

About this week's Special Music...

This Sunday morning, for our Lenten special music, the Chancel Choir and soloists will present two masterworks of twentieth-century choral literature. Each offers a strong musical and theological statement in its own right, but paired together, they make for some striking similarities and contrasts. Both offer wonderful imagery through the poetry they set – especially in the invocation of Christ as Lamb of God. They were written within three years of each other by leading English composers of the day - Britten's work in 1943, and Finzi's in 1946. Both pieces were the result of commissions from Rev. Walter Hussey, whose extraordinary vision of the arts supporting, and supported by, the Church resulted not only in these works, but such masterpieces as Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*; works of poetry by W. H. Auden; paintings by Marc Chagall; and sculpture by Henry Moore, among many others. While Britten's cantata is, for the most part, an exuberant hymn of praise, Finzi's work is more of a devotional reflection on Christ's sacrifice. Together, they provide musical and spiritual food for our own experience of Lent.

Rejoice in the Lamb, Op. 30

A Festival Cantata

by Benjamin Britten

(1913 - 1976)

text taken from "Jubilate Agno" by Christopher Smart

(1722 - 1771)

Christopher Smart - poet

Born in April, 1722, from an early age, Christopher Smart displayed a delicate constitution and overly-sensitive nature, but he also exhibited precocious mental growth; he read voraciously and demonstrated a proclivity for verse-making. He became a classical scholar at Cambridge, but struggled through life due to various personal weaknesses, ending up on two occasions in the asylum, Bedlam. In his day, he was considered "insane", his sickness said to have taken the form of praying loudly in public. At least one modern commentator proposes that his "illness" was more likely manic-depression, which manifested itself in the ecstatic, visionary character of his poetry.

Smart was fundamentally a writer of devotional lyrics, through which his deeply religious nature is reflected. His personal religion was deeply rooted in his unfaltering response to the great injunction, "O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord, praise Him and magnify Him forever." The basic theme of his works – gratitude – arises from a natural thankfulness in which all living things unite and share in the instinctive response to God's goodness. He attributes this sense of gratitude to animals, birds, fish and, eventually, to rocks and flowers in his poetry.

Rejoice in the Lamb (“Jubilate Agno”), was written while Smart was incarcerated from 1759 to 1763. It was virtually unknown until 1939, when William Force Stead discovered the unfinished manuscript among family treasures of a friend. The inclusion of dates give the poem a “diary” effect and reveals the progression of Smart’s thoughts through these shadowy years. Written at the rate of no more than one or two lines per day, *Rejoice in the Lamb* is a unique chronicle of the day-to-day physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experiences of a troubled, yet brilliant, mind.

Consisting of over 1700 free verse lines, *Rejoice* is structured on the antiphonal principles of Hebraic poetry. There are really two poems: the “Let” section (so-called because every line begins with the word) followed by a responsive “For” section (so-called for the same reason).

Benjamin Britten, composer – and the Cantata

Britten was one of the greatest and most prolific of 20th century English composers, having composed for many musical media. He is particularly known for his operas, orchestral works, songs, song cycles, and choral works. His musical style is very inventive and fresh, and he demonstrates a gift for taking simple musical materials and building great musical structures from them.

He composed the cantata, *Rejoice in the Lamb* in 1943, just a few short years after the discovery of the poem itself. From the 1700 lines of the original poem, Britten chose some of the finest passages, and arranged them to suit his own sense of structure. The overall theme of the poem, and of the cantata, is the worship of God, by all created beings and things, each in its own way.

Rev. Walter Hussey, who commissioned the composition, provides the following description of the work:

“The cantata is made up of ten short sections. The first sets the theme. The second gives a few examples of one person after another being summoned from the pages of the Old Testament to join with some creature in praising and rejoicing in God. The third is a quiet and ecstatic Hallelujah. In the fourth section Smart takes his beloved cat [Jeoffry] as an example of nature praising God by being simply what the Creator intended it to be. The same thought is carried on in the fifth section with the illustration of the mouse. The sixth section speaks of the flowers – “the poetry of Christ”. In the seventh section Smart refers to his own troubles and suffering, but even these are an occasion for praising God, for it is through Christ that he will find his deliverance. The eighth section gives four letters from [the Hebrew] alphabet, [attributing special characteristics to them], leading to a full chorus in section nine which speaks of musical instruments and music’s praise of God. The final section repeats the Hallelujah.”

