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BLAKE

R E V I E W

Kevin Hutchings, *Songs of William Blake* (CD)

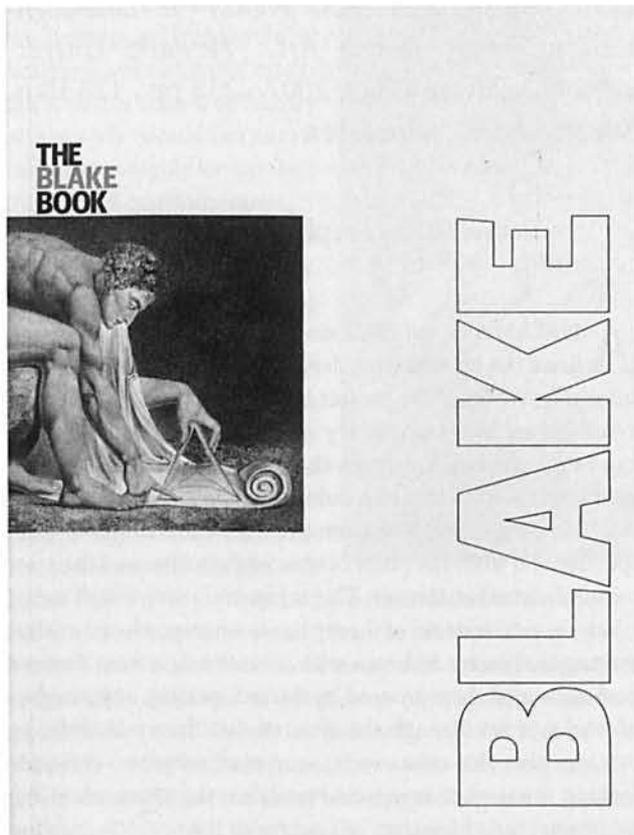
Brent E. Kinser

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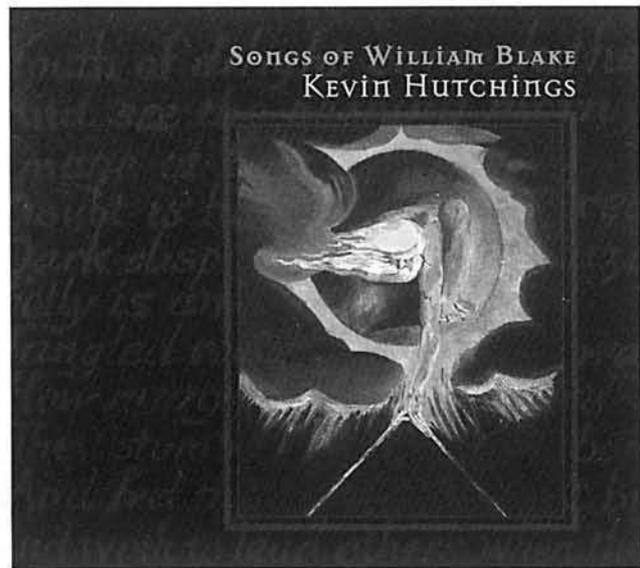


selected by the book's designer from pictures treated in the chapters they introduce; at the same time, several important images (such as the annotated *Laocoön*) are barely larger than postage stamps.

The book's focus is sometimes quirky, with breakout sections devoted to such outliers as a single *Tiriel* design or *The Fall of Rosamond*, an impressive stipple illustration after Thomas Stothard, but Myrone covers most of the essential works as well as a respectable number of unexpected ones. The usual elements of a gallery companion—chronology, bibliography, guide to collections—are present and competent, but a selection of reactions to Blake from “Creative Artists,” including R. H. Cromek, James Joyce, and Georges Bataille, is very uneven and seems perfunctory in comparison with the rest of the book. The organization and layout of the volume, probably dictated by the designer of the whole guidebook series, are vaguely postmodern, but the thorough index makes it possible to locate topics efficiently.



Kevin Hutchings. *Songs of William Blake*. [Self-published music CD with booklet <<http://www.kevinhutchings.ca/about>>] 2007. Canadian \$16.99 from <<http://www.indiepool.com>>.



Reviewed by Brent E. Kinser

FAIRNESS requires me to preface this review of Kevin Hutchings's *Songs of William Blake* with a significant caveat: I am no lover of academicized folk music, modern or otherwise, and although the production values and the musicianship on this CD are first-rate, the overall sound and feel of the disc remind one less of Blake's immortal poetry than of Christopher Guest's parodic *A Mighty Wind* (2003). Sahra Featherstone's production choices, her clear ability behind a mixing board, and the skill of the musicians she has assembled for the recording make it a musically sound, accomplished performance. Although Hutchings declares in the accompanying booklet that "the effort to set Blake's songs to music will always be audacious" and that "Blake's creative theory ... provides me with the poetical license necessary to make of his *Songs* something new and perhaps unforeseen" (9-10), it is hard to discern either audaciousness or newness on a CD that is best described as a conventionally polished, over-intellectualized folk recording, one that decidedly lacks, especially in the vocal performances, the raw energy and the soulful depth that give traditional folk music its penetrating, heartrending identity.

