

On Making Operas from Novels, and Britten's Legacy: An Interview with John Joubert

David Chandler

John Joubert was born in Cape Town on 20 March 1927. In 1946, having already composed a good deal of music, he won a Performing Right Society Scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music and studied in London for four years (1946-50) under Theodore Holland, Howard Ferguson and Alan Bush. In 1950 he obtained a lectureship at the University of Hull, and married the following year. Joubert took British citizenship in 1961. In 1962 he moved to the University of Birmingham, where he was subsequently appointed senior lecturer and then reader. He retired early in 1986 in order to devote more time to composition, but maintained his connection with the university, where he was appointed Senior Research Fellow in 1997. He continues to live and work in Birmingham.

SINCE THE 1940S JOHN JOUBERT has composed prolifically in almost all genres: songs, piano works, chamber music, concertos, symphonies, choral music. For much of his career, however, opera was an overriding interest, his first opera, *Antigone*, being commissioned for BBC radio in 1954, and his last, *Jane Eyre*, being completed in 1988. In between came *In the Drought* (1956), *Silas Marner* (1961), *The Quarry* (1965), *Under Western Eyes* (1969), *The Prisoner* (1973) and *The Wayfarers* (1984). Joubert's three major works in the genre, *Silas Marner*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Jane Eyre*, have all been based on classic English novels, and it was this striking pattern that inspired the following interview. This interview was conducted via email in winter 2013-14 with the kind assistance of Anna Joubert, John's daughter, herself a musician. It has been lightly edited, with the final text approved by John Joubert.

D.C. John, one thing that really stands out, looking at your operatic work as a whole, is how many of your operas are inspired by major literary works. Your first full-length opera was *Silas Marner*, and that was followed by *Under Western Eyes* and *Jane Eyre*. Several of your shorter operas, too, have distinguished literary sources: Sophocles, Tolstoy, Chaucer. How did this come about? Do you have a preference for adapting classic literature?

J.J. Well, in fact my operas form only a part of a lifelong interaction between words and music: a list of the authors whose words I have set in my non-operatic vocal works would include such names as Emily Brontë, Andrew Marvell, William Shakespeare, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence. The criterion I use for the selection of operatic subjects is that they should comment in some way on basic human issues, thus bringing them into line with the Enlightenment idea of theatre as a 'School of Morals'. The two models which are for me the foundation of modern opera are Verdi's two last operatic masterpieces, *Falstaff* and *Otello*. *Falstaff* still bears many of the traces of *opera buffa* (one being the discomfiture of an aristocrat by those of a lower class); *Otello* is an example of a reformed *opera seria* (a tragedy in which the *dénouement* is the result of human interaction rather than gods or goddesses).

In both the fusion of music and drama is complete and both form the bedrock on which my own operatic works are built.

D.C. I'm struck that you consider *Falstaff* and *Otello* foundational in that way. They are of course based on plays which had thoroughly proved themselves in the theatre long before Verdi set them. In your case, though, you seem to have been inspired more by novels than plays. Is there any particular reason for that preference, if preference it is?

J.J. With *Falstaff* and *Otello*, Verdi, in his old age and with the help and encouragement of Boito, revolutionized Italian opera in a way that made Puccini and *verismo* possible. I believe it is from these early roots that my own operas spring. I revere both Wagner and Strauss but I don't hear any traces of their influences in my own operas. As regards my preference for novels as their source perhaps it is because there are more great English novelists than there are playwrights. There is always Shakespeare, of course, but for this I would need a Boito to transform the poetic drama into a viable libretto. As for more recent English dramatists I can't see operatic potential in the West End 'well-made play' tradition, and neither Wilde nor Shaw – or for that matter Stoppard or Pinter – offer much temptation to me as an operatic composer. Compared with figures such as these the novelist offers me a far greater range of character and situation. And to embark at my time of life on the writing of my own libretti, as Tippett has done with his mythically and psychologically derived operas, would require a combination of literary aptitude and sheer courage I simply don't possess. I did, in my early days, base two one-act operas on plays, but I had literary friends who kindly acted as my Boito in adapting them for me, one reason being that the text of a straight, spoken play offers no opportunity for an ensemble, for me one of the most important weapons in the operatic armoury.

D. C. I take it that you would consider *Silas Marner*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Jane Eyre* your major operas? In terms of choosing novels suitable for operatic adaptation they all seem, if you don't mind me saying so, rather odd choices. I've just confirmed that to some extent by consulting Charles H. Parsons' catalogue of opera subjects.³² If that is to be relied on, none of these novels had been adapted as operas before. Actually Parsons lists no George Eliot operas at all – he must have missed yours. Why these novels?

