

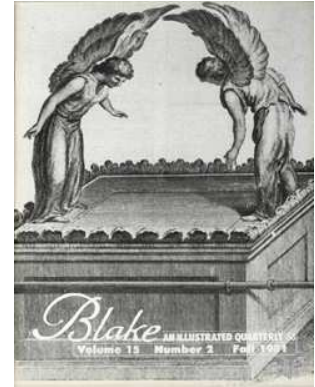
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BLAKE

R E V I E W

Mike Westbrook, *Bright As Fire*, a recording of
jazz settings of Blake

Anthony J. Harding

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THE WESTBROOK BLAKE



Mike Westbrook. **Bright As Fire**, a recording of jazz settings of Blake. London: Original Records. Released and distributed in the U.S.A. and Canada by Europa Records, Orlando, Florida. \$8.98.

Reviewed by Anthony J. Harding.

Blake died singing: but there have been few attempts to celebrate his genius musically, by comparison with the large number of illustrated commentaries and facsimile editions now available. Mike Westbrook's *Bright as Fire* is a new album of jazz settings of Blake's poetry, and it earns its title with Blakean vigor and a rare Blakean sense of satirical fun.

The first two tracks each open with a piano solo, hymnlike and slightly portentous in the manner of Alan Price, but the lines from *Jerusalem* (Plate 27:19-34, 103-06, and Plate 86:1-10) are delivered by Phil Minton with ecstatic conviction. Despite the inevitable children's choir, the Blake we hear is no grade-school saint but a full-blooded proletarian artist. Alan Sinclair's tuba in "The fields from Islington to Marybone" makes Track 1 rather bass-heavy, but "I see thy Form" is good, with an inspired trumpet entry at "From thy white shoulders."

Track 3, a powerful setting of "London," opens with ghastly screams on saxophone and clarinet. A lonely lament on saxophone (which is used throughout rather as Vaughan Williams used it in *Job: A Masque for Dancing*, suggesting the whining hypocrisy of Job's comforters) then introduces the song itself, delivered in tones of bitter despair by Kate Westbrook, whose voice has the riveting huskiness of Lotte Lenya's--it is worth noting that Mike Westbrook's band came to Blake by way of Brecht and Kurt Weill. Further lamentations on saxophone, gradually gibbering into incoherence, conclude the track, the most original on the album. After the

intensity of "London," "A Poison Tree" is played for sheer fun as a diabolic tango. Alan Wakeman's tenor sax growls menacingly; Kate Westbrook's hoydenish diction is just right for the exaggerated malice of this poem. The tango rhythm accelerates to a contemptuous closing flourish.

"Holy Thursday" (the one from *Experience*) is the longest track on the album. The poem itself is sung to a simple accompaniment of piano and cello, but there is a long and highly inventive jazz epilogue. Clarinet, bass and drums are joined by saxophones and tenor horn, playing lamenting, wailing chords, then the trumpet stutters mockingly, caricaturing the smug "philanthropy" affected by the "wise guardians of the poor." Chris Biscoe's saxophone imitates a pathetic, leaden-footed dance to the choppy accompaniment of cello and bass.

This mood of hopelessness is dispelled by the opening of the last setting, based on an extract from *America* and one from *The Four Zoas*. It begins with a Hebraic-sounding summons on tenor horn; Phil Minton sings, unaccompanied for the first four lines, "Let the slave, grinding at the mill, run out into the street . . ." His reassuringly cockney voice is joined (at "his chains are loose") by the band, which crescendoes to a startling and effective key-change at "The Sun has left his blackness." The great affirmation, "For everything that lives is holy," is the climax of this last track; but before the final fade-out there is an impassioned reading (by Mike Westbrook) of "What is the price of Experience?" from *The Four Zoas*, with ostinato accompaniment by piano, horn and saxophones.

