Donald Fitch, Blake Set to Music: A Bibliography of Musical Settings of the Poems and Prose of William Blake

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 30, Issue 1, Summer 1996, pp. 25-31
propounding his own "desynonymizing" method. As Simpson acknowledges, "Coleridge smuggled a methodical component into his synthetic conception of the poet... but only by insisting that the methodical element would always be unnoticed as such..." (150). As we have argued, Simpson himself accomplishes this same Coleridgean coup.

Simpson's next two chapters trace the various representations of the neighboring "others" against which England defined itself. He argues that, at least as early as the eighteenth century, the French represented abstract theory to the English, as well as uninhibited emotion and sentiment. The best writing in this chapter demonstrates how the different phases of the French Revolution were rhetorically elided by English reactionaries: all woes in France were due to the unrestrained tyranny of theory (even when the theorists themselves, like Condorcet, were imprisoned and eventually killed). In this struggle of empires, for English nationalists anything "French" was not the right course for Britain—and often only because it was French.

English portrayals of German identity represented Germany as perhaps more threatening than France because it was more like Britain: libidinous and emotional (like the French) yet also characterized by "genius" (like the English). Simpson traces a rejection of Germany by identifying the country with the loose morals of German plays. In such a narrative, the German dramatist Kotzebue—who enjoyed unprecedented success on the English stage in the late 1790s—becomes representative of a sexual wantonness that is definitely not English. Such associations, Simpson argues, cause English reviewers and readers to associate German writing with excess—be it Kotzebue's excessive sensibility or Kant's excessive abstraction—and therefore to see it as divorced from everyday English experience.

After describing the ways in which English cultural rhetoric feminized and libertinized the French and Germans, Simpson turns in chapters 5 and 6 to the question of how gender informs this nationalized opposition of theory and common sense. In Simpson's fifth chapter, "Engendering Method," both reactionaries and radicals after Wollstonecraft attempt in the 1790s to claim a gendered high ground, rejecting female aspirations to reason even while they located sensibility and literature in the realm of the feminine. The work of chapter 6 is thus given over to examining the reactions of the male writers who found themselves practitioners of a disempowered, feminized work. Simpson suggests that poetic rhetoric emphasized complexity and championed opposition to theories that might indicate human feelings could be generalized.

The problem of how one writes literature becomes even more specific in chapter 7: how does one write a radical literature? Simpson offers brief sections on Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, and Keats and indicates that all of their versions of radicalism hover in the middle of the conflict between theory and common sense and ultimately conclude in inefficacy.

Romanticism as practiced by the second-generation poets, Simpson opines, tries to navigate a revolutionary course between theory and a dense inwardness. In the final chapter of the book, Simpson brings the debate forward into the twentieth century, characterizing the postmodern academic as engaged in conflicts equally vivacious—as with E.P. Thompson's indictment of Althusserian Marxism or Camille Paglia's attack on "high theory" (especially of the "French" and deconstructive varieties).

In the context of such controversies, Simpson's closing gesture is especially revealing of his book's romantic, and specifically Coleridgean, method. Simpson has already confessed to anxiety over the weakening of literature under the dual threat of feminization and feminism. His romantic progenitor Coleridge countered his own similar fears by invoking a willed synthesis ("that willing suspension of disbelief") of theory and poetry and yoking it to a Wordsworthian poetics of masculine sublimity. Similarly, Simpson "suspends disbelief" and invokes a romantic poetics—a Shelleyan, "utopian" one, he says—to help him reimagine the "objective reason that disappeared forever with the Enlightenment" (188). Clearly, Simpson intends his book as a challenge to feminism and postmodernism. He does not mention the growing Habermasian movement in literary studies that, like his work, would recover notions of Enlightenment rationalism and theory. Because of his book, however, we are the better poised to lay critical claim to that movement. In sum, because of Simpson's book we now have a much fuller mapping of national and intellectual life during the romantic period; and it is altogether our further gain that the work also raises issues of gender and class and of theory and method.


Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.

