Dryden, the polemics of Pierre Jurieu and the correspondence on Christian unity between Leibniz and Bossuet. Such a study would offer a sharper sense of Locke’s religious and political convictions and would show that the cautious personal life chronicled by Professor Woolhouse coexisted with a boldness of vision and a willingness to innovate that made Locke a true son of Luther and Bacon and by no means the most timid of the Fellows of the Royal Society.


Effortless Cosmopolitanism
R. J. Stove


Had opinion polls existed in 1820, they would have ranked Johann Nepomuk Hummel alongside Beethoven, Weber, and Rossini as among the greatest of all living composers. In 1820 Chopin, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, Verdi, and Wagner remained mere children, Berlioz an obscure adolescent; Schubert’s fame had not yet spread beyond Viennese connoisseurs. Hummel died in 1837, his glory intact. But within a generation it was as if he had never breathed, so wholly did captious Time obliterate his renown. Postery seldom even troubled to censure or calumniate him; it simply forgot him; and forgotten he has largely stayed, despite modest revivals in recent years. This is the first biography of him in English. The last as well, one suspects, given its breathtaking comprehensiveness, solicitude for the smallest details, and attractively fluent idiom, all of which militate against the very idea of a subsequent author adequately essaying the topic.

If Hummel had managed nothing else, he would continue to warrant attention for his almost Mozartean precocity. Born in 1778, he had already become an exceptional pianist when just six years old, and a skilled violinist too (this secondary interest ended when he smashed his violin in ire during an inconclusive aesthetic discussion with a fellow juvenile). At the age of eight he not only began studying piano with Mozart in Vienna, but went to live with him, rent-free. No doubt today this residential arrangement would inspire charges of pedophilia, but such residences occurred quite often at the time—Mozart’s father had his own live-in pupils—with no hint of sexual relations. Hummel proceeded to arrange for chamber forces several of Mozart’s operas and orchestral works, as well as to reveal in his own pianism three Mozartean traits: a constant concern for the long, singing line (Mozart demanded that his keyboard music “flow like oil”), persistent textural clarity, and aversion to any but the most prudent use of the sustaining pedal. In short, everything epitomized in the term “classicist”: everything, also, antipathetic to the young Beethoven’s keyboard style, with its string-wrecking ebullience and pedal-heavy grandeur. Only in the field of improvisation did Hummel and Beethoven meet occasionally on shared ground, several competent judges regarding Hummel as the more gifted improviser of the two. Between both men there arose—and there survived until
Beethoven’s death-bed—an improbable friendship, punctuated by occasional quarrelling. Hummel seems to have been devoid of envy, while Beethoven (for all his tantrums) possessed sufficient natural generosity to accord his major rivals due respect.

As if Hummel’s boyhood were not already star-spangled enough, he came to know Haydn—“Most beloved papa”—during an English visit. He eventually succeeded Haydn as music-master at the Esterházy clan’s Hungarian palace, although he treated his post in a much more cavalier spirit than Haydn had shown, fulfilling numerous extramural commissions, shamelessly twitting his subordinates (one of whom complained to Prince Nicholas Esterházy that “I have had it up to here with his teasing”), and openly disputing his employer’s artistic knowledge. After only eight years—the blinking of an eye, by Haydn’s standards of tenure—Hummel lost his job for good.

Not that he minded overmuch: he experienced far greater satisfaction as, in Professor Kroll’s phrase, “the first touring artist.” He traveled as compulsively as Liszt would do, and won popular as well as critical acclaim without non-musical aids like Liszt’s urbane good looks. (Hummel’s youthful appearance, with his unkempt tresses and thick slug-like lips, nightmarishly adumbrated Mick Jagger; afterwards his facial features thinned out to a certain aquiline decisiveness, but his body grew to elephantine bulk.) From Berlin to Bonn to Cambridge to Copenhagen to Dresden to Edinburgh to Frankfurt to Hamburg to Hanover to Kassel to Kiel to Magdeburg to Moscow to Paris to Prague to Schleswig to Stuttgart to The Hague to Warsaw: scarcely a city in northern, central, or eastern Europe failed to host at least one Hummel performance. Professor Kroll cites journalistic reports to indicate that Hummel’s technique declined in his last years, but even the ravages of illness could not undo his executant panache entirely.

Reading Hummel’s life induces a strange double-vision, in that the attitudes it reveals—the robust practicality, the effortless cosmopolitanism, the fundamental lack of Angst—suggest an early-eighteenth-century rather than an early-nineteenth-century figure. In half a dozen ways he had more in common with Telemann than with his own contemporaries. He shared Telemann’s gift for readable didactic prose (his 1828 guide, Comprehensive Theoretical and Practical Instruction in Piano Playing, reached bestseller status) and something of Telemann’s sheer musical graphomania. Although he lived only two years longer than Beethoven, he composed twice as much as Beethoven did, his opus-numbered pieces forming only about half of his output. He produced music (to quote the phrase of his spiritual descendant Saint-Saëns) “as an apple-tree produces apples.” Of Beethoven-type agonies at the writing desk, the hammering-out of recalcitrant sketches, the frenzied revisions, Hummel experienced nothing. He enjoyed gracious court life too much, such life involving in his case protracted residence at Weimar, where his friend Goethe compared his prowess at the piano to Napoleon’s on the battlefield. A dutiful Freemason, Hummel—like his fellow Austrian Catholics Haydn and Mozart—alternated between the Mass and the Lodge meeting without discomfort to his conscience. (Apropos such flexibility, it should be noted that among Germanic peoples the true revolutionary spirit struck not in 1789 or even 1793, but 1848. Hummel’s doings make clear how much power and influence Germany’s miniature kingdoms, dukedoms, and principalities retained in his day: how completely these petty states kept up ancien-régime habits of self-confident absolutist patronage, as if France’s Jacobins and sans-culottes had never been.)