*(Special thanks to former choir soloist John Denison
for research into the life and work of Christopher Smart.)*

CHORUS

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give glory to the Lord, and the Lamb.
Nations, and languages, and every Creature, in which is the breath of Life.
Let man and beast appear before him, and magnify his name together.
Let Nimrod, the mighty hunter, bind a Leopard to the altar, and consecrate his spear to the Lord.
Let Ishmael dedicate a Tyger, and give praise for the liberty in which the Lord has let him at large.
Let Balaam appear with an Ass, and bless the Lord his people and his creatures for a reward eternal.
Let Daniel come forth with a Lion, and praise God with all his might through faith in Christ Jesus.
Let Ithamar minister with a Chamois, and bless the name of Him, that cloatheth the naked.
Let Jakim with the Satyr bless God in the dance.
Let David bless with the Bear – The beginning of victory to the Lord – to the Lord the perfection of excellence – Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable, and from the echo of the heavenly heard in sweetness magnificent and mighty.

SOPRANO SOLO

For I will consider my cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For he knows that God is his Saviour.
For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.
For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.
For I am possessed of a cat, surpassing in beauty, from whom I take occasion to bless Almighty God.

ALTO SOLO

For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour.
For – this is a true case – Cat takes female mouse – male mouse will not depart, but stands **threat'ning and daring.**
.....If you will let her go, I will engage you, as prodigious a creature as you are.
For the Mouse is a creature of great personal valour.
For the Mouse is of an hospitable disposition.

TENOR SOLO

For the flowers are great blessings.

For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's Creation.

For the flower glorifies God and the root parries the adversary.

For there is a language of flowers.

For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.

CHORUS

For I am under the same accusation with my Saviour –

For they said, he is besides himself.

For the officers of the peace are at variance with me, and the watchman smites me with his staff.

For Silly fellow! Silly fellow! Is against me and belongeth neither to me nor to my family.

For I am in twelve HARSHIPS, but he that was born of a virgin shall deliver me out of all.

BASS SOLO AND CHORUS

For H is a spirit and therefore he is God.

For K is king and therefore he is God.

For L is love and therefore he is God.

For M is musick and therefore he is God.

For the instruments are by their rhimes.

For the Shawm rhimes are lawn fawn moon boon and the like.

For the harp rhimes are sing ring string and the like.

For the cymbal rhimes are bell well toll soul and the like.

For the flute rhimes are tooth youth suit mute and the like.

For the Bassoon rhimes are pass class and the like.

For the dulcimer rhimes are grace place beat heat and the like.

For the Clarinet rhimes are clean seen and the like.

For the trumpet rhimes are sound bound soar more and the like.

For the TRUMPET of God is a blessed intelligence and so are all the instruments in HEAVEN.

For GOD the father Almighty plays upon the HARP of stupendous magnitude and melody.

For at that time malignity ceases and the devils themselves are at peace.

For this time is perceptible to man by a remarkable stillness and serenity of soul.

Hallelujah from the heart of God, and from the hand of the artist inimitable, and from the echo of the heavenly harp in sweetness magnificent and mighty.

Lo, the Full, Final Sacrifice

by Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

text by Richard Crashaw (1612-1649)

Gerald Finzi's "*Lo, the full, final sacrifice*" can be seen as a meditation on the sacrament of Holy Communion as it symbolizes Christ's victory over Death, and the transforming nature of Christ's sacrifice for us as ritualized in the Eucharist. It is possibly Finzi's choral masterpiece, and was the first piece he composed following World War II. Musically, it presents a very broad arch structure, comprised of a series of musical "scenes," very much reflective of the structure of the text. His musical language can be described on one level as austere, but on a deeper level, more impressionistic and full of rich harmonic development – again, in service of the text. He can be found moving from periods of dense harmony with striking dissonance to moments of luminous purity and beauty.

