

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Blake Music at the Santa Barbara Conference and
Everett Frost, production of *Island in the Moon*

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Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 10, Issue 4, Spring 1977, pp. 128-129



REVIEW

Songs of William Blake and Music of Blake's Time.
A concert at the University of California, Santa Barbara, 3 March 1976, for the conference on Blake in the Art of His Time.

William Blake. *An Island in the Moon.* Audio tape of a production for KPFK Pacifica, Pasadena, CA. Produced by Everett C. Frost. Music by Edward Cansino. 2 reels, 7 1/2" ips; also cassettes. Los Angeles, CA.: Pacifica (Los Angeles 90038).

Reviewed by Martin K. Nurmi

According to Burton R. Pollin's bibliography, *Music for Shelley's Poetry* (1974), over 800 composers have set Shelley. The number may not be quite that high for Blake, because Shelley was better known earlier. But Blake has been extremely attractive to composers to set, partly because of the surface simplicity of his lyrics but also partly because of his strong musical rhythms, which must result from his evidently having composed melodies for many of his songs himself. (Shelley, who loved music very much, was apparently almost tone-deaf but had a marvelous ear for poetic-musical rhythms.) Words alone, however musically rhythmic, do not imply specific pitch intervals of melodies, but some of Blake's lyrics come about as close to doing that as seems possible, because their rhythms are so insistently musical, their grammatical sense often suggests musical phrases, and pitch patterns of words sometimes even suggest the direction of voice leading.

The concert, "Songs of William Blake and Music of Blake's Time," given in connection with the Blake conference in Santa Barbara in March of 1976, gives a sample of some recent settings, mostly choral, with also *Ten Blake Songs for Voice and Oboe* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, a selection of two pieces by the glee composer, Samuel Webbe, and two songs from the theatre by Charles Dibdin and Thomas Linley. Ending the concert was a performance of Hubert Parry's familiar setting of the preface to *Milton*, titled "Jerusalem." The program of the concert gives no information on the works or performance besides their names and dates for the songs by Dibdin and Linley. Vocal groups are The Dorians and The Schubertians from the University of California--Santa Barbara and the University of California--Riverside Choral Society. There are various soloists.

Daniel Pinkham's choral settings of "The Sick Rose," "The Blossom," and "Spring" follow closely the rhythms of Blake's text but heighten them in musical declamation. The very short lines of "Spring" are properly grouped into musical phrases at a tempo faster than that of speech in a way that should suggest how the poem should be read, as well as sung. Blake probably sang it.

"The Lamb" in Arthur Farwell's set of four songs almost completely follows the rhythms of the words, even a bit literally--which is almost inevitable because the words clearly indicate musical rhythms. "Cradle Song" is suitably gentle until an unaccountable dynamic climax near the end that would surely

wake up anyone it was being sung to. "The Tyger," with its terrible intensity and incantatory trochees is probably impossible to set in a vocal line that effectively and adequately combines with the words in what Thomas Moore called the "compound creation" of a song. Farwell does about the only thing a composer can do: he puts the energy of the tiger into the piano part and lets the singer give the text without any real attempt to evoke the fearful symmetry vocally. The result is quite effective, as a keyboard composition with intoned vocal part. Benjamin Britten's treatment of "The Tyger" in his fine song cycle, *The Poems and Proverbs of William Blake* (1964) does something similar, but his setting, written for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and recorded by him with the composer at the piano (London OS 26099), relies more on the vocal part, in which Blake's rhythms are altered by being strongly dotted, sometimes syncopated and even jazzy, while the piano, mostly in a pulsating accented bass, evokes a tiger of controlled but incredible energy. In this group of songs by Farwell, Jill Feldman's clear, steady soprano negotiates the tritones and other demanding intervals cleanly and musically, and Stephen Kelly's piano accompaniments are solid, impressive in "The Tyger."

Vaughan Williams' approach to Blake's lyrics is a very different one in *Ten Blake Songs for Voice and Oboe*, written in 1957 for the film, "The Vision of William Blake." As the title suggests, the only "accompaniment" is a solo oboe (three songs are for voice alone). "The Tyger" is not included in this set, probably because the voice needs more help than an oboe can provide. Nevertheless, though one would expect a voice-oboe setting to concentrate on pastoral songs, this set is not restricted to them but includes some very difficult ones, like "London," "A Poison Tree," and "Cruelty has a Human Heart." Blake, who equated melody in music with line in art, and harmony with coloristic effects, would have been delighted with these settings. They show what melody alone can do in realizing the musical implications of the words. And the oboe playing its own melodies with the tenor voice--it is not an accompaniment in the usual sense of the term--interweaves with the voice, now commenting on thematic material from the vocal line, now introducing motifs to be expressed by the voice, now realizing contrapuntal and harmonic implications of the vocal intervals. A version with everything worked out in conventional harmonic accompaniments would be as disappointing as the various harmonic realizations of the Chaconne from Bach's Partita No. 2 for unaccompanied violin.

