

“I seemed at first in a state of utter blankness; then came flashes of intense light, alternating with blackness, and with a keen vision of what was going on in the room around me, but no sensation of touch. I thought that I was near death; when, suddenly, my soul became aware of God, who was manifestly dealing with me, handling me, so to speak, in an intense personal present reality. I felt him streaming in like light upon me.... I cannot describe the ecstasy I felt.

Yet, this question remains, is it possible that the inner sense of reality which succeeded, when my flesh was dead to impressions from without, to the ordinary sense of physical relations, was not a delusion but an actual experience? Is it possible that I, in that moment, felt what some of the saints have said they always felt, the undemonstrable but irrefragable certainty of God?”

Harvard Professor William James, in his 1902 classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, records this report as given to him by J.A. Symonds. Mr. Symonds’ mystical altered state was a result of the use of chloroform. James tells us that the mystical state is defined by four determining qualities: ineffability (a quality of awe, too sacred to be described); noetic quality (knowledge or insight); transiency (fleeting time periods, without perfect memory recall); passivity (union with God or an ideal). The mystic experience may also be accompanied by unusual experiences of ecstasy, levitation, visions, and power to read human hearts, to heal, and to perform other unusual acts. Mysticism occurs in most, if not all, the religions of the world, although its importance within each varies greatly.

Today’s program, *Unseen Worlds*, offers a musical glimpse into this mystery of all mysteries: mysticism. In a Newsweek article, April 13, 1998, 47% of Christians said they had personally experienced the Holy Spirit. Could Hildegard von Bingen have suffered from migraines and their effects? Could St. John of the Cross have suffered with severe depression? Could St. Teresa of Avila been faking it? Does it matter whether she was a psychotic or a saint? Could chloroform and mescaline and nitrous oxide be responsible for mystical altered states? Perhaps, in the end, it is more about the effects of these experiences than the stimuli. The music we offer you is a reflection of these experiences – mystical texts, thoughts, principles set to music. We give you a wide spectrum of possibilities through choral color, sound and idea.

Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda

We open our program with the first set of Gustav Holst’s famous ***Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda***, Op. 26. The years 1900 through 1912 could be thought of as Holst’s “Sanskrit” period. Inspired by his Theosophist stepmother, Holst developed an interest in the religious literature and poetry of India in his mid-twenties, going so far as to learn the rudiments of the Sanskrit language at University College, London, so that he could make his own translations. His first effort in this vein was the opera *Sita* (1900-1906); later came works like the opera *Sàvitri* (1908), the choral work *The Cloud Messenger* (1909-1910), and the *Choral Hymns from the Rig Veda*, written between 1908 and 1912.

The Rig Veda (Sanskrit: a compound meaning “praise” + “knowledge”) is an ancient Indian sacred collection of Vedic hymns. It is counted among the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism, known as the Vedas. Some of the verses are still recited as Hindu prayers, putting these among the world’s oldest religious texts in continued use, composed roughly between 1700-1100 BC or the early Vedic period. The Rig Veda contains several mystical, mythological and poetical accounts of the origin of the world, hymns praising the gods, and ancient prayers for life.

The first group (written in 1908-1910 and premiered at Newcastle on December 6, 1911) is scored for mixed chorus. It opens with the primitivistic "Battle Hymn," with its repeated refrain "Indra and Maruts fight for us!" The Maruts are Indra's attending stormclouds, the warriors in his battles with the demons, and throughout, earnest appeals are made to Indra and the Maruts to fight for the worshippers. The second hymn, "To the Unknown God," begins with the chorus singing quietly in unison, and builds to a huge climax over martial rhythms. The set concludes with a "Funeral Hymn," which acknowledges the finality of death, while urging those left behind to embrace life.

Sibylline Prophecies

Lassus' *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* (or *Sibylline Prophecies*) were composed circa 1560. In motet composition, Lassus assembled the styles fashionable in Italy in his youth: tonally controlled chromaticism, distinctive, finely chiseled thematic material, dazzling vocal textures, imitation, voice pairing, harmonic clarity and solidity.

The Sibylline Oracles are a collection of cryptic half-pagan, half-Christian poems, believed by some to prophesy the birth of Christ. Who were the Sibyls? The earliest explicit textual evidence for an inspired prophetess named Sibylla occurs in the fifth century, B.C. From these references, it appears that her words were circulated as books of prophecy and that her name was inserted in these oracular books.

