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R E V I E W

B. H. Fairchild, *Such Holy Song: Music as Idea, Form, and Image in the Poetry of William Blake*

James A. Winn

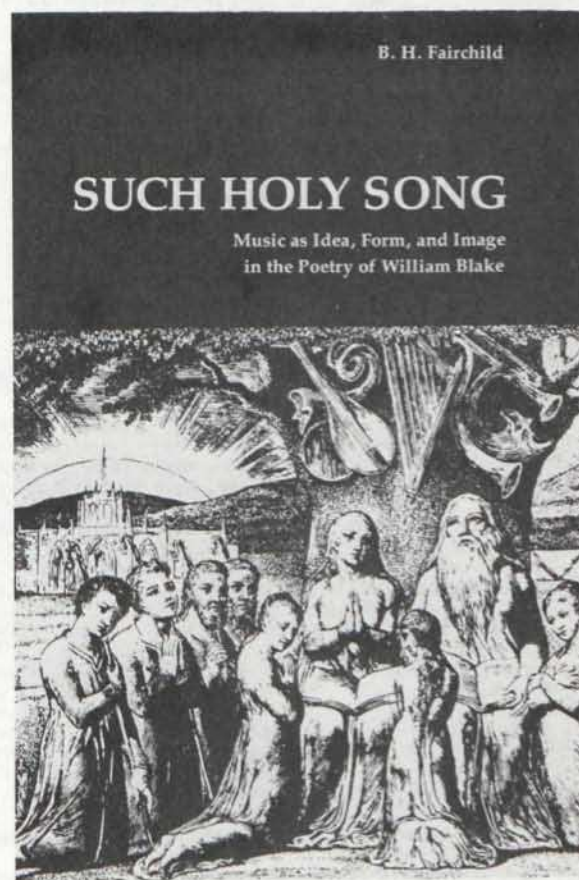
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REVIEWS

B. H. Fairchild. **Such Holy Song: Music as Idea, Form, and Image in the Poetry of William Blake.** Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press. 1980. Pp. 114. \$11.00.

Reviewed by James A. Winn.



At first blush, B. H. Fairchild's subject seems promising. Blake once referred to poetry, painting, and music as "the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise which the flood did not Sweep away"; his poems, as Fairchild demonstrates, employ a good deal of musical imagery; and one contemporary witness, John Thomas Smith, reports that "his ear was so good, that his tunes were sometimes most singularly beautiful, and were noted down by musical professors." But the tunes, unlike the words and the engravings, do not survive, and their absence cripples Fairchild's work. Without a single note of Blake's music, he must fall back on several kinds of speculation, none of them entirely convincing. Among topics touched on here are: the influence of Blake's lost melodies on the meter and matter of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the influence of music by other composers on Blake's poetry, the alleged "originality" of Blake's "preference for melody and distrust of harmony" (p. 9), the "musical" scansion of Blake's later poetry, the "orchestration" of the musical imagery in *The Four Zoas*, and (inevitably) the nature of meaning in music, on which Fairchild takes a highly Jungian position.

Chapter Three, published five years ago in *Blake Studies*, begins by accepting unquestioningly Allan Cunningham's account of Blake's creative method in the *Songs*: "As he drew the figure he meditated the song which was to accompany it, and the music to

which the verse was sung, was the offspring too of the same moment." But this account is surely a fantasy; without downgrading Blake's genius and versatility, one may reasonably question his or anyone's ability to create three kinds of art simultaneously. Nonetheless, Fairchild quotes Cunningham and immediately concludes that "the simultaneous composition of words and music . . . allowed the rhythms of these lyrics to survive despite the loss of melody" (p. 30). Then, after several pages of slippery Jungian theorizing, leading to the conclusion that "we can at least approximate within broad limits a verbal description for the felt significance of certain poetic rhythms" (p. 36), he offers some perfectly ordinary scansions of some well-known *Songs*. Granted, the rhythms of these songs are strong, and it has long been common to speak of their "incantatory qualities." But to leap from that feature of their form to the unqualified claim that "a particular number of recurrences of metrical stress, syntactical features, or rhetorical elements tends to evoke in us particular preverbal attitudes" (p. 41, emphasis mine) is to harden one's own subjective response into insupportable dogma. Would all readers, even all readers of Blake, agree that "two- and three-stress lines suggest completeness, but because dichotomy furnishes our earliest vision of complexity, the two-stress line often suggests a wholeness whose excessive simplicity is likely to provoke our distrust" (p. 41)? If I understand Fairchild's argument correctly, the claim