"Loud & more loud the living music floats upon the air" (Vala, p. 58, l. 6)

According to Blake, "Poetry Painting & Music [are] the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise which

1 William Blake's Writings (1978), 1157, the Blake text quoted below.
the flood did not Sweep away." These arts are crucial to all civilization: "Nations are Destroy'd, or Flourish, in proportion as Their Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy'd or Flourish." (Jerusalem, pl. 3, [420]). Blake's practice of poetry and painting are now well known, but we have very little evidence about his music-making. According to his early friend J. T. Smith, about 1784

Blake wrote many other songs, to which he also composed tunes. These he would occasionally sing to his friends; and though, according to his confession, he was entirely unacquainted with the science of music, his car was so good, that his tunes were sometimes most singularly beautiful, and were noted down by musical professors.2

Of course it was a comparatively simple style of music which most appealed to Blake. His Island in the Moon (17842) is apparently in part directed against foreign musical affectations, such as the Handel Festival (May 1784) and operatic arias sung by Italian castrati: "Hang Italian songs[,] lets have English" (891). As he wrote in the Descriptive Catalogue (1809), Paragraph 78, "Music as it exists in old tunes or melodies ... is Inspiration, and cannot be surpassed; it is perfect and eternal" (852).

Songs and music are recurrent motifs in his poetry, from "Holy Thursday" in Songs of Experience (1789): "... like a might wind they raise to heaven the voice of song" (42) to EZ (?1797-1807?): "What is the price of experience[?] Do men buy it for a song" (35, l. 11). This devotion to song was a lifelong addiction. In old age, he was very fond of hearing Mr. Linnell sing Scottish songs, and would sit by the pianoforte, tears falling from his eyes, while he listened to the Border Melody, to which the song is set, commencing—

'O Nancy's hair is yellow as gowd, And her een as the lift are blue."

I have often heard him read and sing several of his poems. He as listened to by the company with profound silence, and allowed by most of the visitors to possess original and extraordinary merit. [Blake Records, 26]

To simple national melodies Blake was very impressionable, though not so to music of more complicated structure. He himself still sang, in a voice tremulous with age, sometimes old ballads, sometimes his own songs, to melodies of his own.3

And in his last illness, he "welcomed the coming of death ... He lay chanting songs, and the verses and the music were both the offspring of the moment." On his deathbed, he "began to sing Hallelujahs & songs of joy & Triumph which Mrs. Blake described as being truly sublime in music & in Verse. He sang loudly & with true ecstatic energy and seemed too happy that he had finished his course ...5

Of course, Blake was not a professional musician,7 and he "was entirely unacquainted with the science of music," as J. T. Smith wrote, but he may have composed music for more traditional poems than Songs of Innocence. The Oxford undergraduate E. G. Marsh wrote to Hayley on 21 February 1802 about The hymn which inspired our friend ... [the] poetical engraver ... I long to hear Mr Blake's devotional air, though (I fear) I should have been very awkward in the attempt to give notes to his music. His ingenuity will however (I doubt not) discover some method of preserving his compositions upon paper, though he is not very well versed in bars and crotchets ...5

It has only very recently been discovered that Blake was also a friend of E. G. Marsh's father John Marsh (1752-1828), a barrister of Chichester and one of the most vigorous amateur composers in England in the eighteenth century. He met Blake on 22 October 1800, not long after Blake moved to Felpham, near Chichester, and he knew Blake well enough to give him a white kitten in 1801.6 Perhaps John Marsh, who was certainly "very well versed in bars and

2 Vision of the Last Judgment (Notebook 81 [p. 1017]). There is a distinction between the arts in eternity and the arts after the flood, for "in Eternity the Four Arts [are] Poetry, Painting, Music, and Architecture" (Milton pl. 24, ll. 55-56, p. 372).

3 J. T. Smith, Nollekens and his Times (1828) (quoted in Blake Records [1969] 457). In A Book for a Rainy Day (1845), Smith added that at Mrs. Mathews's conversaziones

4 Alexander Gilchrist, Life of William Blake, 'Pictor Ignotus' (1863), 293-94 (Blake Records 305).

5 Allan Cunningham, Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects (1830) (Blake Records 502).

6 Frederick Tatham, MS "Life of Blake" (c. 1832) (Blake Records 528).

7 The William Blake described in "William Blake Musician," Revista Canaria De Estudios Ingleses 12 (1986): 147-51, was not the author of Songs of Innocence but a doctor of theology and "Prebendar of the Cathedral Church of Salisbury, and Rector of St. Thomas's Church in that City" (fl. c. 1774-96).


