

## Benjamin Britten, *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Opus 30, 1943

Some background notes for the SPC – culled from a variety of sources listed below.

In 1942 Britten was only 29 years old and entering one of the most creative phases of his life. After four years in America, he and his life-long partner the tenor Peter Pears spent twelve days on a Swedish freighter crossing the Atlantic in a war-time convoy. During that voyage he wrote his much-loved *Ceremony of Carols* and the unaccompanied choral piece *Hymn to St Cecilia*. Back in England he writes the *Serenade for Tenor, Horn & Strings* for Pears, a *Prelude & Fugue for 18-part string orchestra*, starts work on *Peter Grimes* (eventually performed in 1945), and writes the festival cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb*.

The cantata was commissioned by the Rev. Walter Hussey for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of St Matthew's Church, Northampton in September 1943. Hussey used his position as parish priest and latterly as Dean of Chichester Cathedral to sponsor contemporary arts. He commissioned Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, pieces by Tippett and Walton, and art and sculpture from Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland and Marc Chagall.

While in America, Britten was introduced by W.H.Auden to the bizarre 18th century poem 'Jubilate Agno' by Christopher Smart. It had just been discovered in a private library and was first published in 1939. Smart was famous for approaching people in the street and asking them to pray with him, which in those days (just as now?) was reason enough to lock him up. He was confined to a madhouse for seven years and ended his short life (1722-1771) in a debtors' prison. His poem grabbed Britten's imagination and he, better than anyone, was able in this choral work to reveal Smart as more visionary than lunatic, and his poem as a wonderfully imaginative *Benedicite* or thanksgiving. It may not be orthodox or biblical to see the creative wonder of God in tigers, bears, bassoons, clarinets, and letters of the alphabet but, Britten smilingly asks, why not?

'I will consider my cat Jeffrey', Smart writes, 'for he is the servant of the living God', and Britten responds with wondrous feline curlicues on the organ. When the next verse describes the mouse as 'a creature of great personal valour', we know Smart has foreseen *Tom and Jerry*. During the composition process Britten wrote to Hussey: 'I am afraid I have gone ahead and used a bit about the cat Jeffrey, but I don't see how it could hurt anyone - he's such a nice cat'

Yet Britten never goes for the cartoon, but rejoices in the richness of Smart's own creative landscape. When various biblical figures come forward with wild animals, he puts the choir on its metal as it dodges and weaves with seven, then six, then nine quavers in a bar.

At the emotional core of this work is Smart's acknowledgment of his own 'madness': 'For I am under the same accusation with my Saviour / For they said he is beside himself'. The mocking cries of 'Silly fellow!' accompanied by full organ lead to the anguish of his being in 'twelve hardships'. But soon the joy of creation returns, and Smart and Britten delight in the rhyming vowels which illustrate different musical instruments, before the work closes with its own 'Hallelujah Chorus' – subdued, but with suppressed energy in the stressed athletic quavers of its dotted rhythms.

Most composers would have looked away embarrassed by the outpourings of an eccentric, but Britten, who was never scared by naivety, embraces and transfigures them. Thanks to his music, 'malignity ceases, and the devils themselves are peace', and it is hard not to be moved.

Musically, the seemingly disparate movements of *Rejoice in the Lamb* are unified by the motifs of an oscillating perfect fourth, and a rising scale followed by a falling triad, and it is one of Britten's first compositions to creatively reflect his appreciation of Henry Purcell's crucial place in English music. The dotted-note Hallelujah section, on a firm crotchet bass, clearly derives from those of Purcell's verse anthems – and by bringing back the Hallelujah to end the cantata, Britten seeks to give it the force of a ritornello, as in much 17<sup>th</sup> century music. Describing Purcell's songs, Britten spoke of their 'independent, short sections mysteriously linked by subtle contrasts of mood, and rhythm' and the 'firm and secure musical structure which can safely hold together and make sense of one's wildest fantasies', words equally applicable to *Rejoice in the Lamb*.

#### Sources

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[Rejoice in the Lamb - Wikipedia](#)

[Walter Hussey - Wikipedia](#)