

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



JAMES JOHNSTON (1903-1991) - Tenor

James Johnston was born 17 August 1903, son of a Belfast butcher, who left school to work in his father's shop in York Street. He started singing in the Church choir and although he had no formal musical training he won many baritone competitions until he was discovered to be a tenor. Thereafter he was in demand throughout Ireland; in 1932 he sang at the Eucharistic Congress.

In 1945 Tyrone Guthrie, then in charge of Sadler's Wells Opera Company in London, offered Johnston a leading role. He was Britain's leading tenor from 1945 until 1958. In more than 850 performances in 24 leading roles with Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden, he sang with Sutherland, Hammond, Schwarzkopf and Callas with whom he had a fiery difference of opinion just before a Covent Garden *Il trovatore* in 1953. He was described by Lord Harewood as the singer to whom postwar British opera owes a great debt. Noted for his big Italian roles, his singing of *Nessun Dorma* was often interrupted by applause and Italianate tone and ringing top notes made him a firm favourite with audiences. In oratorio, his recordings of *The Messiah* and *Elijah* with Sir Malcolm Sargent were best sellers on both sides of the Atlantic. Notable roles: Calaf (*Turandot*); Pinkerton (*Madam Butterfly*); Gabriele Adorno (*Simon Boccanegra*); Hugh (Hugh the Drover); Don Jose (*Carmen*); Manrico (*Il trovatore*).

Johnston said that he would quit while he was still at the top. His final performance at Covent Garden was in a production of *Carmen* in 1958. After that he returned to his Belfast butcher's shop in Sandy Row.

James Johnston died on 17 October 1991.

Patrick Devlin