role. After an orchestral climax, the piano re-enters quietly with an elaborately decorated version of its opening tune. This is followed in turn by a reprise of the orchestral melody, embroidered with graceful trills on the piano and the movement ends in hushed introspection with a brief coda.

The third movement opens with a slow introduction in the style of a cadenza, ushered in by a sustained wind chord. It references the opening of the first movement in its use of the rising fifth sequence. An ebullient 3/4 *Allegro* movement ensues. Introduced by the soloist, the first theme again alludes to the opening movement by its use of scales (tracing the interval of a fifth) and repeated notes. The second theme, presented by first violins, is similarly related by its use of the octave leap. After this material has been worked out and recapitulated, the music of the slow introduction returns, heralded again by the wind chord with which the whole movement began. This spontaneous-sounding music now broadens into a substantial cadenza that surveys and distils the concerto's main material. It steers us back, in due course, to the 3/4 *Allegro* which rounds off the work in a trenchant manner. The final reiterated A's provide a last link with the first movement's opening motif.

Predominantly fiery and restless, Joubert's Piano Concerto is driven by a compelling musical discourse. A rhetorical, public utterance conceived for the concert hall, it is a dramatic affirmation of the power and continued relevance of traditional forms. Reviewing the premiere performance, Colin Mason wrote that 'the thematic material is lively, attractive and in no way derivative, the treatment of it is inventive and sustained and the form ... is as taut and strong as it is extended'.¹²

John Joubert once admitted, '... given a free hand, I would like to write opera more than anything, and I would be completely happy writing nothing but opera'.¹³ This *cri de coeur* may come as a surprise to those familiar with his substantial and wide-ranging chamber, choral or orchestral output. Yet he has written eight operas, the latest of which may be regarded as the summit of his achievements in this field.

The idea for a musico-dramatic work based on Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* originated in the early 1980s, when the composer took early retirement from the University of Birmingham. This was a labour of love which he embarked upon unprompted and without the security of a commission. Other works that were requested

¹² Colin Mason, 'Joubert's Piano Concerto in Manchester', *The Musical Times*, Vol.100, No.1393 (March 1959), p.153.

¹³ 'A Composer Interviewed – I: John Joubert in conversation with Peter Davison', *Composer*, No.31 (Spring 1969), p.9.

from him intervened with the result that the opera, written in three acts to a libretto by Kenneth Birkin, was not completed until 1997. As time elapsed with no sign of a performance, Joubert wrote a *Lyric Fantasy* on themes from the opera *Jane Eyre* for piano which, as well as being a challenging and cogently argued piece in its own right, also served a useful purpose in disseminating some of the key themes from the opera. A further decade and a half passed before this naturally lyrical and dramatically convincing piece made its belated concert debut at the Ruddock Performing Arts Centre, Birmingham on 25 October 2016 with the English Symphony Orchestra under Kenneth Woods to a thoroughly deserved standing ovation.¹⁴

When this concert-performance was mooted, Joubert tightened up the score of *Jane Eyre*, reducing the three acts to two and cutting 45 minutes' worth of music on the basis that 'You can take your time writing a novel, but you can't take your time writing an opera'.¹⁵ The material excised by the composer included two whole scenes, the first relating to Jane's arrival at Thornfield House and the second concerning her taking refuge at Whitecross with the Rivers family. He also dispensed with the orchestral interludes between the scenes to maintain the flow of the narrative.

Dedicated to the opera's librettist Kenneth Birkin and his wife Inge, **Symphony no.3 on themes from the opera "Jane Eyre"**, Op.178 (2014-17), reworks the five orchestral interludes as five symphonic movements. Originally written for chamber orchestral forces, the material has been re-scored by the composer for a full symphony orchestra consisting of three flutes (third doubling piccolo and alto flute), three oboes (third doubling cor anglais), three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (third doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (three players: cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, tenor drum, side drum, triangle, tambourine, crotales, xylophone and tubular bells), harp and strings.

The interludes are not transcribed verbatim. Instead, their principal ideas provide the basic material from which the rest of each movement is developed. The five movements are all symphonic in nature yet none conform to traditional designs e.g. scherzo, slow

¹⁴ A recording, taken from the Birmingham performance was released on the SOMM label: SOMMCD 263-2.