J. J. What attracted me to *Silas Marner* was the possibility of redemption offered to its main character, a sort of answer to the anti-heroism of *Wozzeck* and *Peter Grimes* whose characters are fixed throughout, outsiders like Silas, but, unlike him, ultimately irredeemable. It is significant that both take their own lives by drowning. Though Silas is also an outsider we know something of the causes of his miserly condition; his character changes and develops through his love for the child who has replaced his gold as the focus of his affections. He is thus made human again – more human than before.

The theme of redemption also plays a part in *Under Western Eyes*, though here the context is more political. The story is set in the Russia of the pre-revolutionary period. The young, politically unmotivated student, Razumov, betrays to the authorities his revolutionary friend, Haldin, for carrying out an act of terrorism. As a result he finds himself in the power of the secret police who send him to Geneva as an undercover agent to spy on a revolutionary cell. There he meets Haldin's sister with whom he falls in love. Under the influence of his love his conscience compels him to confess to his fellow-conspirators his betrayal of Haldin. He is violently assaulted by the group's strong man, Grisha, and is left deafened as a result. The dramatic irony of Razumov's situation

³² Charles H. Parsons, *Mellen opera reference index: Vol. 9 Opera Subjects*, (E. Mellen Press, Lewiston NY, 1989)

lies in his lack of political commitment. His desire just to be left alone to pursue his studies is the cause of both his moral predicament and his loss of hearing, both of which have left him more isolated than he could have ever wanted to be before. The choice of *Under Western Eyes* as a subject bears some relation to the time in which the opera was composed – the days of student unrest in the late '60s. It could even be said to have some connection with present day cyber-espionage and counter-terrorist surveillance.

Jane Eyre's story has a similar trajectory to those of both *Marnet's* and *Razumov's*. Beginning in obscurity she develops as a character up to the moment of truth when she imagines she has heard the voice of Rochester calling her name just as she seems about to succumb to St. John Rivers' s attempt at persuading her to marry him. This leads to her impulsive return to Rochester, who has been blinded and badly injured in his unsuccessful attempt to rescue his deranged wife from the fire she has caused and which leads to her death. Rochester here undergoes his own transformation which, in its turn, leads to a truer and more enduring relationship with Jane. Indeed the three operas share the same tendency in working towards a redemptive crisis in the lives of each of their main characters. I write from hindsight when I say these choices were not conscious or deliberate, but it may go some way to explaining how subconscious decisions play a part in the creative process.

D. C. What general qualities would you look for in a novel that was going to be adapted as an opera? Which operas, derived from novels, do you think work really well? I suppose Britten's *Turn of the Screw* must be considered one of the most completely successful ones?

J. J. Britten's *Turn of the Screw* must certainly count as one of his most successful (in the artistic sense) but in my view *Billy Budd*, based on the novel by Melville, is equally successful, if not more so. They both, at any rate, demonstrate the power of the novel as a form capable of inspiring great opera. My own preference for using this source of material for operatic adaptation lies in the fact that the novel can portray the whole gamut of human experience and as such can deal with real people in real situations.

D.C. Just sticking with Britten for a moment: you said earlier that you saw *Silas Marner* as a 'sort of answer' to *Peter Grimes*. I tend to think that just about every opera composer working in Britain in the last fifty or sixty years must have at least a slightly complicated feeling about Britten. You know, on one hand he really established the viability of British opera, but on the other, the cult that came to surround him, and that he encouraged, has often seemed rather exclusive. How would you describe your relationship with Britten's work and what we might call the Britten industry?

J.J. If Britten's many admirers can be called a cult please put me down as a fully paid-up member! As for the 'Britten industry' I feel the expression scarcely does justice to either his genius or the total dedication and depth of commitment he brought to his art. If one surveys his operatic output alone one sees him posing new challenges for himself in each new subject he undertakes. Many a lesser composer, after the triumph of *Peter Grimes*, would have been tempted to repeat such a success, but Britten, in the series of chamber operas which succeeded *Grimes*, particularly *The Turn of the Screw*, virtually invented a new category of opera. *Billy Budd* poses a new challenge with its struggle between good and evil set, with an all-male cast, aboard an eighteenth-century man-of-war. Then the series of *Church Parables* follows, creating a new quasi-operatic genre which eschews the use of a theatre for their realisation as drama and presents the narrative within a quasi-liturgical framework. *Death in Venice* was perhaps the biggest

challenge of all, and considering the difficulties his subject must have posed, particularly its autobiographical overtones, is one triumphantly met.

