

THREE “APPARENT MIRACLES”

Program notes by Ahmed E. Ismail

Tonight's program brings together three rarely-heard choral masterpieces of the twentieth century. The two cantatas featured in the first half, written twenty years apart, are affectionate settings of poets that each of the composers greatly valued, while the mass represents its composer's struggle, over the course of decades, to reconcile an intense, personal spirituality with the need to express his faith through music.

One would have to go back to the great Henry Purcell to find a British composer with so meteoric a career as Benjamin Britten (1913-1976). A student of Frank Bridge at the Royal College of Music, he had by age thirty achieved the same prominence as Ralph Vaughan Williams, the doyen of British music at the time, who was nearly forty years his senior. In addition to his many song cycles and choral works, he was also renowned as a conductor and accompanist, not only of his own works but of neglected masterpieces of composers such as Bach, Mozart, and Schumann. Britten's “apprenticeship,” including work for the British Post Office, honed his ability to achieve maximum effects from the barest of resources, as can be seen from his many works for chamber ensembles, notably the “chamber operas” *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Rape of Lucretia*.

Like many of his shorter works, Britten's 1943 cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb* was written on commission, this time by Rev. William Hussey to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the consecration of St. Matthew's church in Northampton, England. It also marked his first significant work since returning to England after a self-imposed three-year exile in America to avoid both World War II and the expected military service, which went against his pacifist beliefs.

The libretto is drawn from *Jubilate Agno*, a long free-verse manuscript written by Christopher Smart between 1758 and 1763. This was not the happiest period in the life of the poet, who was institutionalized in an asylum at the time; this may account for the fragmentary nature of the manuscript, of which only thirty-two pages survive. These extant pages are a curious mixture of the profound and the profane, alternating between moving sections on man's suffering and random wishes and observations such as “God send me a neighbour this September” and “N. B. The hawk beat the raven St. Luke's day 1762.” Britten's affection for the text, however cryptic and confusing, is abundantly clear, judging by his setting, and his request that excerpts be read at his memorial service.

Scored for choir, four soloists, and organ, *Rejoice in the Lamb* can be roughly divided into three “movements” containing a total of ten sections. The opening section, “Rejoice in the Lamb,” starts with a bare middle C played on the organ, followed by the entrance of the entire choir on the same middle C. The choir remains on middle C until the words “magnify his name together”; the upwards movement here appears a herculean effort. This segues immediately into a jaunty processional, marked “with vigour,” in which various Biblical figures are paired with members of the animal kingdom to celebrate the majesty of God. Following this is a “Hallelujah,” but not one in the stentorian mode of Händel's *Messiah* or Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*: instead we have a slow, quiet song in praise of God “the artist inimitable.”

The “slow movement” introduces the four soloists. The first soloist announces “For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry,” and then proceeds to list his various qualities, with a sinuous, almost feline accompaniment from the organ. After lauding the cat's virtues, Britten cleverly merges disparate parts of the manuscript to make Jeoffry the villain of the next section, the alto's “For the mouse is a creature of great personal valor,” with a scurrying figure on the organ suggesting the bravado of a valiant mouse (in shining armor?). From this emerges the tenor, who meditates on the nature of flowers.

Now comes the most remarkable moment in the entire work, “For I am under the same accusation as my Saviour,” as we finally hear the anguish of the poet—the same religious mania that led to his being committed in 1758. At first we think we have returned to the music of the opening of the work, yet by slow degrees, Britten ratchets the tension, until the thunderous impact of the watchman's staff is felt, and the

lament “Silly fellow! Silly fellow! is against me,” out of which emerges the contrapuntal section “For I am in twelve hardships,” with its tortured, chromatic melodic lines.

The eighth section, for bass soloist, creates the bridge to the final part of the cantata, based on alliteration of the alphabet, with each of his lines ending “and therefore He is God.” The ninth section, sung largely over a pedal F, lists various musical instruments and their “rhymes,” before shifting focus to the trumpet and harp, the “instruments of Heav’n.” The final section is a repetition of the “Hallelujah” of section three, bringing us full circle to a quiet, yet joyful, conclusion.