here is that Blake's strong, simple rhythms, because they may strike us as primitive (hence, by a Jungian leap, "preverbal"), ultimately function ironically, and would so function regardless of the meaning of the words in the poem. But Blake did not invent his rhythms out of thin air; he drew many of the patterns, as Fairchild elsewhere acknowledges, from Wesleyan hymns, where there is surely no ironic intent. A page later, a similar observation about rhyme-schemes leads to a similarly dogmatic claim: "In *Innocence and Experience*, the simple and frequent resolution of couplet rhyme enclosing short stress-sequences tends to provoke a sense of simplicity, of discord too easily abated. The lengthening of the tension between rhymes, as in alternating rhyme, tends to evoke a feeling of relative complexity" (p. 42). For Fairchild, perhaps, but for any reader? And could this claim be extended beyond Blake? Would Fairchild want to claim that Shenstone's *Elegies*, thanks to their "alternating rhyme," are more complex than Pope's couplets? The lesson of this chapter is twofold: (1) there is always a danger in separating the formal features of any poem permanently from the lexical features of its meaning, especially when that separation leads to dogmatic claims that a particular rhythm always produces a particular response; (2) the kinds of analysis one can perform on a song which has both words and melody cannot be adequately performed on words alone, even when we know that the words once had a melody.

In his first chapter, drawing on scholarship by Martha England and others, Fairchild assembles some useful lore about serious and popular music Blake might have heard in Vauxhall Gardens and elsewhere. But the absence of really solid evidence makes conclusions from this evidence uncertain: Smith reports that Blake was "entirely unacquainted with the science of music," and Fairchild repeatedly speaks of his "intuitive" skills; there is no evidence that he could either read or write music. So when Fairchild quotes the "Nuptial Song" from *Night the First of The Four Zoas*, notes its verbal resemblances to Milton's poem "At a Solemn Music," demonstrates the dependence of the libretto for Handel's oratorio *Samson* on the same Miltonic poem, and concludes with the "conjecture" that Blake "is hearing Milton through Handel" (p. 68), it is not clear what this conjecture, even if correct, tells us about Blake's poem. And the larger claim that "*The Four Zoas* [is] an imitation, albeit experimental, of Handelian oratorio" (p. 75), unless meant only in the most impressionistic way, seems doubtful in the face of Blake's ignorance of compositional technique and his professed distaste for harmony and counterpoint, an opinion otherwise emphasized by Fairchild. Nor is our faith in Fairchild's judgment strengthened by his own mistakes in musical terminology: *rondo* form is not simply *a b a*, as alleged on p. 49, and the participle "doubling," employed by Blake in *The Four Zoas*, has nothing to do with variations and embellishments (see p. 67).

But these minor slips pale in comparison with Fairchild's really misleading account of British aesthetics in the later eighteenth century. The author concedes that his "sampling of British aesthetics contemporary with Blake," a sampling which looks suspiciously like a sequence of file-card

quotations, "is in no way intended to suggest an overall consistency or agreement among the theorists" (p. 13), but inevitably that is the impression the sampling creates. The assertion that "Blake may have been alone in his theoretical rejection of the harmonic and nonlinear" (p. 14) will not stand up. Daniel Webb, for example, whose *Observations on the Correspondence between Poetry and Music* (1769) is among the treatises Fairchild cites, holds opinions quite similar to Blake's. He advocates a poetry "measured by sentiment, and flowing in ever new yet musical proportions" (p. 113), as Blake, in the preface to *Jerusalem*, would claim to have "produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables" (see Fairchild, p. 15). Like Blake twenty-five years later, Webb objects to the regularity of couplets and of the ancient hexameters, comparing them to musical counterpoint, to which he also objects, like Blake preferring unadorned melody: "Were the counterpoint to take intire possession of our music, we should lose every ideal of its original destination, and the sole object of the art would be to flatter the ear" (p. 119). So Blake's coupling of "paltry Rhymes" and "paltry Harmonies" in *Milton* was not a new idea. Fairchild speaks of "the remarkable similarities between the musical ideas of Rousseau and Blake" (p. 26), but I fail to see why those similarities should seem surprising. Rousseau's ideas about music, despite objections by a number of composers, were taking hold in the literary world: the myth of the origin of music and poetry in a primitive lyrical outcry, shared by Rousseau, Herder, and a number of English theorists, allowed such poets as Blake to justify their ignorance of harmony and counterpoint, and to seek analogies with music based on sentiment, not on technique.

But if Blake was not as original in his ideas about music as Fairchild claims, he went further than most poets in trying to put his ideas into practice, particularly in seeking metrical flexibility in his later works. Fairchild believes that Blake was influenced by Joshua Steele's prosodic theory, which equates musical and poetic rhythm, and he may have been. But as John Hollander and others have shown, any scansion of a poem using musical notation is bound to be debatable, since musical rhythm is in fact far more exact than poetic rhythm. Some of Fairchild's musical scansions show an interesting ear, but as he properly points out, "time-scansion loses as many of the subtleties of the *spoken* poem as does accentual scansion" (p. 57), and the example that precedes this disclaimer does not ring true to my ears. In the later poems, with their long, flexible lines, Blake may have had a precise musical or "quantitative" scansion in mind, but the words alone are an insufficient guide to his rhythmical intent, if indeed it was so precise. Like other poems, these will be read aloud differently by different readers, and the choices between scansions readers will make will have something to do with their sense of Blake's meaning.