9 Christie's (London) Catalogue of Medieval and Illuminated Manuscripts, Valuable Printed Books, Autograph Letters and Manuscripts, 28 Nov. 1990, Lot 285, sold to the Huntington Library. Mrs. Linnell marked that "Mr Blake ... used to say how much he preferred a cat to a dog as a companion because she was so much more quiet in her expression of attachment" (Blake Records Supplement 81).
In his comprehensive book, *Blake Set to Music*, Donald Fitch lists writings by Blake which are known to have been set to music during the last century and a quarter. The principal contents are a very extensive “List of sources” (ix-xviii); “Introduction” (xxi-xxix); “Alphabetical List of [1412] Entries by Composer” (1-256); “Index of Blake Titles” (257-63); “Index of Performing Combinations,” e.g., “Ballet,” “Bassoon,” “Motion picture” (265-68); “Index of Translated Texts,” i.e., of 11 languages into which Blake’s texts-set-to-music have been translated, including Afrikaans (1), Finnish (1), and Welsh (5) (269); “Index of Names,” e.g., “editors, arrangers, translators, performers, conductors, choreographers, dancers, dedicatees, commissioners, etc.” (271-81).

Of course the book is about how composers have used Blake’s works for their own purposes; Blake’s works are the occasions for this music rather than their subjects. Some of the conclusions to which Fitch comes are not very surprising. For instance, “Far and away the most popular of the Blake poems, as a lyric, is *The Lamb*; well over 250 settings have been found, and others seem to turn up every month” (xxiii). Somewhat less predictable is the observation that “Denmark since the war has been a veritable hothouse of Blake interest” (xxiv).

Fitch gives an enlightening table of the dates of composition of music set to Blake’s poetry (xxvi), which indicates that Blake became a subject for musical settings very shortly after Gilchrist’s *Life of William Blake* brought him to wide public attention for the first time in 1863, and the chorus has been swelling steadily ever since:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Published</th>
<th>Unpublished</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870-79</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880-89</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-99</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-09</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910-19</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>193</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920-29</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>181</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930-39</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>170</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940-49</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>223</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950-59</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-69</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-79</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-89</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undated</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>1,319</td>
<td>1,343</td>
<td>2,662</td>
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Many, probably most of these settings make little attempt to set Blake’s poetry to music as they think Blake might have done, with music like that “in old tunes or melodies,” and indeed

It would seem that current fashions in the teaching of composition might well be documented from examples found here. Serialism, atonality, the current “international” style are much in evidence in these settings, but so is Broadway and Hollywood in the several music theater productions, and jazz .... [xxv]

But there is evidence that some of the tunes which accompany Blake’s poems are significantly older than this, for Haydn and Beethoven provide some of the music for songs by Blake.10

Some of Blake’s poems have been used in strongly polemical contexts, particularly the “Jerusalem” from *Milton* beginning “And did those feet in ancient time.” Parry’s music for it was written for the Fight for Right movement but first performed at a rally for the Votes for Women campaign (167); it was printed, inter alia, in *Socialist Singers and Socialist Songs* published as Leaflet No. 10 by the Labour Party in 1933 along with “The Red Flag” and an application to join the Labour Party (according to the Leeds University Library catalogue).

Fitch’s search for music set to Blake texts seems to have been wonderfully comprehensive, as the list of 107 “Sources” indicates, including the U.S. Copyright Office, the Finnish Music Information Centre, and the National Library of Wales, but the Music Division of the British Library is “the largest single repository of printed music listed here” (xxviii). To qualify, apparently a work had to include some text of Blake; at any rate Alex Wilder and Rob de Bois, who each “published cycles entitled *Songs of Innocence* ... without any text by Blake” (xxv-xxvi) are each excluded from the catalogue itself.