The Swiss composer Frank Martin (1890-1974) was a largely self-taught musician: he had only one formal teacher, Joseph Lauber, who provided instruction in piano, harmony, and composition, but not counterpoint. Composition was a laborious practice for Martin, who spent many years developing his own personal musical language, which integrated serialist techniques with concepts of extended tonality, with tonal centers indicated in the bass. Fully developed only in the 1940's, his unique sound-world, with unusual arrays of instruments and unorthodox approach to choral writing, can be heard in multiple choral works, as early as the short Biblical oratorio *In terra pax* and *Golgotha*, the first important Passion since Bach's time, and as late as 1972's *Requiem* and his final work, the 1974 cantata *Et la vie l'emporta*.

Martin's *Ode à la musique* represents a musical meeting of the minds across six centuries, as it sets a text by Guillaume de Machaut, the foremost poet and composer of the fourteenth century. Late in his life, he added an extensive *Prologue* to his complete works, outlining his musical philosophy, based on a hierarchy of “meaning,” “rhetoric,” and “music.” His all-encompassing definition of music is outlined in “*Et musique est une science*” (“[So] music is a science”). In 1961, Martin created his setting of this text, for baritone solo, chorus, brass, double bass, and piano, for the thirtieth congress of the French-Swiss Pedagogical Society.

Similar to Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb*, the *Ode* is in three contrasting sections, with a predominantly fast-slow-fast pattern. Also like *Rejoice*, the *Ode* begins with a unison melody in the choir. However, Martin quickly settles into a polyphonic treatment of the text, until we arrive at a Bach-like chorale at “*Elle fait toutes les caroles*” (“It creates all the carols”). A contemplation on the Virgin Mary completes the first section.

The second section, for baritone solo and *a cappella* chorus, is once more a meditation on the music of heaven. The baritone begins with a recitative, telling us of the singing of “the angels, all the saints, and the archangels.” Then, “as from afar,” the altos intone “*Gloria*,” to be followed in imitation by the other voices. Realizing that the heavenly choir sings “only when the music sings to them,” the baritone informs us that “such is Music in paradise,” as the heavenly *Gloria* slowly fades away.

Our return to earth is led by the piano, with its arpeggios suggesting the harp of David, as the sopranos and altos narrate how David appeased the wrath of God by “singing so devotedly.” A sinister brass chorale segues into a brief recitation of the exploits of Orpheus, the ultimate mythological songster and a central figure in the works of Machaut. The chorus explains that he led his beloved Eurydice out of the underworld “with his harp and with his sweet song,” and could make rivers change their course to listen to his music. [And while Machaut's text leaves out Orpheus's rather tragic demise, Martin's accompaniment makes it clear that a happy ending is not in the cards for Orpheus.] The work ends with a short summary, exhorting us to believe in these “apparent miracles that music has made,” with a brilliant brass fanfare bringing the work to an abrupt close.

Martin's Calvinist upbringing, and his veneration of the music of Bach proved to be double-edged swords: while they were sources of inspiration for many of his works, they also were obstacles in his artistic development. His family's deeply-held religious beliefs made him believe that public expressions of personal faith were unacceptable, and the doubt that his own music could ever withstand comparison with the cantatas and masses of his idol prevented him from publishing any works on sacred themes until 1944's *In terra pax*, a setting of Biblical texts to commemorate the end of World War II in Europe. Worse still,

these sentiments meant that his *Mass for unaccompanied double chorus*, written in the 1920's, remained unperformed until 1963, the year of its publication. As a result, compared to Vaughan Williams's contemporary *Mass in G minor*, also for unaccompanied double chorus, Martin's equally accomplished creation has unfairly languished in obscurity.

As in all of the movements in this work, the second chorus begins the *Kyrie*, with a slow, plainchant-like melody, echoed first by the altos in chorus I, and then the two soprano sections, with the tenors and basses in the background. The lower voices come to the fore in the following section, marked "*avec mouvement*" (with movement), which leads to the first *fortissimo* outburst, with tenors and sopranos on a high B, just before the "Christe eleison." This section similarly builds in intensity, until another *fortissimo* climax, and the return of the "Kyrie," ending on a quiet E major.

