

Program Notes on Britten's "Jubilate Deo"

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If you visit Baltimore, you should take time out from the crabcakes to visit some of the city's religious sites, including the highest of all Anglo-Catholic parishes, Grace & St. Peter's, the Roman Catholic Basilica, oldest in the United States, and the Museum of Visionary Art. Christopher Smart, author of *Jubilate Agno*, from which Benjamin Britten took the text of his "Rejoice in the Lamb," would have been at home—if not necessarily welcome—at all three, but the museum is where he would find the work of kindred spirits.

The museum is full of paintings, tapestries, and other works of art that show great skill, amazing detail, and a real feeling of the divine. Most of them have biblical themes, and sometimes it takes a good long time to recognize every image the artists have included in their work and even longer to understand the overall pattern. Next to each work hangs a biography of the artist. Most note which mental hospital the artist worked in, and many report that "once the artist began Thorazine treatment, he lost all interest in art." The visitor is left wondering whether to be glad a mind is free from torment or sad that a voice that spoke of transcendence has been stilled.

Christopher Smart lived before the age of Thorazine, so his creative work was impeded only by his worldly cares. He was confined to the asylum where he composed his greatest works, *Jubilate Agno* and *A Song to David*, because he had taken to praying loudly in public, even in the Royal Parks designed more for flirtation than adoration. "I blessed God in St. James's Park," he wrote, "till I routed all the company." He was visited in the asylum by the great literary figures of the day, including Dr. Johnson, who

said, “I did not think he ought to be shut up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I’d as lief pray with Kit Smart as anyone else. Another charge was that he did not love clean linen; and I have no passion for it.”

The project Smart set himself while confined was nothing less than a reformed Anglican liturgy. It was to be antiphonal, with one group reading lines beginning with “Let” and another group answering with lines beginning with “For.” Smart, however, wrote down the “For” and “Let” lines separately, so the correspondence between them was not discovered until 1950, several years after Britten set some of them to the music we hear today. (And since the project was never completed, some “For” sections, including the famous “For I will consider my Cat Jeffry,” have no corresponding “Let” lines.) The whole is modeled on the Psalms of David, which Smart himself freshly translated into English during the 1760’s. Smart imitates not just the fundamental poetic form of Hebrew verse, parallelism, but also some of its other features. Several of the Psalms are acrostics, each verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Smart, in the same way, plays with letters and rhymes and sounds, all for the glory of God.

Smart was one of those lucky people whose mental illness leads them more often to euphoria than to despair. In trying to understand his work, the first step is not to try to make sense of it rationally—though critics have worked mightily to follow the routes his mind took to produce his more perplexing images. Rather, one should see Smart’s main point, which is that God is great and loving and that every part of the world, if paid proper attention, reveals His loving kindness. It is as if Smart asks, “Do you want evidence that God loves you? Here it is: cats play, flowers bloom, words rhyme, and

people make up names like Balaam, Ithamar, and Jakim. What more proof do you need?” We may not like being pulled on the sleeve by a gentleman in a dirty cravat and asked to kneel and celebrate God’s glory in the street—especially if he starts going on about mice. But it will not hurt our own mental equilibrium if we listen to his message: God’s love for us is shown by every portion of creation.

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