Britten's operas, together with his many non-operatic works, are regularly performed all over the world, consolidating his truly international reputation as one of the great composers of the mid-twentieth century. My first encounter with a Britten opera was in 1947 when I saw *The Rape of Lucretia* in Lucerne with its original cast soon after its premiere at Glyndebourne. I was only 20 at the time, still a student and largely ignorant of Britten's music. The event left a deep impression on me and was a strong incentive for getting to know more about this remarkable English composer whose music was to become one of my most powerful and enduring influences.

D.C. Would you say Britten's influence on British opera has been wholly positive?

J.J. Britten has certainly created a greater awareness of British opera and put it in a central position in the musical culture of this country. Every young composer nowadays is expected at some stage in his or her career to write an opera, whereas their predecessors, until quite recently, would have had to earn their reputation by composing symphonies. Britten has also broadened the scope of the subject-matter which can be explored operatically. It's significant that the two modern operas which seem to have impressed him most were *Wozzeck* and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, both of which he heard in concert performances in his youth. Though very attached to England and particularly to his native East Anglia he seems always to have wanted to extend the boundaries of English taste and make it less insular and provincial. The major influences on his musical style – Mahler and Berg – are Central European, perhaps encouraged by his teacher Frank Bridge who also, in his later work, moved to a more cosmopolitan position. Some of Britten's song-cycles are settings of French, Italian, German and Russian texts. His ambitions for the Aldeburgh Festival were to make it international, importing artists and composers from abroad to appear together with their British counterparts. Together with his partner Peter Pears he even became an English cultural export and made extensive tours all over the world.

The question remains: has his influence on British opera been wholly positive? Sometimes great composers have an intimidating as well as a stimulating effect on those who come after them. Brahms is reputed to have said that when composing he was always conscious of the shadow of Beethoven looking over his shoulder. The same could be said of some of Wagner's successors. A great composer who stands as a dominating predecessor can provoke a radical reaction as well as uncritical acceptance. I would certainly say that Britten's operas, because of their evident universality, have the capacity to move British opera on to a new phase in its history, whether evolutionary or revolutionary. Whether it eventually does or not only time will tell.

D.C. Apart from the novels that you did base operas on, are there any others you wish you could have had a go at?

J. J. I did at one time consider adapting Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* but discovered that the exclusive musical rights had already been acquired by Kurt Weill for his Broadway musical *Lost in the Stars*. I subsequently considered Paton's other novel *Too Late the Phalarope*, but, though Paton gave me permission (not without some misgivings), I felt that the story, moving as it is, scarcely reflected the situation in South Africa as it exists today and, as such, has been overtaken by history.

D.C. I've read many novels, but none of Paton's. What were you attracted to in his work? To me, as someone who read English literature at university, this is not exactly – or not yet – canonical literature in the sense that the Eliot, Conrad and Brontë novels are.

J.J. No, Paton's novels could hardly be included in the canon of great English novels, as he would have been the first to recognize. But great songs can be – and have – made from minor verse and great operas from the unlikeliest of libretti. Who could have foreseen that Schikaneder's libretto for *The Magic Flute* would be capable of inspiring some of Mozart's greatest operatic music? But both the Paton novels I've mentioned had moved me at the time seriously enough to make me want to make one or other of them into an opera. I had already composed several South African-based works and had been encouraged by Gordon Crosse, a composer friend, after hearing a performance of one of them, to explore my early South African background further. The fact that Paton had written powerfully in both books about the racial issues of the country provided me with an additional incentive. But what I saw as their operatic potential never materialized, partly because they would never have been allowed to be performed in South Africa, the one country where they would have been most understood and most relevant.

D.C. When you read novels, do you read them as a composer, as it were, thinking of their musical potential?

J.J. No, I don't read novels as a composer in constant search for material to adapt. I read them anyway, for pleasure and enlightenment. On the other hand, I should add that if I were to write an opera now, I would in all probability go to the novel again as an inspirational source.

D.C. Perhaps we can turn to the practical issues connected with adapting novels. Did you read the novels in question immediately before or during the process of setting them as operas? I'm wondering if knowing the novel well would help the composition process. In some ways, I imagine, it might be easier to rely on your librettist to deal directly with the novel, as it were, while you deal with the libretto?

J.J. I'd already read all the three novels that I eventually adapted as operas. The process of turning them into operas obviously required re-reading and close study. Their subjects were my choice and their ground plans and scenarios were also done by me, leaving my librettists with the unenviable task of writing the texts to fit in with my intentions with regard to the formal structure of each work as a whole.

D.C. And you worked closely with your librettists?

