

PERSONALIA

John Joubert as a Personification of Two Worlds

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Early on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of May driving into the inner city of Manchester, a perfect sunny day, the aftermath of a road race still visible in the streets, one has to stop at an intersection. It is an opportune moment to ask an English bobby directions to the Bridge-water Hall. He waves me off, saying, ‘enjoy your concert, Sir!’ Leaving the car in a parking garage, one has to cross the tramway lines to reach the hall. Being too early for high tea, we enjoy coffee and cake in the foyer.

Being thirteen years since we have last met, both of us encounter some difficulty in recognising each other. In the process one realises that age has taken its toll. Soon though, it becomes clear that John and his wife Mary had managed to retain the same sprightly and youthful spirits which one had for the first time encountered when we became acquainted more than thirty years ago.

The event is a celebratory concert for the 80th birthday of the South African born composer, John Joubert. A star studied cast of the British composer establishment is there to pay tribute to this talented fellow composer, great teacher and amicable man. Many of them had over the years written compositional tributes to John, some of which will be performed during the course of the afternoon’s concert. An important selection of musicians will be performing the nineteen works, ranging from instrumental to vocal solo and choral music. The texts of the vocal compositions present an array of contemporary poets who write in the English language. At the same occasion the latest CD-recording of a selection of John Joubert’s song cycles and chamber music will be presented.

In this discussion a brief description of the composer’s biographical background will be given, highlighting his achievements through the years. A wide array of his com-



The composer John Joubert at the celebratory concert for his 80th birthday
Photo: Niël Geldenhuys

positional output will be discussed according to stylistic and tonal expression, with special attention given to his specific choice of poetic texts used in the vocal settings, and to the way in which the composer managed to give meaning to the words in his music. Attention will be given to how John Joubert is steeped in two worlds, being born in South Africa yet living for most of his life in England, and how this has led to the development of his particular musical language and stylistic properties.

Historical Background

John Joubert was born in Cape Town on 20 March 1927. His French surname indicates that his father was a descendant of French Huguenot refugees who had settled in the Cape during the end of the seventeenth century, at that time still a Dutch colony. The Dutch East India Company had initially used the Cape of Good Hope, also known as the Cape of Storms, as a halfway station for their boats sailing to the Far East. From his mother's side, John's forebears were Dutch. After the fall of Napoleon the Cape had been ceded to England, and despite his parentage, it was not out of the ordinary that John had a typical English upbringing. On the musical side he had his earliest instruction in music at the hands of his mother, Aimée, who was an accomplished pianist. She had for a time studied with Harriet Cohen in London.¹

John's schooling in Cape Town took place at Diocesan College for Boys, better known as Bishop's, an Anglican foundation run on the lines of an English public school. The music master there from whom he received his theoretical training, Dr Claude Brown,² had been an assistant to Ivor Atkins at Worcester Cathedral. John started composing whilst at school, shortly after studying composition with the distinguished English composer William Henry Bell, Principal of the South African College of Music at the University of Cape Town. Some of John's earliest compositions were not only performed at school, but were even played by the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra as part of their programme.

A scholarship awarded by the Performing Right Society allowed him to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London. His principal teachers in composition there were Theodore Holland and a close friend of Arnold van Wyk, Howard Ferguson. A stimulating term was also spent with Alan Bush. Whilst still at the Academy he composed his *String Quartet No. 1* and the *Divertimento for Piano Duet*. These works later became his Op. 1 and Op. 2 respectively. Because of his talent and good progress in composition, he was awarded both the Frederick Corder and Royal Philharmonic Society prizes.³

After graduating with an external BMus degree from Durham University in 1950, he was later in the same year appointed to a lectureship at Hull University in the North East of England. Soon his music began to be widely performed, published and broadcast. Among the more ambitious works of this period were his *Symphony No. 1*, the *Piano Concerto*, and the three-act opera *Silas Marner*. However, he also wrote smaller scale works, notably a jewel of a carol *Torches*, which became extremely popular and has remained in the choral repertoire ever since.



John Joubert with the author of this article in the foyer of the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester
Photo: Jolena Geldenhuys

In 1962 he continued his academic career with his appointment as Lecturer at the University of Birmingham. After two years he was promoted to Senior Lecturer, and eventually became Reader in Music at the University.⁴ As in the past, commissions continued to come his way, and amongst the large scale works he composed at Birmingham were *Symphony No. 2*, the opera *Under Western Eyes*, and the oratorio *The Raising of Lazarus*. The increasing demands of his two professions made him decide to take early retirement from the University in 1986. This enabled him to devote his time exclusively to composition, although he has remained to this day a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham. In 1991 he was awarded an honorary doctorate in music by Durham University. True to his compositional career he continued writing numerous smaller works, but at the same time involved himself in large scale projects. Two such projects, his third three-act opera *Jane Eyre*, and the full-length oratorio *Wings of Faith* received their first performances during March 2007 as part of the composer's eightieth birthday celebrations.⁵