Adrian Mitchell chose the texts, and his emphasis on *Experience* and the prophetic books reflects what is usually thought of as modern taste in Blake. The music was originally composed at Adrian Mitchell's request for his *Tyger* (1971), "a stage show in celebration of the life and works of William Blake," and Mitchell writes that what had impressed him about Mike Westbrook's music was its combination of "earthiness and fire." These qualities, with much bold and inventive musicianship, are strongly apparent in this valuable addition to Blake discography.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

THE MUSIC OF THE ANCIENTS

Peter Davidson

When one reads that the occupations of Samuel Palmer and his friends at Shoreham were "literature, and art, and ancient music,"¹ curiosity is aroused by the last of these activities, as it is the one about which the least is known.

From his youth, Palmer was both a singer and a violinist² and Francis Finch had considerable skill as a pianist and counter-tenor. Thus, it is not remarkable to discover that the Ancients passed their evenings with such contemporary songs as Moore's *Irish Melodies* (Finch's rendition of "The Minstrel Boy" was especially remembered)³, although the vision of Palmer and Calvert walking through Shoreham to Palmer's singing of "The British Grenadiers" places a heavier demand upon the imagination. (Presumably Palmer sang the older version of the tune, with a rising phrase and a turn for the words "none that can compare").⁴

Another musical enterprise of the Ancients has been recorded:

But the favourite haunt was a wild lane near Shoreham in Kent, flanked on either side with great old beech trees; it was hedged in by their spreading roots in the wildest contortions. Some years before it had been the scene of a murder, and while in its pristine wildness and grandeur it was most admirably adapted as the theatre for the enactment of some of the scenes of witchcraft so popular among the *Tableaux vivans*. They all knew the Macbeth music by heart, and many a night made the 'black lane' ring with it.⁵

A. H. Palmer confirms that the Macbeth music in question was that published first in 1770, claiming to be Boyce's revision of the score which Matthew Locke composed for D'Avenant's version of the play.⁶ This music, which held the stage until 1875, was in fact composed in 1702 by Richard Leveridge.⁷ The following melodramatic lines would seem to suit the occasion upon which Palmer and his friends performed them:

Crimes foll'wing crimes on horror wait
The worst of creatures faster propagate
Many more murders must this one ensure
As if in death were propagation too
He shall he will he must spill much more blood
And become worse to make his title good.

When we try to identify the "ancient music" which provided a more thoughtful contrast to "Locke" and Tom Moore, we might do well to remember that, in the early nineteenth Century, the phrase "ancient music" would have suggested the "Concerts of Ancient Music" given under Royal patronage. The definition of "Ancient" in this context was "no music less than twenty years old," but the repertory was primarily Handelian, although works by the older English composers were also performed. In the light of this it is interesting to find this reference in a letter of 5 June 1836 from Palmer to Richmond:

Then vow you'll not stand it; but get out your Handel;
and a kind friend will call in and give you some scandal.⁸

There is one firm clue concerning the musical repertory of "The Ancients." In his memorial essay on Francis Finch, Palmer writes,

The writer has felt more pleasure in sitting by his pianoforte, listening to fragements of of Tallis, Croft, or Purcell . . . than from many displays of concerted music.⁹

Given this, we may attempt to discover the extent to which music by these composers would have been available in the 1820s.

At this point, it should be noted that, apart from a few pieces printed in such collections as Stafford Smith's *Musica Antiqua*, Palmer and his friends would have had no access to Dowland, Campion and the earlier English composers whose printed works have a poor rate of survival and whose notation would have presented considerable difficulties.

A surprising quantity of Purcell's vocal music would have been obtainable; a "third edition" formed from unsold sheets of earlier editions of *Orpheus Britannicus* had appeared in 1721. A *Collection of Songs*, taken from *Orpheus Britannicus*, was published by John Johnson in the 1790s. Benjamin Goodison published at the same time several volumes of a proposed "complete" edition.¹⁰ Purcell could also be found in Clarke's 1809 collection or Corfe's 1805 *Beauties of Purcell*, which contains a generous selection from the operas, stage music and songs. In view of Palmer's admiration for Dryden, and of the Ancients' common vision of the pastoral landscape,