¹⁵ Christopher Morley, 'Composer John Joubert to finally see his opera Jane Eyre performed', *Birmingham Post*, 20 October 2016.

movement, strict sonata form, etc. Rather, they develop organically, their character and form arising naturally out of the ideas. All five movements relate to specific episodes in the story that occur in the same order as they do in the opera and the titles of the movements represent the various locations in which the opera unfolds. Just as each operatic scene can be regarded as free-standing in its own right, so the symphony's five movements are separate entities within a larger musical argument.

The opening movement, 'Lowood School', begins, like the opera, with a flickering string *tremolando* passage that generates much of the ensuing music. There is a pleasing ambiguity to these initial bars, the product of an intuitive storyteller. The strings may be shivering and therefore setting the scene of a chilly, autumnal evening that is matched by the austere, glacial classroom where Joubert's (but not Brontë's) story begins. On the other hand, they might be suggesting guttering flames, a portent of one of the novel's most potent recurring images, that of heat and fire, externalised by Bertha's two acts of arson. Their airy, insubstantial nature could also be a musical reflection of the Gothic motifs and haunting allusions to the spirit-world which pervade the book. Such is the artful simplicity of Joubert's writing that even the first four bars of his symphony are open to multiple interpretations, an ambiguity well-suited to a work based on a novel whose central character is cryptic and equivocal.¹⁶ A series of regular taps on crotales represents a distant clock striking eight. There follows a restatement of the opening paragraph leading into a sighing, descending theme representing Jane's longing which recurs in various guises throughout the opera (and the symphony). Presently, the horn introduces another important triplet-inflected phrase. The music becomes more impassioned, rising to a powerful climax with the themes presented in glorious counterpoint. In the aftermath, the opening gestures of the movement are recalled. The closing bars are a model of dramatic economy and effectiveness as the upper woodwinds ascend hesitantly before the final, widely-spaced dark-hued chords.

In 'Thornfield House', Joubert fashions a colourful tapestry of interweaving motifs from the second and third scenes of Act I. Interestingly, the oboe's charmingly rustic, grace-note-inflected motif which features prominently in the framing sections of the

¹⁶ As signified by the fortune-teller's shrewd observation of Jane Eyre that, 'when I examined your face, one trait contradicted another' (Chapter XIX, p.232 of the Penguin Classics edition of the novel).

movement is barely present in the opera, with only a few traces to be heard in the aftermath of Bertha's arson attempt and later as that event is briefly recalled while Jane and Rochester grow closer in the gardens of the Hall. Borne aloft on harp glissandos, the waltz-like central section of the movement has a weightless, visionary quality. An insistent rhythmic idea on xylophone depicting Rochester's wife Bertha is much less prevalent here than in the opera, though still casting a brief shadow over the idyllic scene.

In 'Thornfield Church' we are introduced to another key theme from the opera – a march which is played at Jane's wedding procession in Act II. This idea is soon undermined by the destabilising force of Bertha's motif. Other material from the previous movement is further developed and extended in music of commanding breadth and resonance.

After the disrupted wedding service, the succeeding movement depicting Jane's unhappy refuge with the Rivers family at 'Whitecross Rectory' begins in an unsettled, brooding tone with anguished string writing. The music becomes increasingly intense as Jane senses that something is wrong and realises that she is needed at Thornfield. The urgent rhythmic figures are recalled, hinting at Bertha's decision to exact a terrible punishment on her oppressor in a suicidal conflagration.

In the final movement, 'Thornfield Park', much of the previously heard thematic material is brought together with the sleight of hand of a master of long-term, symphonic planning. The wonderfully assured and uplifting ending depicts Jane and Mr Rochester facing life together in much altered circumstances, the march of the wedding procession now transfigured into a paean to enduring love.

Paul Conway, 2018

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Photo: Anna Joubert

John Joubert discussing scores with William Boughton, July 2017

Lyritya

SRCD.367
STEREO DDD

John Joubert (b. 1927)

	Piano Concerto Op. 25 (1958)	31.59
1	I Allegro	9.20
2	II Lento	8.46
3	III Lento - Allegro vivace	13.53
	Symphony No. 3 Op. 178 (2014-17) - on themes from the opera 'Jane Eyre'	33.17
4	I Lowood School. Lento	6.56
5	II Thornfield House. Andante - Allegro	5.34
6	III Thornfield Church. Andante - Allegro	7.45
7	IV Whitecross Rectory. Lento - Allegro	5.39
8	V Thornfield Park. Allegro	7.23

Total playing time 65.16

Martin Jones, piano
BBC National Orchestra of Wales conducted by William Boughton

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