This lack is disappointing, for the intent behind the project is a sound one. Approaching the *Songs* as musical compositions, even in the absence of authentic Blakean arrangements, seems at least as legitimate as some of the other ways that critics have read Blake in terms of their constructed visions. We have, for instance, Cunningham's vision of Blake as madman,

Gilchrist's vision of Blake as hero, Swinburne's vision of Blake as rebel, Yeats's vision of Blake as symbolist, Visconti's vision of Blake as artist, and now Hutchings's vision of Blake as musician and composer. However valid these critical approaches are, they all reveal as much about the critic as they do about Blake or Blake's work. The value of this project, therefore, and there is value, rests in the attempt to understand Blake's songs in the context of the creative process. From inspiration to recording to postproduction, Hutchings has clearly struggled to understand the unity of invention and execution, just as Blake did and all musicians do. Thus, when he claims to have learned much in creating *Songs of William Blake*, I believe him and congratulate him for the insights he has gained from his investigations of Blake's creative process. How much this CD has to offer as a musical artifact, however, depends upon a shared sense of taste; those who like folk music will be more apt to enjoy this disc than those who do not.

On the question of what musical interpretations of Blake potentially can teach us about his compositional intentions, Hutchings makes a theoretical point with which I disagree. He suggests that Blake's lost melodies—the essential missing component in a creative triad of words, imagery, and music—if recovered, would help critics today better understand the complexities of Blake's paradoxical vision, just as "Blake's musical performances" may have "helped his contemporaries to navigate such ambiguities" (6-7). Here, in conjunction with the claim that "there can be no doubt that access to Blake's original melodies would provide us with important interpretive cues, cues that would help to guide and to shape our understanding of what his poems mean—or at least what they meant to the poet himself" (8), Hutchings goes one step too far. It would of course be wonderful to have access to Blake's original music, but the sphinx riddle of what meanings he intended will surely remain in the midst of whatever woes are influencing the Blakean explorer. If we had Blake's music, or even samples of his singing, we would not be any closer to a definitive interpretation of the ambiguities at the center of his works. There is, after all, no reason to believe that Blake's music would be any more explicit to idiots than his words or his images. Allowed to witness an actual Blakean performance, we would certainly know more, but the possible meanings engendered by such an experience would more likely expand the number of potential interpretations than it would reduce them—infinite particularity indeed.

In terms of the performance, the CD is never stronger than during the first song, "Introduction (Experience)." When the music begins, it has a wonderfully mysterious sense to it before the first lyrics rather jarringly declare academic folk as the genre. For me, the blow is fatal. But again, those readers who appreciate music of this variety will no doubt find much to like here. Further, the accompanying booklet is very fine in terms of conception and design. The CD and its packaging are beautiful things. Hutchings's introductory essay is accessible to those with little knowledge of Blake, and, again, he makes a good case for approaching Blake from the point of view of

music. So, although it may appear otherwise, I do recommend *Songs of William Blake*, if for no other reason than to support the attempt to draw out some of the nectar that is embedded within the silenced versions of these remarkable poems. But if the desire is for audacity and newness, a much better interpretive engagement with Blake might be Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man* (1995). And if folk music is not your preferred musical genre, there are many other approaches, as Hutchings recognizes in his essay. Ultimately, Hutchings must be thanked, and one hopes that musicians will continue to turn to Blake and his works for inspiration, for it is in the processes associated with these creative turns that one finds the keys to the doors of perception. Hutchings has clearly opened them for himself in creating his *Songs of William Blake*, though I stubbornly and perhaps unreasonably refuse to walk through with him. I wait in hope for an interpretation of Blake with more of an edge, more of an attitude, more like Amy Winehouse on the brink of rehab, and less like folk on the brink of academia.

William L. Pressly. *The Artist as Original Genius: Shakespeare's "Fine Frenzy" in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Art*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007. 235 pp., 123 illus. \$80.00/£68.50, hardcover.

Reviewed by Stephen C. Behrendt

A HALLMARK of William Pressly's work has always been the breadth and depth of cultural awareness that inform it. Whether the project be an exhibition catalogue or a full-blown interdisciplinary study like this book, Pressly can be counted on to bring a thorough understanding of the primary materials and the cultural contexts that help us to read those materials, both from a modern, contemporary perspective and from the point of view of the artists and their actual and virtual audiences. This is especially important today, when the proliferation of theory has so often produced critical writing that seems to begin with an author's current favorite paradigm and then proceed backward, passing any number of works of art through the sieve of that theory in order to discover that the artists were—surprise, surprise—forward-looking theorists themselves. Pressly's is the approach of the traditional (art) historian: he starts with the artifacts, moving outward from what they reveal within their own spaces and toward widening concentric rings of culture and signification. At the same time, he crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries much in the fashion of the eighteenth century, when artists and critics alike—and not a few consumers as well—ranged