The performance of *Ten Songs* by Ian Partridge, tenor, and Janet Craxton, oboe, as recorded by EMI (HQS 1236) is a hard act to follow. Peter Roberts, a robust but lyrical tenor, gives a very good performance, but John Beckner's oboe part leaves much to be desired in rhythmic suppleness, articulation, and phrasing. He plays the notes.

The song character of Blake's lyrics rather gets lost in Roger Nixon's setting of "Love's Secret" and in John Crawford's "Nurse's Song" and "The Little Black Boy," which strike me as being more choral compositions that use words as a starting point than as musical settings of the text in which text and music work together; for they all but overwhelm the

poems, especially Crawford's "The Little Black Boy," where the irony of the tenderness of the Black Boy toward the English Boy is completely lost in the striving for impressive choral effects with piano accompaniment--which even at one point introduces some irrelevantly gauche jazzy figures. Crawford's setting of "Spring," however, is thoroughly delightful, merrily rhythmic and straightforward.

The glees and songs of Webbe, Dibdin, and Linley are pleasant and well performed by the Schubertians, Carl Zytowski, tenor and "Concertmaster" for the occasion, and Michael Ingham, baritone and director of the Dorians (who is a little shy of some of his high notes). The anthem, "Jerusalem," by Parry--who should also be known for his 1880 setting of *Prometheus Unbound*--may have been embraced by religious orthodoxy and even used as a hymn without full awareness of its doctrine, but it is a strong piece anyway, either as a solo song (Paul Robeson used to sing it) or as a choral composition. (It is available through G. Schirmer in New York.) This piece, with organ and combined choral forces, ended the concert.

Most of the new music in this concert consisted of choral settings of Blake's songs. Blake's song texts do make good texts for choral pieces, but it seems to me that they work better for the solo voice. Blake wrote words for choruses galore, especially in *The Four Zoas*, and it would be interesting to have some of these turned into the musical form he had in mind.



Frost's dramatized production of *An Island in the Moon*, with music, for radio was originally played at the Santa Barbara Blake Conference and is now available for sale. It is well worth having.

The production does everything it can to translate Blake's text into a dramatic-musical form with complete fidelity. With the exception of a very few added words to help the proceedings make sense, and an occasional modification of a word here and there in the song-text of a kind which does not violate the sense or spirit of the original, the words spoken by the singer-actors and sung by them are all Blake's and include the whole of the *Island*. One can follow the production completely with the text and not have to skip around through cuts or rearrangements. It would be an excellent--and thoroughly enjoyable--teaching aid. Technically, it is professionally produced, with stereophonic spatial separation of the speakers effectively employed.

Since almost all of the speakers are also singers and represent different ranges of the voice, differentiation of the large cast of characters comes through quite clearly, and the narrator helps the listener out in identifying them whenever things get confusing. If the production were played for an audience thoroughly familiar with the text--or had the advantage of visual identification of the characters--the pace of some of it might be picked up a bit to communicate more of the rollicking spirit

of this (mostly) genial satire. But the boisterous parts come across well, and it keeps moving, especially with the delightful music.

Edward Cansino's score for the production is also directed toward evoking the original but without attempting a literal archeological recreation of the music Blake would have heard in his ears as he wrote. The instrumental introduction first suggests space-travel by means of electronic instruments, or electrically modified ordinary instruments, and lands us in a musical scene on an 18th century moon (which resembles England) where we hear a harpsichord and a few strings, which will be the basic instrumentation for most of the music, aided on occasion by flute, piano, and once by tympani. Cansino's selection of a Handelian model for many of the songs is right, it seems to me, with his adaptation of the Baroque arias for harpsichord and voice, using recitatives and floridly embellished arioso passages, sometimes in the parody of which the English were so fond. Blake might well have known Samuel Foote's parody of an air by Gemmiani, to which he wrote words on "The Tragical History of Billy Pringle's Pig." We hear echoes in the music also of Haydn, the English ballad, and of Purcell--especially in Miss Gittipin's "Leave O leave [me] to my sorrows," which rather suggests in its repeated bass the *basso ostinato* of Dido's "When I am laid in earth." The music is always delightful and, when appropriate, moving. Cansino properly resists the inevitable temptation to milk the two songs of *Innocence* by writing really lyrical melodies for them, which I think would have violated the spirit of the piece. His settings are sensitive and moving but of a kind in which the words of the poems retain prominence. Blake might have sung tunes like these. An effective device musically in some of the songs is that of suddenly moving from floridly embellished singing to *Sprechstimme*, to bring us back from musical satire to a more verbal one.

Transitions between chapters are marked by music, usually atonal; and what must have happened in the missing leaf of the MS is suggested by an extended musical interlude with crowd sounds.

I couldn't help but be a little curious as to why none of Handel's *Watermusic* was used at the point where Steelyard says, "lets have handels waterpiece." Instead, Cansino writes a recitative that is mostly chanted and then works in an imitation of the Hallelujah chorus from *Messiah*, though I must admit that the rhythms of the last three lines work with the dotted rhythms of parts of the chorus.

The musical performance is very good on everyone's part, and so is the acting.