

Spring 6-9-2023

# Rejoice in the Lamb: Preparation to Performance

John Gladen  
*Portland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/honorstheses>



Part of the [Music Education Commons](#), and the [Music Performance Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

## Recommended Citation

Gladen, John, "Rejoice in the Lamb: Preparation to Performance" (2023). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1337.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1366>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

Rejoice in the Lamb:  
Preparation to Performance

by

John Gladen

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Music

in

University Honors

and

Music Education, Choral

Thesis Advisor

Ethan Sperry

Portland State University

2023

Rejoice in the Lamb, written by Benjamin Britten in 1943, sets to music a poem by the eccentric 18th century poet Christopher Smart. Smart wrote the longer work from which the lyrics are taken, Jubilate Agno, while he was residing in an asylum. The kaleidoscopic tapestry of deeply devout Christian imagery, in combination with Britten's compositional prowess allow this piece to bring to life a myriad cast of wild characters, moods, and textures. In this creative thesis, I will lead the Westminster Presbyterian Church Choir through the preparation of this piece through weekly rehearsals, culminating in a performance on Sunday May 28th, 2023 during regular worship in place of the sermon.

### **A Brief History of Christopher Smart**

Born in Kent, England in 1722, Christopher Smart was a well regarded member of the English literary elite for the first part of his life. He was a fellow of Pembroke College in Cambridge, and his religious poetry won several prizes. However, his lifestyle of partying and spending beyond his means all but ended his career.

By 1756 he is reported to have begun showing signs of mental illness, praying loudly in the streets, taking to heart the New Testament mandate to "pray without ceasing". In 1757 a commission of lunacy was taken out against Smart by John Newberry, his publisher who was also Smart's wife's stepfather. He was admitted to St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics. It is unclear if he was actually mentally unwell or if previous bad blood between him and Newberry was the cause of his detainment.

While confined at St. Luke's, in a religious mania, Smart composed the two works he is best known for today, "Jubilate Agno" (from which the lyrics of Rejoice in the Lamb are taken), and "A Song to David". Both of which are extremely fervent, over the top, zealous, and full of deep devotion for the Divine. He was released from the asylum

in 1763 and had some success publishing his work, but his old habits got the better of him and in 1770 he was arrested for debt. He lived one more year in a debtors' prison before his death in 1771.

### **A Brief History of Benjamin Britten**

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) was a highly celebrated composer, conductor, and pianist. Born in England, he was a pivotal figure in 20th century British music, composing across many genres including opera, for which he is most famous. As a child he showed great musical promise and began composing at an early age. He studied composition under Frank Bridge at the Royal College of Music in London. After graduation he worked as a film composer in the music department at the BBC.

A lifelong pacifist and a gay man, he and his partner Peter Pears, who began as a platonic friend and moved into becoming his lover and partner after Britten's mother passed, left England for the United States just before World War II began in 1939. When the war began, after consulting the embassy, they stayed in the US as artistic ambassadors upon the embassy's recommendation. While there Britten was introduced to the enlightenment era poetry of Christopher Smart.

He continued to compose, but it was generally not well received, some critics even calling his work derivative. Britten never composed on the standard texts, and almost always composed for commission or for special events. Through his own personal struggles with fear and ostracization around his homosexuality, Britten was searching for a voice that was truly his own.

In 1942 Pears and Britten returned to England and applied for recognition as conscientious objectors to exempt them from military service which was granted. In 1943 Britten received a commission for a piece to celebrate the 50th anniversary of St.

Matthew's church. Having read Smart's poetry and striving to find his own voice, he set selections from Jubilate Agno to music, which became Rejoice in the Lamb.

It wasn't until his opera "Peter Grimes" premiered in 1945 that Britten found himself thrust onto the world stage. He continued to compose many operas and other commissions throughout the rest of his life to much critical acclaim, cementing himself as a prominent figure in Western music of the 20th century.