Joubert as Tonal and Word Painter

To the West of England and Birmingham lies Shropshire Hills. This forms part of the Welsh border country, boasting a most spectacular landscape formed by the powerful natural forces which had shaped some of the geographical landmarks of the region. This forceful shaping of nature by nature reminds one of similar geological occurrences in John Joubert's country of birth. *Shropshire Hills* was not only the title of the celebratory concert, but also of the first song cycle by the composer used for this event. The poet, A. E. Housman, was inspired by the countryside and its inhabitants when writing *A Shropshire Lad*, but in this case Joubert made use of a text by a local friend and librettist of long standing, the poet Stephen Tunncliffe. As with Housman, the poems do not singularly deal with the landscaping, but simultaneously with the subsequent human and psychological struggles to settle and defend it. The second song of the cycle, *Early Spring in the Marches*, deals with the natural life of the region. The beginning refrain of the poem "two curlews with their bubbling call" provides the opportunity for word painting, as well as the principal musical motif for this song. Joubert uses the same principles in the last of the three songs, *Clun Forest*, which is a more reflective poem. Again the opening line, 'This is rainbow country', provides the musical setting with its resultant unifying factor, and word painting. At first the poet focuses on the refreshing and calming aspects of Nature, but in the later stages of the song this mood becomes more visionary and even, at the end, aspirational.⁶ In contrast to the impression given by the titles of the three songs, the song cycle *Shropshire Hills*, Op. 155, for high voice and piano, is far from being a pastoral idyll. Unequivocally, one does notice the inspiration and influences derived from the South African landscape of his youth, as well as the underlying human and psychological struggles of multidimensional population groups

During the second half of the programme another Joubert song cycle, *The Rose is Shaken in the Wind*, Op. 137, for soprano and recorder was performed. The poetry is by a New Zealand poet, Ruth Dallas, and distils in words the essence of her native South Island, a most beautiful and still unspoiled region of the world. This song cycle is the second of two by Joubert for soprano and recorder. In the first, *The Hour Hand*, only the treble recorder is used, while the latter employs treble, bass, as well as sopranino recorders, whereby much more textural variety can be achieved. *Spring Day in Arrowtown* captures the landscape of Otago on the South Island with imagery recalling Wordsworth, especially in its reference to dancing daffodils. In *Tombstone Song*, with bass recorder accompaniment, a more solemn note is struck. In the refrains which round off each of the two stanzas, Joubert manages in his word painting for voice to suggest the inevitability of death in its almost fatalistic chant-like style. *The Gardener's Song*, with colourful high-pitched sopranino recorder accompaniment, can be regarded as a

kind of horticultural patter-song. The gardener, or if you wish poet, castigates the pests in her garden, and, looking forward to an after-life without them, imagines the 'peerless marrows' she will be able to cultivate then. *The Rose is Shaken in the Wind*, the title song and emotional focus of the cycle, has reference in the text to those who have departed this life, but have, in the poet's words, 'left the earth richer than when they came.'⁷ These song cycles were superbly interpreted by the soprano Lesley-Jane Rogers, accompanied on the piano by John Wilson, as well as by John Turner on the recorders.

John Joubert is probably best known for his choral works and it was most appropriate to include three choral works as part of the programme. Two of these were set to poems, while the third was based on a traditional Latin motet text. In the earlier work, *Four Motets*, Op. 89, already written in 1979, John Joubert makes use of the music written for unaccompanied choir to give a certain colouring to the Latin text. For example, in the opening of the Offertory a sustained harmonic background is built up, against which solo soprano and tenor voices are projected. In the second halo of the Communion the spreading chord, "multiplicabitur", of the righteous, and symbolised in the text by the image of a spreading palm-tree, is being suggested by the division of the choir into two, and their flourishing 'florebit' by the motet's triumphant ending.⁸

Joubert's respect for and closeness to nature is conveyed not only in his musical expression, but also in his choice of poetical texts, reflecting on impressions of nature gained in his early childhood. In his choral work, originally written for youth choir, *Lines from 'The Youth of Man'*, Op. 90, based on extracts from a poem by Matthew Arnold, he deals with the relationship between Man and Nature. The frailty and mortality of the one is contrasted with the immutability and indifference of the other. The first of the chosen passages emphasises Man's separation from Nature which is represented as 'mild and inscrutably calm'. The second is a plea for Nature to make itself felt to the 'dying spirit of youth'. The third and last is an appeal to youth to re-connect and 'Yearn to the greatness of Nature; / Rally the good in the depths of thyself!'⁹ All these are sung unaccompanied, without a break and (true to the composer's style) with music corresponding to the three passages of poetry in an attempt to express the respective moods and meanings in musical terms.