The story of the oracles goes something like this: the Cumaean Sibyl brought nine books of her oracles to Tarquinius Priscus, who at that time ruled the public affairs of the Romans. She asked three hundred philippics for them: Tarquinius was not interested and scorned her, so she burned three of the books. Again, she brought the remaining six books to Tarquinius and demanded the same amount of money. And again, she was scorned and sent away. So she burned three more books. Then she came again, with the remaining three books, demanding the same price and declaring to Tarquinius that she would surely burn the remaining three if he did not comply. This time, the King felt fear and began to worry. He bought and read the remaining books, and, as he was filled with such wonder, made a collection in ancient Rome of all the Sibyls' oracles. The collection mentioned ten Sibyls. (We are offering the colorful prologue and the Persian Sibyl and the Libyan Sibyl).

The music in its chromaticism is an attempt to produce magic. If you look at the 15th and 16th centuries, you will find that alchemy was taught at university as a respected intellectual pursuit. In reading these alchemical texts, we find the words couched in the language of science. But this is allegorical. The intent was not to turn base metal into gold: but to transmute the soul into the higher realm. The allegory is usually in terms of color. Alchemical processes are characterized by a putrefaction that's black and moves chromatically – chromatic metaphor. Lassus' use of chord color is somehow an attempt in music to model these alchemical transformations. Now if it is true – Lassus' intention to evoke alchemical transformation – the music will actually be magic itself.

Saul

Egil Hovland is one of Norway's most productive and popular contemporary composers. He has written symphonic works, concerti for various instruments, chamber music, choral works, children's music and a great number of sacred works of varying dimensions, including a church opera, church ballets and music to modern biblical plays. Since 1949 he has held the post of organist and choir-master at the church of Glemmen in the city of Fredrikstad. Mr. Hovland has won several significant musical awards and in 1983 was made a Knight of the Royal Order of Saint Olav in recognition of his services to Norwegian music both as composer and performer.

In his stirring work *Saul*, Hovland gives us a haunting and piercing vision of the moment that Saul, at the peak of his destruction and persecution of Christ's followers, is met with one of the great mystical experiences of the New Testament, a blinding conversion. According to Acts, a bright light blinded Saul, and then he heard God asking, "Why do you persecute me," a mystical voice Saul interpreted as God communicating with him. Saul immediately changed his name to Paul and joined the Church as an apostle, spreading Jesus' teachings throughout the known world. Hovland gives the chorus the voice of an impassioned God, while a narrator maintains the biblical thread.

Laudate sie mi Signore

Ronald Perera's (b. Boston, 1941) compositions include operas, song cycles, chamber, choral, and orchestral works, and several works for instruments or voices with electronic sounds. He is perhaps best known for his settings of texts by authors as diverse as Dickinson, Joyce, Grass, Sappho, Cummings, Shakespeare, Melville, Updike, Henry Beston and Francis of Assisi. "Laudate sie mi Signore" is a movement from his dramatic cantata *Canticle of the Sun*, which sets only a fragment from St. Francis' most famous canticle.

Saint Francis of Assisi, "the little beggar," is perhaps the most popular saint in history. He was born in 1182 in Assisi, Italy, and his baptismal name was John, but his father renamed him Francesco, in honor of his love for France. A handsome, charming, wealthy and educated young man, he spent his early life dreaming of knighthood and longing for the adventurous life of chivalry. In pursuit of that dream, he joined the war between Assisi and Perugia at the age of 20.

In that war, Francis was wounded and taken prisoner. Spending the next year in a dungeon, he contracted malaria. Ransomed by his father, a more reflective Francis returned to Assisi. The military victories of Count Walter of Brienne revived Francis' desire for knighthood. Under the Count's command, he hoped to win his favor and become a knight. On his way to join Brienne, Francis stopped in Spoleto and heard the shocking news of the Count's death.

One night a mysterious voice asked him, "Who do you think can best reward you, the Master or the servant?" Francis answered, "The Master." The voice continued, "Why do you leave the Master for the servant?" Francis realized the servant was Count Walter. He left Spoleto convinced God had spoken to him. From that moment on, Francis began to care for the sick and the poor – especially the lepers – convinced that this was what God had called him to do.

A further call came in 1205, when, in a dramatic moment of prayer in the abandoned Church of San Damiano, Francis heard a voice coming from the crucifix, which challenged him to rebuild the church. At first he thought it meant that he should rebuild San Damiano, so he sold some of his father's cloth to raise money to build the Church at San Damiano. His father, who was already upset about the life he was leading, took him to court, where he was ordered to pay back the money. Francis complied with a dramatic gesture, renouncing his inheritance. Dressed only in a workman's smock, he left town and spent the next two years as a hermit, taking a vow of poverty and dedicating his life to God.

