

JOSEPH JONGEN

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Joseph Jongen was a Belgian composer who lived from 1873 to 1953.

There are not many Belgian composers who are well known apart from Dufay, Dez Pre, Ockeghen, Ysaye and Franck.

It is my view that Jongen is the best of the bunch.

He was born in Liege. His family originally came for Flanders.

Joseph showed great talent and was accepted into Liege College at the age of seven and was there for sixteen years. He won a prize for a Fugue composed in 1895 and had an honours diploma in piano the next year. The following year, a similar diploma for organ was awarded. He composed a large String Quartet in 1894, known as Op 3, and also won the Belgian Prix de Rome in 1897 and consequently studied in France, Germany and Italy.

Composing had begun at the age of thirteen in which he displayed his incredible talent.

In 1902, he was back in Belgium and soon became professor of harmony and counterpoint in Liege. He moved to England at the outbreak of World War 1. Back again in Belgium, he was appointed professor of fugue at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels and, from 1925 to 1939, was director there, eventually succeeded by his brother, Leon.

Joseph composed about 241 works but destroyed some. Like Dukas, he was a perfectionist and that shows in his work. It is solid but never tedious or boring. It is very well written in every genre. There are three concertos for cello, piano and violin respectively, two violin sonatas and one for the cello, a majestic Sonata Eroica for organ, a Piano Trio, a Piano Quartet, a charming Viola Concertino, a Duo Sonata for violin and cello and a stupendous Symphonie Concertante for organ and orchestra.

There is much solo music for piano and also for organ. There are songs and other instrumental pieces. Even his short works, such as the Toccata for organ, are worthy pieces. None of his works are slight. There are many composers who do write inconsequential music and, to add insult to injury, such composers are often revered. Why is it that very fine composers like Jongen are not actively promoted whereas composers of a far lesser class are venerated? Franck is played very often but he is not in the Premiere League with Jongen!

He died at Sart-lez-Spa on 12 July 1953.

There are so many great works. There is the Violin Concerto in B minor Op 17, set in three movements. It has a strong opening, melodic, well written and romantic without being slushy. The tremendous climaxes are natural progression from the material. The slow movement has some gorgeous tender moments of extraordinary beauty while the final is a scherzando. This is first rate concerto. The BBC broadcast the Elgar violin concerto 20 times last year and yet the Jongen is unquestionably superior and has had no broadcasts. The opening movement of the Elgar is marked Allegro crotchet equals 105! That is not an allegro!

There is also a Adagio symphonique in B for violin and orchestra by Jongen.

The Cello Concerto Op 18 followed and is set in three movements Largo, Assez lent and Modere. It is a good work but does not have the range of the violin concerto.

His first outstanding work is the String Quartet in C minor Op 3 set in four movements:

Adagio, Allegro risoluto

Adagio, Allegro agitato, Adagio

Allegro scherzando, Prestissimo, Scherzando

Allegro molto, Adagio, Allegro molto ending in C major

A short but charming work is the Concertino for viola and piano Op 111 of 1940 which is not the usual tragic melancholic work but an enchanting work with a purpose. It is poignant but never weak and has an infectious rhythmic drive. The following year saw the Prelude and Fugue in E flat for organ. I have a copy written in his own immaculate hand.

There are three more viola and piano works, the Allegro appassionato Op 79 of 1925 and the Andante espressivo, and a Suite all of which are gems.

As already mentioned the Symphonie Concertante for organ and orchestra is a masterpiece. In this atheistic world people hate organ music because of its ecclesiastic connections. Even the slow movement is exciting. The opening movement, Molto moderato is in the Dorian mode, the second movement, Molto vivo is in 7/4. Next comes the Lento misterioso and the finale is a Toccata moto perpetuo ending in majestic C major. It is a terrific work.

Some of the piano music is fine whereas some, like the Concert Study Op 65 no 2, is a little self indulgent. Sun at Midday is successful and people speak well of the Piano Concerto which I have yet to hear.

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