

“Rejoice! Festive Music for Chorus and Organ”
Program Notes by Colin Roust

North Shore Choral Society
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A life-long student of literature, Gerald Finzi used his music—and a series of public lectures at the Royal College of Music—to argue that the English language was every bit as musical as Italian. Avoiding any word painting to illustrate his texts, he sought instead to capture the inherent poetry and lyricism of the words themselves. The result is a careful, precise fusion of words and music, flowing as smoothly and naturally as in spoken language. *God Is Gone Up*, composed for the feast day of St. Cecilia in 1951, blends this text-oriented approach with the more rhythmic and muscular style that he adopted after a 1950 trip to the United States. The organ’s dramatic fanfares set the stage for a devotional poem by Edward Taylor, a seventeenth-century Puritan poet from Massachusetts.

Kenneth Leighton was a prominent young composer in post-World War II England. In the 1950s, he adopted a serialist aesthetic—virtually a necessity at the time. Avoiding the high modernist path of Anton Webern and Pierre Boulez, he instead followed the models of Alban Berg and Luigi Dallapiccola, composing tone rows that suggested traditional tonal harmonies. His *Paeon*, commissioned in 1966 for the *Modern Organ Music* anthology, was composed after he abandoned serialism for a more dynamically dissonant tonal language. The piece opens with a strident and bright chord—a major chord with an added tritone (the legendary “Devil in music” interval). The almost improvisatory piece unfolds as an exploration of that chord in different registrations, configurations, and melodic configurations.

Rejoice in the Lord Always, by Henry Purcell, is a “symphony anthem,” originally composed in 1684 for soloists, full chorus, and string ensemble (replaced today by organ). The text comes from Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians. Toward the end of his letter, Paul offers three final exhortations: to be united as a church, to rejoice without anxiety, and to think and act purely. The opening prelude begins with a descending bass line that evokes the pealing of church bells. When the soloists enter, they sing the exhortation to rejoice with a joyous minuet-like melody that returns numerous times.

Ave verum corpus is a paraliturgical, or devotional, hymn sung in the Catholic Church for the Feast of Corpus Christi. Sung during the Eucharist, the hymn affirms that the bread is truly the body of Christ. Following the Reformation, the text became increasingly popular and was set to music by numerous composers, from William Byrd and Mozart to Gabriel Fauré, Francis Poulenc, and Edward Elgar. The setting by William Byrd, published in 1605, reflects the late Renaissance era in which it was composed. By adding an “echo” section at the end, he transforms the five-line Latin text into a fourteen-line sonnet, ideal for a madrigal-like setting with two contrasting halves. While Byrd’s version is the work of a mature, experienced composer, the version by Edward Elgar was one of his first published works, though it was written fifteen years before its 1902 publication date. With no formal training as a composer, his music comes from the instincts of a highly imaginative and versatile young choral conductor and multi-instrumentalist. If the call-and-response form is somewhat idiosyncratic, the long arching melodies foreshadow Elgar’s more mature works of the early twentieth century.

Hail, Gladdening Light, by the Irish composer Charles Wood, represents Purcell's renewed influence on the composers of the English Musical Renaissance. As one of the first students admitted to the newly formed Royal College of Music in 1883, Wood studied composition with Sir Hubert Parry and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, who guided him in a thorough study that placed particular emphasis on Purcell and Johannes Brahms. This anthem, composed in 1919, represents Wood at his best, writing liturgical music for the Anglican Church. It draws strongly on the heritage of Purcell's anthems, capturing the festive atmosphere of works like *Rejoice in the Lord Always*. But the harmonic language, dense eight-part texture, and dramatic breaks between sections reflect the choral and orchestral works of Brahms.

In 1994, the spunky, straight-talking Rev. Geraldine Granger was called to be vicar of the fictional village of Dibley, initiating the long-running BBC television series *The Vicar of Dibley*. Howard Goodall, a prominent radio and television composer (who also composed the music for *Black Adder*, *Mr. Bean*, and *Red Dwarf*), was hired to provide the music. The show begins with pastoral scenes of the English countryside, accompanied by the angelic treble voices of the Christ Church Cathedral Choir, singing Goodall's ***The Lord Is My Shepherd***. The success of the show and the popularity of its theme song have established this anthem as a standard piece of the choral repertoire.