The tenors in chorus II start the *Gloria* on a pedal, with the other voices entering on increasingly higher pitches and after shorter intervals until both choruses unite for "in excelsis"; this process is immediately repeated, starting with the low basses. The movement quickly picks up pace, until halfway through, when the second chorus drones the "Domine Deus," while the first chorus sings "Agnus Dei." Both choirs share in the "Quoniam tu solus sanctus," where Martin breaks with tradition by eschewing both a fugal episode on the concluding "Amen," and the usual *forte* ending of this movement.

Although the *Credo* has by far the longest text of any movement of the ordinary Mass, Martin's concentrated setting is just fifteen bars longer than the Gloria. That is not to say that Martin's *Credo* lacks the drama of other composers': he retained a special fondness for the "Et incarnatus est" section, with its wrenching "Crucifixus." The "Et resurrexit" is a graceful dance, with sopranos and altos in each chorus in imitation, as are the two tenor sections. The first sopranos and second tenors lead the "Et in spiritum sanctum," repeating the same melody for each new line of text. The movement is brought to a vigorous conclusion with a homophonic statement of "Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum."

The *Sanctus* begins with the lower voices repeating a slow-moving figure which imitates the tolling of bells. As the movement progresses, the voices become increasingly animated, until we reach the "Hosanna in excelsis," with a prominent part for the tenors in both choruses singing in unison. From here, we segue immediately into the "Benedictus": with the three lower voices in chorus II chanting against the exotic close harmonies of their chorus I counterparts, while the sopranos, divided in each chorus, exchange the undulating primary melody. The "Hosanna" which concludes this movement is one of the most virtuosic moments in the entire choral literature: with all of the voices soaring into their highest registers, until the final chord, where chorus I drops out, leaving chorus II "pealing" once more, on the dominant chord of E major. It was here in 1922 that Martin stopped working on the Mass.

Four years later, Martin returned to this work, and added one of the greatest afterthoughts in all of music: the "Agnus Dei." The music sounds effortless and timeless, artfully concealing its difficulties: the meter oscillates between 5/4 and 4/4, interspersed with an occasional 3/4 bar. Against the steady pulse of the second chorus's slowly-changing harmonies, the first chorus sings its ethereal melody in unison. The basic melody is repeated six times, with the pitch gradually increasing, and with ever more insistent repetitions of *miserere* ("have mercy") through the first four variations. After the climax of the fourth variation, with the first chorus in two parts for the only time in the movement, the mood calms down through the remaining two variations, until all voices unite for the lone *dona nobis pacem*. The final chord is G major, and for the first and only time in this work, we end a movement on the tonic, and we sense that at long last, our spiritual journey has come to an end.

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Rejoice in the Lamb

CHORUS

Rejoice in God, O ye Tongues; give the 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 Ishmail 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 for 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.

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 bless'd 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 the flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.

CHORUS

For I am under the same accusation with my Savior,
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 the silly fellow, silly fellow, is against me, and
belongeth neither to me nor to my family.
For I am in twelve hardships, but he that was born of a
virgin shall deliver me out of all.

BASS SOLO

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.

CHORUS

For the instruments are by their rhimes,
For the shawm rhimes are lawn fawn and the like.
For the harp rhimes are sing ring and the like.
For the cymbal rhimes are bell well and the like.
For the flute rhimes are tooth youth and the like.
For the bassoon rhimes are pass class and the like.
For the dulcimer rhimes are grace place and the like.
For the clarinet rhimes are clean seen and the like.
For the trumpet rhimes are sound bound and the like.
For the trumpet of God is a blessed intelligence and so
are all the instruments in Heav'n.
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 for 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.

—adapted from *Jubilate Agno*
by Christopher Smart (1758-1763)

Ode à la Musique

Et Musique est une science
Qui veut qu'on rie et chante et danse.
Cure n'a de mélancolie
Ni d'homme qui mélancolie
À chose qui ne peut valoir,
Ains met tels gens en non chaloir.
Partout où elle est joie y porte,
Les déconfortés reconforte
Et n'est seulement de l'ouïr,
Fait-elle les gens réjouir.

N'instrument n'en a tout le monde
Qui sur musique ne se fonde,
Ni qui ait souffle ou touche ou corde
Qui par musique ne s'accorde.
Tous ses faits plus à point mesure
Que ne fait nulle autre mesure.