J.J. Yes. Fortunately, I was in close contact with all of them. Rachel Trickett, the librettist of *Silas Marner*, was also a novelist of distinction and a colleague of mine at Hull University, she in the English, and I in the Music Department. Cedric Cliffe, the librettist of *Under Western Eyes*, was the choice of the New Opera Company, who both commissioned and gave the first performance of the opera which was subsequently broadcast by the BBC. He had written the libretto for Arthur Benjamin's *Tale of Two Cities* and was at first doubtful about the suitability of *Under Western Eyes* for an opera, but in the end produced a fine script for it. We had to work by correspondence as he lived in the south of England, but in spite of misgivings, he seemed pleased with the result of our efforts. I well remember playing it through to him on the piano at the Holywell Music Room in Oxford. Kenneth Birkin, my *Jane Eyre* librettist, was a mature post-graduate student of mine at Birmingham University where he was working on a PhD on the libretti of Strauss's post-Hofmannsthal operas, so he was well placed both geographically and personally for our collaboration. Though he succeeded in achieving his doctorate I sometimes wondered whether our supervisions were focusing more on *Jane Eyre* than Richard Strauss! Anyway, yes, with all three there was lots of discussion, both before and during the composition stage.

D.C. You suggested that you made the key artistic decisions regarding the way the novels were to be shaped as librettos. But did the librettists ever offer different solutions that you ended up accepting? Did they challenge your ideas?

J.J. As far as I can remember I don't think any of my librettists offered any objections to the ground-plans I had devised for my operas, though they did, of course, have many suggestions of detail which would have been thoroughly discussed and, if agreed upon, accepted.

D.C. In terms of the audience, coming to your operas for the first time, do you think it would be an advantage or disadvantage to know the novels well? How do you respond to the pedantic complaint, so often made when novels are adapted, that things have been changed? Obviously the Brontë sisters in particular have diehard fans, and though they are likely to be interested in a *Jane Eyre* opera, they are also likely to have very particular ideas about fidelity to the novel.

J.J. I don't think it matters much whether or not an opera audience has read the novel on which the opera they are watching is based. The same situation exists with regard to films based on novels. In Visconti's film of *Death in Venice* nobody seems to object that the role of Aschenbach, the fictitious author, has been changed to that of a composer with strong allusion to Gustav Mahler, the real-life composer (who didn't die in Venice), but I'm glad that Britten in his operatic version of the novel restores Aschenbach to his original part in the story. I am aware that Mahler was Mann's first choice as protagonist.

As for *Jane Eyre*, I thought it was important to include the St. John Rivers section which is so often missing in the film or TV adaptations I've seen. It not only provides the fulcrum for the whole story but also a splendid part for a tenor. I do leave out much of the opening of the novel, starting at the point where Jane is about to leave Lowood for her 'new servitude' as governess to Rochester's illegitimate adopted daughter. Of course people are entitled to feel aggrieved if their favourite passages or events have been left out, but *Jane Eyre* is a very long novel and to set it all would be impractical. The main thing is that everything that is present in the opera should directly relate to its corresponding passage in the novel. So in that sense I think my opera is as faithful to the novel as can realistically be expected. It's worth noting, perhaps, that *Jane Eyre* was made into a Broadway musical some years ago. It was not particularly successful, the critics complaining that the librettist and composer 'tried to get too much in'.

D.C. Somebody who couldn't be accused of trying to 'get too much in' is Michael Berkeley. It seems to be one of those striking coincidences that soon after you completed your *Jane Eyre* opera, he composed one too. Have you heard his version? What did you think of it?

J.J. Michael Berkeley and I had very different ideas on how best to interpret Charlotte Brontë's great novel. I have seen his version and it would seem – indeed he has said himself – that his interest lay in the 'Gothick' aspects of the story. Consequently it's very condensed and couched in an Expressionist musical language. I don't see the novel as 'Gothick' at all, but rather as a romantic love story of great passion and originality in which the nightmare psychology of Expressionism has no part to play. It also deals frankly with women's issues just as relevant today as they were then. Thus I have treated it both realistically and as a work in the romantic tradition. After all, love is a universal human experience which happens to everyone in one way or another. We should still be able to write love music that can express in musical terms the profound emotions so often and so movingly depicted in literature.

D.C. But granted that Berkeley's interpretation of the novel is very different, do you see his opera as successful in its own terms? I've only been able to hear the recording, but I thought the basic concept, once accepted, worked rather compellingly.