Let All the World in Every Corner Sing was commissioned in 1963 by the Church of St. Matthew in Northampton. The anthem uses a dissonant, but still tonal musical language similar to that of *Paeon*—the two pieces even open with the same chord. In this case, however, we also hear the lively, often syncopated rhythms and lyrical melodies that characterize much of Leighton's music. The text was written by George Herbert, a seventeenth-century poet and Anglican priest from Wales. An antiphon, the poem consists of a recurring chorus, "Let all the world in every corner sing | My God and King," alternating with verses. In Leighton's setting, the choruses are highly energetic, contrasting the more metaphysical and contemplative verses.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Sir Hubert Parry was at the peak of his career. He directed the Royal College of Music, taught at Oxford, and had just been named a baronet. Thanks to works written in the 1890s for Purcell's bicentenary and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, he was unofficially considered the composer laureate of the United Kingdom. Thus it was no surprise that he was commissioned to write an anthem for Edward VII's 1902 coronation. ***I Was Glad*** captures the pomp and pageantry of royal events—most recently, the wedding of Prince William to Catherine Middleton. The opening fanfares, added for George V's 1911 coronation, reveal Parry's conventional harmonic language. He adheres rigorously to the diatonic system of major and minor keys, but spices his chords with frequent dissonances. A passionate disciple of Richard Wagner, Parry even slips in the famous "Tristan" chord during the third fanfare. From there, the piece unfolds in three sections. The beginning of Psalm 122 is set in an imitative style, using antiphonal effects to suggest spatial separations between various parts of the chorus. An optional section (omitted in today's performance) follows as the choir sings "Vivat Regina!," "Long live the Queen!" (or "Vivat Rex!" when a king is sitting on the throne). The final section consists of a hushed prayer for peace, followed by a triumphal march setting for the promise of peace and prosperity.

In 1942, Benjamin Britten had just returned to England after a soul-searching three-year journey to North America. Disillusioned with the United States, he came home having accepted his sexuality, entered a committed union with singer Peter Pears, and determined to become the greatest English opera composer since Henry Purcell 250 years earlier. He and Pears soon began work on *Peter Grimes*, a powerful opera about the persecution of a social pariah. As Pears worked on the libretto, Britten accepted a commission for a choral setting of Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, written between 1759 and 1763, but surviving today in only a few fragments. As a pacifist and a homosexual in wartime England, Britten channeled his own experiences into the music, creating a powerful work that, like *Peter Grimes*, expresses the pains of persecution. Throughout ***Rejoice in the Lamb***, Britten captures the rhythmic irregularities of Smart's free-verse poetry. The result is a sung text that flows as naturally as spoken language. The work can be heard in a large-scale arch form (with the first and fifth sections related, the second and fourth related, and a central section). The opening choral section gradually builds from a unison pitch to a joyful "Hallelujah" sung in a dizzying imitative texture. The second section comprises three solos illustrating the presence of God in all nature: the treble soloist portrays the cat's liveness, the alto presents the mouse's bravery, and the tenor sings of the plants' glorification of God. The emotional central section has the choir suffering the same persecution as Jesus Christ. Open intervals create a stark sound, with dark minor chords used to highlight important words. Christ's deliverance from persecution is sung using an artificial scale made from combining D-sharp and E minor chords, representing death and the hope for respite, respectively. In the fourth section, Smart's text seeks meaning in every letter and number of the Latin alphabet, just as the Kabbalah finds similar meanings in the Hebrew alphabet. Even the sounds of musical instruments resonate with these meanings, becoming the voice of God. In the final section, God's peace is portrayed through a monotone of a different sort from the first section: here the choir sings only the notes of an F major chord, building to a repetition of the joyful "Hallelujah."

Like Leighton's *Paeon*, Simon Preston's ***Alleluyas*** was commissioned for the 1966 publication of *Modern Organ Music*. The score is prefaced by an excerpt from the "Cherubic Hymn" of the St. James Liturgy, one of the earliest known versions of the Orthodox Church's Divine Liturgy: "At his feet the six-winged Seraph; Cherubim with sleepless eye, | Veil their faces to the Presence, as with ceaseless voice they cry, | Alleluya, Alleluya, Alleluya, Lost most high." This fantasia unfolds in nine sections that sound like improvisations on three distinct five-note motives that evoke the angels three-fold "Alleluya."

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, musical settings of the ***Te Deum*** underwent a dramatic transformation. What had been the concluding chant of morning devotional services and feast day celebrations now became the vehicle for festive choral works in both the Catholic and Anglican churches. John Rutter's 1988 setting of the text draws on what he calls "the Anglican tradition of 'functional' Te Deums." Like Sir Arthur Sullivan, Sir Hubert Parry, and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, Rutter aimed for straightforward and accessible vocal writing, with excitement generated from the organ's intricate accompaniment, dramatically contrasting sections, and the chorus's soaring melodies.

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