### **Analysis of Prominent Recordings**

Rejoice in the Lamb is written in an oratorio style, with 10 distinct sections. I have analyzed two of the most prominent recordings made by giants in the choral music world Robert Shaw and Dale Warland. Each of the 10 sections is marked with italics. We'll begin with the Robert Shaw recording.

#### **Robert Shaw**

*Rejoice*-This movement starts at 63 beats per minute (bpm), this is exactly what is marked in the score. The choir is using clear and articulate consonants moving completely together. Their singing is so true to the dynamics marked in the score. Shaw does choose to take some liberties; there is some rubato at the most intense points, opening them up in a gorgeous way.

*Nimrod*-This section is marked at 200 bpm, Shaw takes this at 220, much faster than marked! Amazingly his choir can handle it and works through the tongue twisters with accuracy and seeming ease. Their dynamics and articulations are so clean throughout this section. You can really hear the difference between a staccato, an accent, a forzando, a tenuto, and more. This is truly inspiring.

*Hallelujah*- Shaw takes this section between 45 and 50 bpm, slower than marked. This creates even more contrast between the nimrod and hallelujah sections. The choir

continues to sing with impeccable attention to dynamics, as well as incredible precision in the quintuplet that Britten has asked for here.

*Jeoffry*-Our first solo is taken at 45-54 bpm. Generally under the marked tempo. In this recording there is a lot of rubato on the part of the soloist and organist. Generally the tempo is slower when the soloist is singing, and then the organist speeds some things along, perhaps to make up for the lost time in the slower tempo.

*Mouse*-The drama of this movement is spectacular. They take it at 97 bpm which is slightly under the marked tempo. This allows for the soloist to be even more expressive.

*Flowers*-This movement is taken at 54 bpm, right on the written tempo. I choose to take this movement a little faster; at this tempo it almost feels too slow, and it's clearly hard for the tenor to make it all the way through the long lines Britten has written here.

*Accusations*-This movement is at 52 bpm, just ever so slightly under the marked tempo, it works though as the choir continues to have incredible articulations and powerful dramatic communication.

*For H*-The soloist is taking lots of time in this Recit. section. It adds intensity and drama in a beautiful way.

*For the instruments*- This section is taken at 88 bpm, slightly under the marked tempo, but beautiful. This section taken at 96 bpm, the marked tempo, feels almost frantic, which is perhaps what Britten was going for here. As it stands the choir is clear and sounding together.

*Stillness*-Shaw chooses to take this section at 42 bpm, six clicks under what is marked in the score. It helps to create more stillness and peace which is what this section is all about. The lines are beautiful, flowing, and clear.

*Hallelujah*- This final section, a reiteration of the third section, is taken at 46 bpm. Exactly the same as that first hallelujah. This flows directly from the stillness section perfectly at nearly the same tempo with just slightly more motion, as if a slight stirring in the heart has occurred.

Next we'll look at the Dale Warland Singers recording:

### **Dale Warland**

*Rejoice*-Warland begins at 58 bpm, a tempo under what is marked. It works because the choral tone is incredibly smooth, like silk. They sound as if they are a single voice moving together.

*Nimrod*-This section is taken at 190 bpm which is 10 clicks slower than marked. The choir has incredible dynamic contrast through this section, you can really feel the duality of ff to pp. I'm not sure why Warland chose to take it a few clicks under the marked tempo, his choir could definitely do it at 200 bpm. They also have some interesting pronunciations of words in this section compared to many other recordings. What rings through most in the section though are their clear and beautiful articulations.

*Hallelujah*-He takes our first hallelujah at 48 bpm, also slower than the marked tempo of 60. They also chose to ignore the quintuplet rhythm in favor of a dotted eighth sixteenth but fluctuate some between them, which is a fascinating choice. Despite the slower tempo this rhythmic inconsistency makes it feel faster than it is. The choir also doesn't have as much dynamic contrast in this section.

*Jeoffry*-36-54 bpm Wow, this soloist is making it her own! So much rubato, I would be surprised if Warland is conducting this, I'm betting that this is just soloist and organ, they're both taking liberties all over the place. It works, it's a beautiful interpretation, but it's not quite what's on the page.

