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## Reflection on Rejoice In The Lamb (Dale Adelman)

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**A Reflection by Dr. Dale Adelman**  
**Canon for Music**  
**Observing the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi (transferred)**

Based on lessons appointed for St Francis' Day:  
Psalm 148  
Genesis 2:18-24  
Matthew 11:25-30  
and *Rejoice in the Lamb* (poetry by Christopher Smart, music by Benjamin Britten)

I am standing here under the "canon snuffer" today because, during the Cathedral Choir's pilgrimage to England in August, I happened to mention to Canon Knowlton that we would be singing Benjamin Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* on St Francis' Sunday, and "wouldn't it be nice if the preacher could simply offer some words of explanation about the piece?" From now on I will be more careful about what I wish for out loud.

This year, musicians around the world are celebrating the 100th anniversary of Benjamin Britten's birth, and *Rejoice in the Lamb* is certainly one of his great sacred masterpieces. Some of you may know that it exists *at all* because an Anglican priest, Walter Hussey, commissioned it for his parish's 100th anniversary, where Alec Wyton, who was later a mentor to some of North America's great church musicians, conducted its premiere 60 years ago on September 21st. It is due to Hussey's passion for commissioning sacred art, both at St Matthew's, Northampton and later as Dean of Chichester, that we have not only *Rejoice in the Lamb*, but also William Walton's *Chichester Service* (which we have just sung), not to mention Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, and Gerald Finzi's *Lo, the full, final Sacrifice* (which we will perform for the first time here at the Cathedral on our Lenten concert in March).

But we are not offering Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* today for any of those reasons. It's all about the text.

In *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Britten sets selected excerpts of a 1200-line poem by the 18th-century poet, Christopher Smart. We could spend the rest of the day talking about either Smart or his poem, but the one biographical tidbit I probably need to reveal is that he was actually in a mental asylum when he wrote it.

*Why* am I telling you this? Because that fact sometimes becomes the excuse for people to dismiss the entire text the moment it gets a little weird. But this text is definitely not crazy.

Yes, Christopher Smart spent years in an asylum - but in the 18th century you could be committed to such an institution for a lot of reasons, probably *most* of them not very good ones. It is probably relevant that it was his own father-in-law, with whom Smart had badly fallen out, who undertook the legal proceedings to secure the "commission of lunacy" against Smart for his religious "mania," and had him put away. Christopher Smart was clearly eccentric, but he was also brilliant, extremely well educated, and a passionate "High Church" Anglican, arguably with an Evangelical bent.

I will not stand here and pretend that all of Christopher Smart's poetry is comprehensible, but his work undeniably reveals what critics describe as "flashes of genius," and these "flashes" are skillfully purposed in Britten's setting. I happen to think that the portions of Smart's poem set here are perfect for today.

It being the Cathedral's tradition to transfer the feast of St Francis of Assisi to the first Sunday in October, we have prayed blessings on people's pets, and the "love of animals" theme is picked up in the Bible lessons the Church has appointed for this day.

We heard the portion of the creation story from Genesis, where Adam gives *names* to all of the animals, birds, and fish that God has made. Then in Psalm 148, we heard *all of creation* being invoked to "Praise the Lord from the earth", including even sea-monsters. And this Psalm - written in about the 6th century B.C. - supplies inspiration to St Francis's own *Canticle of the Sun*, a translation of which we have just sung as our opening hymn Hymn 407, *The Hymnal 1982*, "Most High, omnipotent good Lord"], where he intones "my Lord be praised, by brother sun," and by "sister moon," and by "mother earth."

All of this takes us to the very heart of *Rejoice in the Lamb*, and to the ancient Judeo-Christian belief that *all of creation* - whether by its *simplicity*, or its mind-boggling *complexity* and *diversity*, or simply for its awesome beauty - ***all of creation is good, and all of creation - whether living or inanimate - by its very existence, praises and magnifies God, its Creator.***

So let's have a look at the text in your service leaflets on page 5 [see below].

Britten begins by using Christopher Smart's invocation of *man and beast* - "all "nations and languages, and every creature" - to rejoice in God, to "give the glory to the Lord, and the Lamb." Britten does this *not* bombastically, however, but with a quiet, awe-filled, expectant excitement.