J.J. I see Berkeley's setting of *Jane Eyre* as an effective piece of Music Theatre, a category of opera defined in Grove as a musical work 'for small or moderate forces that involve a dramatic element in their production'. I would put it the other way round as a 'dramatic work ... that involves a musical element in its production'. For me music is the principal, primordial element in opera. In Music Theatre it has taken a secondary place. Nevertheless, Music Theatre has had its notable successes, amongst which Grove mentions Stravinsky's *Soldier's Tale* (in which there is no singing), Weil's *Mahagonny* and Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. It is worth noting that Berkeley's work was commissioned and performed by Music Theatre Wales, a leading proponent of this essentially hybrid form.

D.C. Which opera would you most like to be remembered for? What makes that one special?

J.J. For an opera to be remembered by anybody it requires both a performance and an audience to do the remembering, and this cannot apply to *Jane Eyre* which, although it was completed in 1988, still awaits its world premiere. So the choice must lie between *Silas Marner* and *Under Western Eyes*, both of which have had performances and broadcasts. Between these two my vote would go to the latter, which I consider one of my best works. Yet *Jane Eyre* remains a favourite of mine and I hope that, if one day it were to be performed, I shall still be around to hear it.

D.C. Well, I suppose to be pedantic that some composers are remembered for works that were unperformed, or hardly performed, at the time they were written. I get the impression from your answer that you do consider *Jane Eyre* your greatest opera?

J.J. There are many examples of works that became classics which their composers never lived to hear played. Three examples immediately come to mind: Schubert's great C major symphony and Mahler's *Song of the Earth* and ninth symphony. In my own case a staged production of *Jane Eyre* seems unlikely under present circumstances, one reason being that it was never commissioned and commissions do ensure at least one performance. (I am now, as it happens, in discussion with a record company about a recording.)

I have written some works by which I may perhaps be remembered and I have to content myself with the thought that someone might, having heard or taken part in such a work, be tempted to explore a little further. Most of my output has been published and the British Library has quite a collection of my works. In answer to the last sentence of your question, I do consider *Jane Eyre* my best opera – though I would be chary of using your word 'greatest' ...

D.C. I can only imagine how depressing it must be to write an opera, an accessible opera on a popular subject, and then have no one perform it. You must of course feel that this is unjust. Do you see this as part of what is sometimes portrayed as a particularly British problem, a failure to support new operas unless they are written by a very select group of what I suppose can be called 'establishment' composers?

J.J. The way that music is currently organised has become complicated and rather topsyturvy. Modernism is the new 'establishment', while Traditionalism seems to invite the sort of disapproval once reserved for Modernism. With the rise of interest in early music and its 'authentic' performance new areas of repertoire have opened up and command a large following. Then there's pop, now so universal that it's just called

'music' while the word 'classical' has to be added to it to denote the kind of music we have been talking about. All this has developed during my own lifetime. When I was growing up there was no such thing as 'youth culture' and many of the great composers of the last century were still alive and productive. One could realistically base one's hopes, all other things being equal, on becoming heir to a great living tradition. Now, as a composer of Classical Music and a Traditionalist to boot, I feel I live on the periphery of a periphery, all the certainties and criteria that a living tradition entails having been swept away.

Nevertheless, despite the ensuing vacuum, I know that there are people who admire and are moved by my kind of music – after all I can't write any other kind – and if my public is small it still means much to me. I know also that their interest is genuine and not motivated by the desire to be part of an exclusive elite. In such an open field the Modernist has largely lost his or her capacity, and perhaps incentive, to create a *succès de scandale*. Modernism and Traditionalism should work together to bring the present cultural apartheid to an end so that the currently ossified repertory can be renewed and replenished.

D.C. That's a very arresting vision. I imagine all readers of this interview will join with me in wishing that we – and you – can get to hear *Jane Eyre* soon. Many thanks for taking the time to answer all these questions.

Appendix

In 2001 John Joubert and Kenneth Birkin prepared a pamphlet to promote *Jane Eyre*. The 'Composer's Introduction' includes the following statement, so relevant to some of the issues discussed in the interview that it is worth reproducing here:

An adaptation of a novel for the lyric stage must involve some adjustments to, and manipulation of, both text and plot. The first problem was the length of the book, which, because my librettist and I wanted mainly to deal with our heroine's adult life, led to the omission of its first few chapters – those dealing with Jane's unhappy childhood experiences both as her aunt's ward and as a pupil at Lowood School. We did, however, want to include those chapters, so often omitted in TV and screen adaptations, to do with the relationship with the Revd. St. John Rivers, which we considered the emotional turning-point of the story. Above all, in those places where we have had to be selective, we have tried to be faithful both to the integrity of the original and the exigencies of the operatic stage. In undertaking this delicate balancing-act we have kept a wary eye on the present-day economic realities of opera production in making the work suitable for performance in smaller venues, and by companies with limited resources.

(By permission of John Joubert)

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