

John Joubert
20 March 1927 – 7 January 2019



The distinguished composer, John Joubert has died after a very short illness at the age of 91.

He was born in Cape Town, South Africa. His mother was an accomplished pianist who had studied with Harriet Cohen, and it was from his mother that Joubert received his first groundings in music. He began composing while still at school and his first teacher was the English émigré William Henry Bell (1873-1946), a pupil of Stanford who had been Director of the South African College of Music since arriving in the country in 1912. In 1946 Joubert came to London after he won a Performing Rights Society scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. During his four years at the Academy his teachers included Howard Ferguson and, briefly, Alan Bush. Among the prizes that he was awarded during his student days in London were the Lionel Tertis Prize (for a viola concerto) and the Royal Philharmonic Society Prize (for an orchestral piece entitled *Symphonic Study*.) During his time at the Academy Joubert also successfully studied, as an external student, for the degree of B. Mus. from Durham University.

On leaving the Royal Academy Joubert earned a living as an academic while continuing to pursue his composing career. From 1950 to 1962 he lectured in music at Hull University. From there he moved to Birmingham University where he held a series of increasingly senior posts in the music faculty before taking early retirement in 1986 to devote himself completely to composition.

His catalogue of published works is extensive: his *St Mark Passion* (2015) is Op 180 and further compositions followed.

He wrote in many genres. There were nine operas, the earliest of which was *Antigone* (1954) and the most recent *Jane Eyre*, op.134 (1987-97) So far, the latter is the only opera to have received a recording: the superb live recording issued by SOMM to mark Joubert's 90th birthday ([review](#)). There's also a substantial body of chamber music and a wide variety of important orchestral scores. Particularly important in Joubert's output, though, and a constant thread running through his composing career, were his vocal pieces. His large-scale works for chorus and orchestra are too little-known: none have yet been recorded and live performances are rare, though a revival of *An English Requiem* (2010) will take place at this year's Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester on 30 July. However, some of his smaller-scale choral works are much better known, not least his famous Christmas pieces, *There is no rose* and the happily ubiquitous *Torches!* In his vocal works John Joubert consistently revealed a discerning eye for a text and an unflinching ability to set words to music in an expert fashion so that his music

complemented and enhanced the words, bringing the text to new life for listeners. Equally, his writing for instruments, whether a large orchestra or just a handful in a chamber work, showed a great flair for colour as well as an ability to achieve clarity of both thought and texture in his contrapuntal writing.

Happily, in recent years a steady stream of recordings has brought a good number of his important works to wider public attention. Several record labels have shown highly commendable enterprise in releasing records and two – SOMM and Lyrita – have been especially active. Three recent Joubert recordings stand out as indispensable for Joubert admirers. Resonus Classics issued an important disc of music commissioned by the Choir of Wells Cathedral, including the *St Mark Passion* ([review](#)). Just last year Lyrita, who have several significant Joubert releases in their catalogue, issued a fine coupling of the Piano Concerto (1958) and the Third Symphony (2014-17) ([review](#)). The symphony is a notable and inventive work in its own right. However, its importance is heightened because it utilises music which Joubert excised from his opera *Jane Eyre* (1987-97) when he revised and shortened it for a concert performance. The symphony proved that the music in question was far too valuable to lose. However, if I had to commend one Joubert release it would be the recording of *Jane Eyre* in its revised version. This score revealed a composer with an acute theatrical sense; the music is ardent, romantic and tautly dramatic. Fortunately, under the direction of conductor Kenneth Woods it received a performance fully worthy of the score. The label, SOMM, has stoutly championed Joubert's music, especially his chamber output, so it was fitting that they should issue this magnificent recording ([review](#)).

John Joubert has left a tremendous legacy of music. I'm conscious that there's a lot of it which I don't yet know because I've not had the chance to hear it either in performance or through recordings. I'm sure I'm not alone in that and we must hope for, at the very least, further recordings in the coming years so that Joubert's music achieves the even greater recognition it deserves. On the occasion of his 90th birthday in 2017 I attempted to provide [an overview](#) of many of the recordings of his music that had appeared to date and I'm delighted that there have been further releases since then.

When MusicWeb International [celebrated John Joubert's 85th birthday](#) in 2012 several distinguished musicians contributed tributes to him. It's fitting to recall now some words written then by his former pupil and colleague, the composer John Casken. Referring to two later works, *An English Requiem* (2010) and the Cello Concerto (2012), he commented: "In neither of these works, as with his entire career, does John Joubert show himself to be a follower of fashion, but rather he creates his own musical world, putting a strongly personal stamp on how the material is to be put together and how it is to behave as the structure unfolds." Casken went on to refer to "[the] music's ability to connect with audiences through its strongly expressive qualities, and when the fashionable often holds sway, it is good to be able to thank a composer for something more deep-rooted and lasting."

As John Casken indicated, John Joubert was very much his own man, writing, in a distinctive voice, music that, rightly, challenged the listener but always in an accessible way. Surely, we will find over the coming years that his music will indeed prove to be "deep rooted and lasting."

[John Quinn](#)