*Mouse*-This solo is taken at 100 bpm, exactly the marked tempo. So much drama in this character's voice which is aided by such British pronunciations!

*Flowers*-This section is taken between 54-58 bpm. Our tenor soloist moves ahead on some of these lines, which makes total sense, it's tough to have enough air to float these notes at the written tempo. I'm sure Britten wrote this solo with Peter Pears in mind, but not everyone has that kind of lung capacity.

*Accusations*-Warland takes this section between 40-52 bpm. There is significant play with the tempo on this section in this recording. The choir could do more with dynamics, they choose to sing without vibrato, and it limits their expressive capacity.

*For H*-No attention is paid to the dynamics here, the first line is marked *pp* the second line *f*, both sound at exactly the same volume. The soloist could use more depth in his tone, every once in a while he taps into it, but it's like he's afraid to use his power.

*For the instruments*- This section is taken at 87 bpm, under the 96 that is marked. The choir's dynamic range is stifled by the lack of vibrato, and the *rallentando poco a poco* into the stillness section is almost completely ignored, making the final phrase seem to rush by.

*Stillness*-Warland takes this at 48 bpm, exactly where it's written, but it feels fast somehow! The words fly by so quickly. The *rit.* is mostly ignored.

*Hallelujah*- Also under tempo, this sits at 48 bpm versus the 60 it's written at. This is truly beautiful singing though, their piano and pianissimo are exquisite.



## **Rehearsal Notes**

I was given seven rehearsals to put this piece together with the choir, one of which was canceled due to illness. Five of those six I had approximately the last half hour of rehearsal, for our final rehearsal I was given the full hour and a half. With so little rehearsal, there was no time to waste. In my first four rehearsals I went through the piece section by section, breaking down difficult rhythms, tricky note leaps, articulations, dynamics and other various nuts and bolts of the music making process. I also broke the choir up and had our section leaders take their sections through a sectional to clean things up in our third rehearsal. In our fourth rehearsal we attempted our first run through of the entire piece without stopping.

In our fifth rehearsal I gave the choir my interpretation of the piece as well as expanded context on Benjamin Britten and Christopher Smart. This interpretation can be seen below in the program notes. We also made our way through each section of the piece bringing attention to all the notes I had taken in my score study and preparation. Between each of the rehearsals I reviewed the videos I had taken of myself, not only to find trouble spots to work in the next rehearsal, writing those on sticky notes and placing them in the corresponding sections in the score, but also to observe myself as a conductor to find the many places that I can improve. Our sixth rehearsal we finished going through those notes (we had run out of time in the previous rehearsal) and did a full run through. By the end of the sixth rehearsal I felt confident in our ability to make it through the piece. We did not accomplish everything my perfectionist mind was hoping to, but the piece was ready for a performance.

## **Program Notes**

*The following was included in the bulletin at Westminster on the day of the performance:*

John will be conducting this piece as a part of the requirements for his creative honors thesis under the mentorship of Dr. Ethan Sperry.

Rejoice in the Lamb is Benjamin Britten's kaleidoscopic masterpiece through the mind of a deeply devout deranged man, our poet, Christopher Smart. It begins with a soft, ethereal call to Rejoice in God proceeding into a tour de force of multimeter mastery of "let" verses calling on numerous biblical figures to come forth with their symbolic animals or accouterments. Once all are assembled, in a momentary hush a Hallelujah bursts forth praising all that comes "from the heart of God", quietly at first then rising in fervor, pouring out in ecstatic wonder and praise for the works of the "hand of the artist inimitable" echoing from the heavenly harp.

We then hear three solos, vignettes from the world of God's creation. Our organ metamorphosizes into a playful cat, a noble mouse, and a flowing field of flowers as our soloists illustrate the praise, virtue, and poetry present in Nature.