The text which Finzi set is by the 17th century metaphysical poet Richard Crashaw who has adapted two hymns on the Eucharist written by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Crashaw was a follower of fellow poet George Herbert and a leader of the Counter Reformation in England. Metaphysical poetry is marked by a rich use of imagery, which can be both sensual and shocking at times – particularly in the juxtaposition of images and the use of paradox. The seeming layering of multiple images is very prevalent in Crashaw's text as well. In devotional poetry such as this, animals are often used to symbolize Christ. Perhaps the most important of these is that of the lamb – Christ being the Lamb of God – but the lamb is also used in the more general sense of a sacrificial animal.

In reference to the opening four lines of the poem, one commentator, George W. Williams points out that "little Isaac, who was to be a sacrificial victim and who carried the wood for his own burnt offering, was a type of Christ, who was a sacrificial victim and who carried the cross for his own death, and that manna, the heavenly food with which Jehovah fed His children in the desert, was a type of Christ, the heavenly food of the New Covenant." An interesting juxtaposition of images occurs in line 6 where it is noted that Christ is not only the Lamb but also the Shepherd who tends and protects the flock. The text then moves through Crashaw's hopes for union with the saints through drinking the wine, and a prayerful section on the life-giving bread. One of the most striking images in the text comes as the poet turns his attention to the reviving power of the blood of Christ. The image of the "soft, self-wounding Pelican" grows out of the belief at the time that the pelican would purposely wound herself in the side to feed her nestlings with her own blood, thus giving them life while sacrificing herself. He then goes on to praise the cleansing power of the blood before closing with a longing for the Last Judgment, when "Glory's sun" will chase any "shades" of faith (doubts) away.

(Thanks to John Denison and Rod Taylor for research into Richard Crashaw's life and work, and for interpretative assistance with the text.)

Lo, the full, final, Sacrifice
On which all figures fix't their eyes.
The ransomed Isaac, and his ram;
The Manna, and the Paschal Lamb.

Jesu Master, just and true!
Our Food, and faithful Shepherd too!

O let that love which thus makes thee
Mix with our low Mortality,
Lift our lean Souls, and set us up
Convictors of thine own full cup,
Coheirs of Saints. That so all may
Drink the same wine; and the same Way.
Nor change the Pasture, but the Place
To feed of Thee in thine own Face.

O dear Memorial of that Death
Which lives still, and allows us breath!
Rich, Royal food! Bountiful Bread!
Whose use denies us to the dead!

Live ever Bread of loves, and be
My life, my soul, my surer self to me.

Help Lord, my Faith, my Hope increase;
And fill my portion in thy peace.
Give love for life; nor let my days
Grow, but in new powers to thy name and praise.

Rise, Royal Sion! Rise and sing
Thy soul's kind shepherd, thy heart's King.
Stretch all thy powers; call if you can
Harps of heaven to hands of man.
This sovereign subject sits above
The best ambition of thy love.

Lo the Bread of Life, this day's
Triumphant Text provokes thy praise.
The living and life-giving bread,
To the great twelve distributed
When Life, himself, at point to die

Of love, was his own Legacy.

O soft self-wounding Pelican!
Whose breast weeps Balm for wounded man.
All this way bend thy benign flood
To'a bleeding Heart that gasps for blood.
That blood, whose least drops sovereign be
To wash my worlds of sin from me.
Come love! Come Lord! and that long day
For which I languish, come away.
When this dry soul those eyes shall see,
And drink the unseal'd source of thee.
When Glory's sun faith's shades shall chase,
And for they veil give me thy Face. Amen.

*From Richard Crashaw's versions of the Hymns of
St. Thomas Aquinas: Adoro Te and Lauda Sion Salvatorem.*