There have been a few such attempts before, including Martin Nurmi’s “Note on Musical Settings” in *A Blake Bibliography* (1964 [363-65]), and Bryan N. S. Gooch & David S. Thatcher, in their *Musical Settings of British Romantic Literature: A Catalogue in Two Volumes*.11 The second work does not seem to be referred to in Fitch’s book.

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11 The second work does not seem to be referred to in Fitch’s book.
Blake Set to Music is an impressive book, with an astonishing amount of information about music inspired by Blake's poetry. Donald Fitch has performed a work of formidable difficulty with admirable credit.

Appendix

Thorough and professional and flexible as Blake Set to Music is, however, there are apparently a number of omissions, which I list below, not in any sense of carping but to indicate what an extraordinarily difficult undertaking Fitch has embarked upon. In the list that follows, I have not seen most of the originals, and my information is based on secondary sources whose reliability I am usually not in a position to judge. I have been saved from a number of musicological gaffes by the kindness of Donald Fitch in correspondence.

Abbreviations

OCLC
Online Computer Library Center

Gootch & Thatcher
See fn11


——. *Tyger, Tyger.* "Film released 1969 by BBC-TV. Written and directed by Christopher Burstall. [With original music]". <Gootch & Thatcher #1796>.


Ayres, Frederick. "To the Evening Star" (MS n.d.). <Gootch & Thatcher #1768>.


——. *Bevan, Temple.* "When the greenwoods laugh" ["Laughing Song"]. In *Playtime* (London: Paterson's Publications [c. 1936]). <Gootch & Thatcher #1151>.


Brozen, Michael (1934-). *Songs to Poems of William Blake for Medium Voice and Piano* (MS "June 1952 Bard College"). <OCLC>.


California Institute of the Arts "has undertaken a joint composition project, setting texts from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." <Gootch & Thatcher #1868>.


——. "And Aged Tiriel stood before the Gates of his beautiful palace." *Scenes from Tiriel* (MS 1979). <Gootch & Thatcher #1713>.


Cope, David H. *Tyger! Tyger!* (MS 1975-76). <Gooch & Thatcher #1807>.


According to the composer, this work, #1 of his Tryptich (Opus 25), "Hall links up with Blake: I'd originally wanted to write a Blake work, using his kind of imagery, but couldn't find a suitable text. There's an episode in Blake's life when he threw a soldier out of his garden; the soldier had him put on trial for sedition, and gave false evidence against him. In a similar way, Jezebel gave false evidence against Naboth . . . ."


Haydn, Franz Joseph; see J. Michael Diack.


Kagen, Sergius (1909-64). "Tiger" ["The Tyger"] (MS c. 1949-64) <Gooch & Thatcher #1819>.


Lander, Cyril B. "Love's Secret" ("I told my love"). Flores de


Thomas, Christoper [Joseph] (1894-). "All the hills echoed" ["Nurses Song" from *Innocence*] (Cincinnati: Willis, 1949). <Gooch & Thatcher #1403>.

Thomas, Mansell. "King of Glory, King of Peace" (MS 1960). First performance at Colwynfest Festival, Vale of Glamorgan, Wales, 1960. According to the composer, the work employs a text by Blake, beginning "King of Glory, King of Peace." However, there is no such text by William Blake. <Gooch & Thatcher #1921>.


— *The Loom of Light,* "a major choral work" which was to have its premiere at the Blake Society of St. James, Piccadilly, London, in 1987 (and was presumably related to Blake). <Flyer for the Society for 11 September-5 December 1986>.


Williams, [Christopher] Becket. "Cupid's Song" ["Why was Cupid a Boy"] (London: Curwen, 1924). <Gooch & Thatcher #1853>.

Williams, Dorothy I. "The Little Black Boy" (MS 1963). <Gooch & Thatcher #1253>.


Wilson, Ray R. "Night" (MS 1946). <Gooch & Thatcher #1379>.


Apocrypha

A number of entries in Gooch & Thatcher have nothing to do with William Blake:


Greene, Maurice; see note 10.


Rowley, Alec. "Let us dance and sing." (London: Novello, 1957). <Gooch & Thatcher #1912>. The score attributes the text to Blake ("Let us dance and sing / Take hand in a ring / With a fa la la ..."), but there is no such text by Blake.