Another set of three unaccompanied choral pieces, but this time as part-songs, was originally commissioned by Cork International Choral Festival and performed at this celebratory concert by The Wordsworth Singers, under the expert direction of Michael Hancock. They are all settings of poems by the early 16th century poet, John Skelton (1460–1529). With the descriptive title of *Three Portraits*,



From left to right the British composer John Casken who is Professor of Music at the University of Manchester, John Joubert, Professor David Greer of Durham University and Mrs Greer
Photo: Niël Geldenhuys

Op. 97, each is dedicated to one of the three women who had been very close to John in his lifetime. The dedicatees are his daughter, his wife, and his sister who had lived her life in Cape Town (the settings are not necessarily intended as character-studies of the individuals). In these, as in many of his other works, botanical imagery is used to enhance the meaning, and particularly in the last portrait as a means to bring the whole group to a lively conclusion.

The earliest Joubert work, expressively performed on the piano by John McCabe, was his first piano sonata, the *Sonata No. 1*, Op. 24. It was composed during the 1950s when he was still a Lecturer in Music at Hull University, and was dedicated to the late Lionel Bowman, a South African pianist who gave its first performance at the Wigmore Hall in London. The work, strongly representative of the composer's instrumental oeuvre, is in one continuous movement, consisting of three main sections, with the central Allegro being framed by outer slow sections. Another much later instrumental work, the *Duettino*, Op. 156a for recorder and piano received its first performance at this concert as a revised version of the original short piece under the same name for recorder and guitar. There is also a link with the performer of the piano sonata, as this new version with piano accompaniment is dedicated to John and Monica McCabe. Again, as with the *Sonata No. 1*, the piece is cast in three sections, this time however starting with a lively first section, followed by a more reflective centre-piece in which the two instruments engage in a melodic dialogue accompanied

by spread chords.¹⁰ Although the concluding third section is essentially a repeat of the first, new decorative detail is included which leads to an emphatic close.

Another first public performance during this afternoon was the work *In Retrospect: Theme and Variations for string quartet*, Op. 159, performed masterfully by a youthful string quartet from Chetham's School of Music. *In Retrospect* is based on a theme coming from a work written by Joubert in his teens, when John was still a pupil at Bishop's, and which was first performed in the early 1940s by the strings of the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra. Since both John Joubert's children have grown up to become professional string players, he has dedicated each variation to one of his four grandchildren. The work, though retrospective in both style and content, can perhaps according to John¹¹ also be regarded as looking forward not only in its involvement with younger people, but also in its suitability for students and amateurs of all ages.

Before and after the interval, eight works by British composers who had written tributes to John Joubert were performed in two sections. All of these had been vocal works for soprano and recorder accompaniment, with the piano added to the accompaniment in four of them. The recorder player, John Turner, who took the initiative to organise the event, gave most sympathetic and excellent renderings on recorder, with the pianist John Wilson giving the necessary sensitive support. These works were not only musical, but also very

personal tributes to the composer's amicable personality as conveyed in his relationship with friends, colleagues and former students. Their choice of poetic texts and tonal settings speak volumes about the talents and preferences of the composer being honoured.

Retrospect

Driving along the busy British highway, back to the serenity of the Manor House in Pulford, one has time to reflect on the afternoon's concert. One realises that it had been an amazing and special opportunity to be part of the homage to an artist who had devoted his lifetime to creating the most beautiful, meaningful music. The concert had made it possible to experience in a nutshell, as it were, a wide spectrum of his compositional and stylistic output. One finally understands that John Joubert's tonal and word painting stems from his extraordinarily personal linguistic musical discourse, steeped in two divergent hemispheres. Even though his upbringing had been totally in an English tradition, the African roots and influences are still markedly present. Having lived and worked in England for more than fifty-five years, he is able and neither afraid nor embarrassed to speak a few words and sentences in Afrikaans, with a British accent surprisingly absent. This same dexterity of expression is distinctly noticeable in his tonal output, allowing him the unique and original qualities needed of a composer and a personification of being steeped in two worlds.



Notes

- 1 John Joubert. 2007. Programme notes, p. 11.
- 2 Daniël Geldenhuys. 1976. John Joubert se Komposisies: 'n Stylkritiese Ondersoek met Spesiale Verwysing na sy Vokale Werk. Stellenbosch, p. 8.
- 3 Joubert. Programme notes, pp. 11–12.
- 4 Geldenhuys, p. 13.

5 Joubert, Programme notes, p. 12.

6 Ibid., p. 1.

7 Ibid., p. 3.

8 Ibid., p. 2–3.

9 Ibid., pp. 4 and 9.

10 Ibid., p. 2.

11 John Joubert. 2007. *In Retrospect*. Composer's note. Tewkesbury: Roberton, p. 4.

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