This segues into a characteristically Christian - if musically rambunctious - invocation of "'those who have gone before' to join us in praising God , but the people that Smart invokes are definitely not the saints we expect. Instead, he rattles off a list of obscure Old Testament figures, who you can all Google later, if you're curious. This is probably the skeptic's first opportunity to write the whole text off as crazy, yet the poet's genius shines through with a felicitous image of God - God's *self* as "*the perfection of excellence.*"

This glimpse of such a Creator evokes the first of two sections in which the principal word is "hallelujah ," and, again, Britten resists the temptation to make this movement loud & rollicking, as praise to God often is. Instead these "hallelujahs" are more intense and intimate - an expression of joy "*from the heart of God*", God *the Creator of all*, WHO himself is "the ARTIST INIMITIBLE."

Then we return, for three unusual and charming movements, to the idea that *all of creation glorifies God, simply by being what it was created to be.*

Christopher Smart wrote a *lot* about his cat, Jeffry. It bears reflection, however, that Jeffry was really his *only completely* devoted companion, through thick and thin. I am unfortunately allergic to cats, but I once had two adorable Miniature Pinschers who convinced me that dogs, at least, were placed on earth by God to teach us about *unconditional love*. They are a great gift! Any of you who have cats or dogs know that they are capable of doing utterly random and absolutely charming things, for any, or no, reason, and there is incredible joy to be had simply in watching them be what they are. In Britten's organ accompaniment, we hear the unpredictable twisting and playful turning of Jeffry , at *least* "seven times round" And why not? "For God has *blessed* him in the *variety* of his movements."

In the next aria, the virtues of valour and loyalty are extolled, "this is a true case", when Smart observes a mouse, whose natural instinct is to defend its mate against impossible odds.

It would be hard for me to select a favorite moment in this work, but Smart's imagery around flowers is truly inspired. "For the flowers have their angels" - and speak to us in their own language - "for flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ." The next section contains the most impassioned statement of faith in the entire cantata, due in large part to the music. Here Smart, in his own hardships, identifies with Jesus - both of them, at the end of their lives, were thought by the

authorities of their day to be crazy - and both suffered beatings and severe mistreatment, ironically, at the hands of the "officers of the peace." Faith drives out despair, nonetheless, and the movement ends stating Smart's confident belief that, "He that is born of a Virgin shall deliver me out of all."

There follows a very brief *excerpt* from what is a *complete* acrostic in the original poem, suggesting alternate words for God inspired by the selected letters of the alphabet, Britten's excerpt ends - unsurprisingly - with "For M is musick," and we sprint headlong into the glorious world of *sound* by means of a jubilant succession of rhyming words. Although the words themselves have to do with music, I think Smart's *rejoicing in God* derives less from meaning of the words, than it does simply from the pure *joy* of the *sound* of the rhymes.

There is a wonderful phrase near the conclusion of the Episcopal Church's baptismal rite, where we pray God to give the newly christened "the gift of joy and wonder in all [God's] works." Wouldn't it be the wonderful if we *could* all view *all* of creation around us *however amazing* - or *unremarkable* - it might be - with the kind of joy and wonder perceived here by Christopher Smart & Benjamin Britten? Perhaps this is one of the ways we can "come unto him, all we who labour and are heavy laden" - and then, perhaps, "from the echo of the heavenly harp, magnificent and mighty," we might indeed "find rest" , "for this time *is* perceptible to man, by a remarkable stillness, and serenity of soul."

TEXT by Christopher Smart employed in Benjamin Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb*:

*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,  
Dance, dance, dance.*

*Let David bless with the bear  
The beginning of victory to the Lord,*

*To the Lord the perfection of excellence.*

*Hallelujah, hallelujah,  
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.  
Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.*

*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.*

*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.*

*For the flowers are great blessings.  
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.*

*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 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,  
Shall deliver me out of all.*

*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 and the like.  
For the shawm rhimes are moon boon and the like.  
For the harp rhimes are sing ring and the like.  
For the harp rhimes are ring string and the like.  
For the cymbal rhimes are bell well and the like.  
For the cymbal rhimes are toll soul and the like.  
For the flute rhimes are tooth youth and the like.  
For the flute rhimes are suit mute 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, hallelujah,  
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.*

*Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah.*

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