Elle fait toutes les caroles,
Par bourgs, par cités, par écoles,
Où l'on fait l'office divin
Qui est fait de pain et de vin.
Peut-on penser chose plus digne
Ni faire plus gracieux signe
Com d'exhausser Dieu et sa gloire,
Louer, servir, aimer et croire,
Et sa douce mère en chantant
Qui de grâce et de bien a tant
Que le ciel et toute la terre
Et quanque les mondes enserrent,
Grands, petits, moyens et menus,
En sont gardés et soutenus.

J'ai ouï dire que les anges,
Les saints, les saintes, les archanges,
De voix délie, saine et claire
Louent en chantant Dieu le père
Pour ce qu'en gloire les a mis
Com justes et parfaits amis,
Et pour ç'aussi que de sa grâce
Le voient adès face à face.
Gloria.

Or ne peuvent les saints chanter
Qu'il n'ait musique en leur chanter:
Donc est Musique en paradis.

David, le prophète, jadis
Quand il voulait apaiser l'ire
De Dieu, il accordait sa lire
Dont il harpait si proprement
Et chantait si dévotement

So Music is a science
That makes us laugh and sing and dance.
And a cure for melancholy
or for men who are melancholy
About something which has no worth,
But leaves them uncaring.
Everywhere it goes it brings joy;
The miserable are comforted
And just by hearing it,
It makes men rejoice.

No instrument in all the world
Is not founded upon music,
Nor that with wind or touch or string
Cannot play in consort.
All its deeds are of greater measure
Than any other measure.

It creates all the carols,
In towns, in cities, in schools,
Where one performs the office divine,
Which is offered with bread and wine.
Can one think of anything more fitting
Or make a more gracious offering
Than to exalt God and his glory,
To praise, to serve, to love, and to believe;
And his sweet mother, singing,
Who is so full of grace and good
That the heaven and all the earth
And whatsoever the worlds surround,
Great, small, average, and fine,
Are guarded and sustained by them.

I have heard it said that the angels,
All the saints, and the archangels,
In voices fine, strong, and clear
Praise in song God the father
For he in glory made them
Like true and perfect friends,
And that also through his grace
They may soon see him face to face.
Gloria.

For the saints can only sing
When the music sings in them:
Thus is Music in paradise.

Once David, the prophet,
When he wanted to appease the ire
Of God, he in consort with his lyre,
Which he played so wondrously,
And singing so devotedly

Hymnes, psautiers et oraisons
Ainsi comme nous le lisons,
Que sa harpe à Dieu tant plaisait
Et son chant qu'il se rapaisait.

Orpheüs mit hors Eurydice
D'enfer, La cointe, la faitice,
Par sa harpe et par son doux chant.
Ce poète dont je vous chant
Harpaît si très joliment
Et si chantait si doucement
Que les grands arbres s'abaissaient
Et les rivières retournaient
Pour li ouïr et écouter,
Si qu'on doit croire sans douter
Que ce sont miracles apertes
Que Musique fait. C'est voir, certes.
—Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1372)

Hymns, psalms, and prayers
Even as we read them,
That his harp and his song
So pleased God that he relented.

Orpheus led Eurydice,
The elegant and fine lady, out of Hades
With his harp and with his sweet song.
This poet about whom to you I sing
Played his harp so beautifully
And sang so sweetly
That the great trees lowered their branches
And the rivers changed their course
To hear him and listen.
So one must believe without doubting
That these are apparent miracles
That Music has made. It's certainly true.
—Translation by A. E. Ismail (2002)

Mass for double chorus *a cappella*

KYRIE

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

GLORIA

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.

We praise You, we bless You, we worship You, we glorify You, we thank You for Your great glory: O Lord God, King of Heaven, God the Father Almighty. O Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father: who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us; who takes away the sins of the world, give ear to our prayer; who sits at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.

For You alone are holy, You alone are the Lord, You alone are high above all: Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

CREDO

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God of God, light of light, true God of true God. Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man. He was crucified also for us:

under Pontius Pilate He suffered and was buried.

And the third day He rose again, according to the scriptures. And He ascended into heaven: he sits at the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead: of His kingdom there shall be no end.

And in the Holy spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified: who spoke by the prophets. And in one holy catholic and apostolic church.

I confess one baptism for the remission of sins and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

SANCTUS-BENEDICTUS

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts: heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

AGNUS DEI

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.