Francis begged for his food, wore old clothes, and preached peace. He began to attract followers, and in 1209 with a papal blessing he founded the Friars Minor (Franciscans). Then in 1212 with St. Clare of Assisi, he founded the Order of "Poor Ladies," now known as the "Poor Clares." He also founded the "Third Order of Penance" (the Third Order), which included lay people. He was the first person (recorded) to receive the stigmata (the five wounds of Christ) in 1224. Out of humility Francis never accepted the priesthood but remained a deacon all his life. It is thought that, although ill, broken of

spirit and depressed, Francis, in a moment of ecstasy, composed the beautiful, triumphant *Canticle of the Sun* for his beloved order of friars, some time in 1225.

Francis died at the age of 44 on October 4, 1226 at Portiuncula, Italy. He was canonized by Pope Gregory IX less than two years later.

Rejoice in the Lamb

The poem *Jubilate Agno, or Rejoice in the Lamb*, was written by that Cambridge prodigal Christopher Smart (nicknamed “Kit”), 1722-71, while confined in a madhouse. In 1742, Smart became a Scholar of Cambridge University, and in 1745 he was elected a Fellow of Pembroke and Keeper of the Common Chest. His Cambridge career came to an end in 1749, as he was beset by delusions, debt and alcoholism. Despite these hurdles, Smart managed to win the Seatonian Prize (newly founded in Cambridge, given to the best English poem on a sacred subject) five times between 1750 and 1755.

Different dates have been assigned to Smart’s first “attack of insanity.” Among Smart’s eccentricities was his penchant for public prayers; he insisted upon his friends praying with him, and he would fall upon his knees in the street to pour forth his prayers, in spite of the jeers of passers-by. Dr. Samuel Johnson, friend and supporter, took a moderate view of Smart’s madness: “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.” Smart entered a private madhouse in Bethnal Green in 1758 where he remained until January, 1763. *Rejoice in the Lamb* was the result of this confinement. Whatever the reason for his confinement, and whatever the cause of his illness, *Rejoice in the Lamb* remains the most extraordinary and mystical poem known to have been written during the 18th century, and the most eloquent of testaments to the creative and spiritual potential of madness.

The structural basis for Smart’s poem is deceptively straightforward. Each standard verse comprises a series of ‘Let’ statements – after the structure of the sacred poetry of the Psalms – followed by antiphonal ‘For’ statements (Psalm 95, for example: ‘Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving... For the Lord is a great God’). “Let Daniel come forth with a Lion, and praise God with all his might through faith in Christ Jesus. For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry. For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.”

In *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Smart saw himself as being entrusted with a divine and evangelical mission: “I am the Lord’s New-Writer – the scribe-evangelist.” Smart summons each and every known bird, animal, fish and insect, as well as most of the named figures from the Old Testament, to associate with him in his praise of God Almighty. In his madness, Smart possessed a vision that looks across the whole of creation and revels in the accumulation of species, names, knowledge, sound and language.

Smart believed that Saul, at the moment of his conversion, “heard certain words which it was not possible for him to understand. For they were constructed by uncommunicated letters. For they are signs of speech too precious to be communicated for ever.” **The whole structure of *Rejoice in the Lamb*, therefore, is a massive substitute for what cannot be otherwise spoken, written or understood: the name of God. It is a stand-in for silence, not a silence that demands absence, but a silence fuller and more resonant than any linguistic construct of which the mind is capable.**

Benjamin Britten chose to set ten short sections of Smart’s longer work. *Rejoice in the Lamb*, the centerpiece of our program, is scored for chorus, soloists and virtuoso organ. The first two sections set the mood and give examples of names being summoned from the pages of the Old Testament to join

with some creature in praising and rejoicing in God. What follows is a quiet and ecstatic Hallelujah – the first moment that Britten steps into this mystical arena. It is a haunting moment, filled with presence and power. Sections 4 through 6 offer Smart’s take on nature praising and rejoicing in God. You will hear from a cat, a mouse, and the flowers. In the seventh section, Smart relays his own troubles and suffering: “For I am in twelve hardships, but he that was born of a virgin shall deliver me.” Sections 8 and 9 offer four letters from the alphabet, leading to a full chorus that heralds the praise of God through musical instruments. At this point, Smart gives us his reason for the entire poem of praise, “For at that time malignity ceases, and the devils themselves are at peace.” Britten responds to Smart’s short respite from madness with a repetition of his rapturous Hallelujah.

In closing this magical mystery tour, I leave you with one last thought from William James:

“Even the least mystical of you must by this time be convinced of the existence of mystical moments as states of consciousness of an entirely specific quality, and of the deep impression which they make on those who have them.”