Our next section elucidates our poet's personal struggles being "under the same accusation as (his) savior". Even through this adversity he finds resilience through his faith that "he that was born of a virgin shall deliver (him)"

The solo that follows delivers some fascinating allusions to alphabetical and numerical symbolism leading us into our singers becoming musical instruments of praise climaxing with the trumpet of God and coming to a close as "God the Father almighty plays upon the harp of stupendous magnitude and melody" which brings about a "remarkable stillness and serenity of soul" full of wonder, grace and peace. And from

this place of supreme peace that passes all understanding, we hear an echo of the Hallelujah from earlier moving forth with quiet praise for the Divine.

### **Performance Reflections and Conclusion**

The day of the performance finally came. I had made every preparation, and given the choir everything I could in the time permitted. In my final rehearsal with them the morning of, we spent a few moments cleaning up a few trouble spots and did a run through. So many things had changed for the better between our last Thursday rehearsal and that Sunday morning. Our final runthrough went exceedingly well. Then the time came in the service to perform. I was a little nervous, but mostly excited. Of the three major mistakes that occurred I believe my conducting gesture was directly to blame for two of them. I also made a few other mistakes, but managed to communicate effectively enough with my face and offhand to keep us together.

While I do think it is important to acknowledge and learn from the mistakes that were made, I also think it is important to celebrate the 95% of the piece that went exceedingly well. Overall I was incredibly pleased with the performance. The focus and dedication of the almost all volunteer choir, the time I was given to rehearse it, even though I am still a student, I feel immense gratitude for the opportunity.

The process of rehearsing and conducting Rejoice in the Lamb in a performance has been incredibly rewarding. I learned so much along the way about rehearsal technique, my own patterns and places that I can improve, the magic of multimeter to communicate text effectively, and many other things. This has been an exhilarating and exalted entrance into the world of choral conducting, I am deeply honored.

## Bibliography

- Donaldson, Hilary Seraph. "An Analysis of Benjamin Britten's "Rejoice in the Lamb."” *The Choral Journal*, vol. 51, no. 10, 2011, pp. 6–24, [www.jstor.org/stable/23560980](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23560980). Accessed 27 May 2023.
- Internet Archive. *Christopher Smart and the Enlightenment*. Internet Archive, New York : St. Martin’s Press, 1999, [archive.org/details/christophersmart0000unse/page/216/mode/2up](http://archive.org/details/christophersmart0000unse/page/216/mode/2up). Accessed 27 May 2023.
- L., E., et al. "Review of Rejoice in the Lamb: Festival Cantata (Christopher Smart.) for Mixed Chorus and Organ, Op. 30.” *Music & Letters*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1944, pp. 120–120, [www.jstor.org/stable/728885](http://www.jstor.org/stable/728885). Accessed 27 May 2023.
- Mark, Christopher. "Benjamin Britten: New Perspectives on His Life and Work, And: Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten, 1928-1938 (Review).” *Music and Letters*, vol. 92, no. 1, 2011, pp. 153–158, [muse.jhu.edu/article/431970](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/431970). Accessed 27 May 2023.
- Riddles, Mark. "The Instruments Are by Their Rhimes: An Examination of the Text in Britten’s "Rejoice in the Lamb."” *The Choral Journal*, vol. 36, no. 7, 1996, pp. 17–22, [www.jstor.org/stable/23550725](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23550725). Accessed 27 May 2023.
- SFChoral. "Benjamin Britten | Rejoice in the Lamb.” *San Francisco Choral Society*, 5 Feb. 2013, [www.sfchoral.org/site/benjamin-britten-rejoice-in-the-lamb/](http://www.sfchoral.org/site/benjamin-britten-rejoice-in-the-lamb/). Accessed 27 May 2023.
- Vocelle, L. A. "Cats in the Enlightenment (Part 10 – Christopher Smart’s Jubilate Agno).” *THE GREAT CAT*, 6 Dec. 2013, [www.thegreatcat.org/cats-enlightenment-part-10-christopher-smarts-jubilate-agno/](http://www.thegreatcat.org/cats-enlightenment-part-10-christopher-smarts-jubilate-agno/). Accessed 27 May 2023.