

## **Derek Bourgeois**, composer and conductor – obituary



Derek Bourgeois

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Derek Bourgeois, who has died aged 75, was a music teacher, conductor and prolific composer; as director of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain in the 1980s and 1990s he took his young musicians to musical heights that included a remarkable appearance at the Proms in 1987, when they performed Schoenberg's Gurrelieder under Pierre Boulez with Jessye Norman as soloist.

Bourgeois wrote an astonishing 116 symphonies, most of them written in retirement. They were rarely, if ever, performed, although several contained flashes of humour. While Haydn's Symphony No 45 (known as The Farewell) has the players leaving the stage one by one, Bourgeois's No 45 had them entering one by one.

Fearing that No 9 might, like that of Beethoven or Schubert, be his last, he made it "a big one" lasting two hours. No 32 matched the record of Havergal Brian and so was written in the style of that eccentric composer and with 32 movements, while No 42 is titled Life, the Universe and Everything, in tribute to the author Douglas Adams.

Bourgeois for a time made attempts to emulate the music of Stockhausen and Birtwistle, but soon realised that this was not the path for him. Instead he wrote in tuneful and humorous style, with works such as Jabberwocky: an Extravaganza (1963), The Astronauts (1969) and the Wine Symphony (1980), which was commissioned by Harvey's of Bristol, with each movement representing a different drink from France or Germany. It started with a champagne prelude – a cue for the orchestra to simulate the popping of corks with fingers in cheeks.

Even when Bourgeois's orchestral music was heard in public the critics cared little for it, though he had long since stopped worrying about their opinions. A combination of wearing irreverent "Rupert Bear" trousers and writing music for television programmes such as The Barchester Chronicles and Mansfield Park probably did little to further his cause in stuffer circles.

However, his music for brass and wind bands received a warmer reception, with players from the Black Dyke and Grimethorpe Colliery bands warming to his rich melodic inventions and flashes of humour in works such as The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. "Part of life is laughing," Bourgeois would say. "If a symphony is going to reflect true life, why can't you laugh with it? Or even at it?"



Derek Bourgeois

Derek David Bourgeois was born at Kingston upon Thames on October 16 1941, the eldest of three children of a company director and his wife. His parents were not particularly musical, although young Derek took piano lessons with a lady "from down the road". Inspired by tales of Mozart's youthful compositions, he acquired some manuscript paper and by the age of 13 had written a passable piano sonata.

He won a music scholarship to Cranleigh School and when the regular tuba player fell ill was asked to learn

the instrument for a school show. Within a few months he was proficient enough to be admitted to the National Youth Orchestra.

He went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, to read music under Philip Radcliffe and Raymond Leppard. However, his biggest achievement there was not so much getting his Symphony No 1 performed by the university music society under the baton of David Willcocks, but rather arranging for the occasion to be reviewed by the national press, The Times declaring that Bourgeois "has much promise and already patent gifts" although it added that "the symphony is no masterpiece".

His music studies continued at the Royal College of Music with Herbert Howells and Adrian Boult, who gave his first symphony a second performance, before he returned to Cambridge for his DMus. Back at Cranleigh as a music teacher, his pupils included Alan Rusbridger, later to become the editor of The Guardian. Meanwhile, he acquired an enthusiasm for Mah-Jongg.

In 1971 he was appointed lecturer in music at the University of Bristol, where he made his first forays into brass band music, before rejoining the NYO in 1983 as director. His fresh approach included establishing the National Youth Chamber Orchestra in 1989 as well as preparing the orchestra for several major Proms.

In 1993 he moved on to become director of music at St Paul's Girls' School, where Howells and Gustav Holst had once taught, before retiring, in 2002, to Mallorca, where he began churning out symphonies on a near industrial scale. Before the age of 60 he had written only seven; now his composing served as a diversion while caring for his first wife Jean Berry, a former violinist with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. They had met as members of the NYO and had married in 1965, with Bourgeois writing a jeu d'esprit in 11/8 and 13/8 for her to dance down the aisle at their wedding.

By now, however, she was suffering from motor neurone disease. "If we'd been doing all the things we'd planned to do in retirement, I wouldn't have had time to write all these symphonies," he told The Guardian in 2009. Instead, he added, the music "all came tumbling out".

Jean died in 2006 and Bourgeois later described how his composing had been "tremendously cathartic". He moved for a while to New York where he met Norma Torney who became his second wife in 2008 and who survives him. They settled in Wool, in Dorset, where he continued to compose until cancer forced him to give up.

Derek Bourgeois, born October 16 1941, died September 6 2017