When not writing or playing or socializing, Hummel could usually be found teaching. The young Mendelsohn took lessons
from him; the young Schumann had every intention of doing so, though he turned against Hummel later; the young Liszt would have liked to do so, but baulked at paying the exorbitant fees involved. Hummel’s shrewd business sense armed him for a laudable, and in his case successful, struggle against piratical publishers: this decades before modern copyright consciousness emerged. His win did lack permanence—a hundred years on, Richard Strauss needed to carry out similar wearying labors afresh, faced with renewed German governmental reluctance to accept composers’ intellectual property rights—yet colleagues recognized it, and Professor Kroll traces to Hummel’s efforts the origins of America’s current copyright law. Unlike Mozart, Hummel left a fortune at his death: thus harming his posthumous repute, so enslaved have we become to bohemian drivel about the virtues of self-destruction. Equally unglamorous was Hummel’s contented, quarter-century-long marriage (which produced two sons): no febrile Byronic spasmody on the domestic front.

What appeal, what importance, does Hummel have in our time, when we must use our imaginations to evoke what Tennyson called “the touch of a vanished hand”? In 1963 New York Times critic Harold Schonberg passed upon Hummel’s compositions the brisk verdict “overrated then, underrated now.” That seems about right, to judge by the admittedly small proportion of his output available on CD, and the even smaller extracts from it that Professor Kroll reprints. Hummel’s Trumpet Concerto, far better known at present than anything else he wrote, is certainly a curious blend: its outer movements rattle along as cheerfully as those of Haydn’s piece for the same instrument (intended for the same soloist), but its middle movement is shot through with Beethovenian pathos wholly unlike anything in the Haydn. Such pathos quite frequently marks Hummel’s slower music, and is about the one sign that he took notice of the emerging Romantic spirit. It is typical of him that this spirit is almost always kept within bounds, that he seldom permits it to dominate an entire piece (as it routinely dominates in Weber or the lesser-known composer Louis Spohr, to name two examples among Hummel’s contemporaries), and that more often than not it is counteracted by Hummel’s love of conspicuous virtuoso filigree.

Regularly he appears to have shown undue enthusiasm for relying on ingenious pattern-work after the opening flush of inspiration has spent itself. This might account for the frequent critical assertion that his best writing lies in variation forms, where a shortage of long-term logic need be no handicap. He undeniably avoided the genre of the symphony, though the hypothesis that he did so through fear of competing with Beethoven has little to commend it. During Hummel’s lifetime, Beethoven’s symphonies had not acquired anything like the canonical prestige they gained afterwards; and if they had, Hummel with his legitimate self-worth was hardly the man to be awed into artistic sterility by them, or by anything else. He happily enough vied with Beethoven in various other media where the latter excelled, including the piano sonata and the string quartet, despite the obvious gulf between Hummel’s loquaciously companionable muse and Beethoven’s depth. Hummel’s piano concertos indubitably inspired Chopin’s, and are free from the Pole’s sometimes jejune notions of orchestral scoring. Another field justifying serious examination is Hummel’s sacred music: the early nineteenth century constitutes a thin period for liturgical works—in contrast to such para-liturgical pièces d’occasion as Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis or Berlioz’s Requiem—and Hummel’s have the merits, by no means negligible or widespread, of singability and solidity. Everything that could be achieved
in Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic musical life without sheer imaginative genius, Hummel achieved. Besides, in what moral code is it written that music must sear the soul and flay the nerves with its profound originality before it can be considered valid? “Enjoy the world by giving joy to the world,” ran Hummel’s credo; if it ensured that he never stormed the heavens, it also guaranteed much high craftsmanship and gemütlich charm.

For Michael Burleigh, the distinguished historian of the Third Reich and author of *Earthly Powers* and *Sacred Causes*, the link between the Vendée and the totalitarian violence of a later age is equally clear. Yet, as Burleigh shows in his remarkably illuminating two-volume history, the massacres in the Vendée are also part of a larger, less frequently studied narrative: the epic clash of religion and politics in Europe over the past three centuries.

Begun as a comparative study of Jacobin civic cults and the festivals of the Bolsheviks and the Nazis, Burleigh’s work grew in scope as he came to realize that religion—so often neglected by contemporary historians—offers a more effective window into the origins of modernity than other, trendier subjects. “Perhaps we need less exposure to the Second World War and more on such themes as how Christianity came to be the dominant creed, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, relations between Church and state, and the deep causes of present secularity,” he writes in the introduction to *Earthly Powers*. The result is a penetrating and deeply learned work filled with surprising insights and a consistently powerful moral compass.

Like fellow English Catholic Christopher Dawson, Burleigh sees the central tragedy of modern history in the “Moloch-like expansion of the modern state” and its colonization of all areas of human life, including morality: “[The] alliance of throne and altar duly broke down as the temporal power of the Churches was challenged by nation states which vied for the ultimate human loyalties.” Yet the churches would fight back, not only to secure their own existence, but also to protect individuals from the grasp of government. “Christianity,” Burleigh reminds us, “has much to do with the notion of the autonomy of the individual, with the preservation of a sphere beyond the state that anticipated civil society, with the notion of elected leadership, and with holding rulers accountable to higher