To his credit, Fairchild recognizes that the use of musical notation for scansion is an arbitrary and subjective procedure. Unfortunately, he seems less aware that the use of musical terms as metaphorical and impressionistic descriptions of poetry is equally subjective. On page 9 he quotes

approvingly some cautionary statements and definitions by Steven Scher and John Hollander, but in the same paragraph, he lapses into the looseness of terminology they deplore: "I use 'orchestration' in the imitative sense, meaning that Blake uses musical imagery and poetic sound as a way of underscoring a particular dramatic event, theme, emotion, or atmospheric effect, thus loosely imitating the manner in which musical orchestration produces colors that heighten the intended musical effect." Loosely indeed! Chapter Four goes on to develop at length the notion that musical imagery "orchestrates the most significant dramatic events" of *The Four Zoas*, by which I take it Fairchild means that musical language appears at important points in that poem. But why is it necessary to introduce the concept of "orchestration," an advanced compositional technique, to describe the poetic procedures of a man untutored in composition? If there were, in the words of Scher's definition, "a substantial analogy to . . . and an actual influence from, the art of music," Fairchild would have to validate his notion of *The Four Zoas* as oratorio by a technical account of their structure; he would also have to establish that Blake knew and understood Handel's technique. In fact, his argument is much weaker. He cites, for example, these apocalyptic lines:

Then fell the fires of Eternity with loud &
shrill
Sound of Loud Trumpet thundering along from
heaven to heaven
A mighty sound articulate: "Awake ye dead &
come
To Judgment from the four winds Awake & Come
away"

(IX, 117:10-13)

and suggests an influence from the vaguely similar bass aria in Handel's *Messiah* ("The trumpet shall sound"), overlooking the closer and more obvious influence of Dryden's *Song for St. Cecilia's Day*, 1687. And this detail may stand as an example of the problem in Fairchild's method: to the extent that there are precedents for Blake's late poetry, those precedents are finally poetic; if Blake meant the poems to be "musical" (as in some sense he surely did), he imitated his own notions about music, not the advanced techniques of such composers as Handel; when he wished to employ musical terminology, he drew quite naturally on Milton and Dryden, not on treatises on composition. So he is not finally as fruitful a subject for the study of interactions between music and poetry as, say, Machaut, who was both a skilled composer and a skilled poet, and who made innovations in the *technique* of one art by drawing on the *technique* of the other.

But studies of relations between musical and poetic technique require a detailed knowledge of musical technique--something few poets and fewer critics have had since Blake's time. Fairchild takes a different, more metaphorical tack, and persuades himself of its validity by espousing the following theory of musical meaning:

Music does seem to communicate meaningfully, whether it expresses the composer's spiritual state or signifies precise meanings through

symbols. And it communicates by avatarizing certain preverbal, premusical experiences, whether those experiences are part of the Jungian racial unconsciousness or fragments of our own experiences that have been submerged in the individual unconscious. (p. 33)

These two sentences lump together at least four separate accounts of musical meaning, alternate theories now nicely discriminated in Peter Kivy's *The Corded Shell: An Essay on Musical Expression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Worse yet, Fairchild attempts to support this theory by misrepresenting one of our most precise thinkers about music, the composer Roger Sessions. Fairchild cites a passage in which Sessions locates the ultimate origin of musical meaning "in the inner gestures which embody our deepest and most intimate responses," then leaps to the claim that Sessions "apparently believes that the nature of [musical] meaning is archetypal" (p. 33). But when Sessions directly addresses the vexed question of meaning in music, his account is hardly metaphysical; indeed, the following passage from *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950) is distinguished by its clear-headed precision. Sessions outlines two kinds of "association" by which music can acquire meaning:

The music may be brought into association with words or dramatic gestures, and these elements will give it meaning. . . . [Or] when there is nothing of a not strictly musical nature to contribute this element of association, it must be supplied from within the music itself. The music must, to state it cautiously, supply some element of repetition. (p. 63)

That element of repetition might be rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, modal, tonal, serial, even textural, but its repetition will be in any of those cases a principle of structure. Poetry, even poetry as chaotic as some of Blake's late work, also thrives on repetition; indeed, Fairchild lists a number of lines with striking patterns of assonance and alliteration. For me, Blake's musicality lies in those patterns, not in the "avatarizing [of] preverbal experiences."

One last observation: this is a hardback book from a university press containing 92 pages of text, including a 17-page chapter already in print. Problems in its organization, not least the tendency to quote the same primary and secondary passages several times, suggest that Fairchild expanded his article to book length, then excised some of his expansion, bringing the manuscript back toward a length more appropriate for publication as an article. I am speculating, of course, and the story of the making of this little book may be different. In any case, its publication in the present format suggests a problem many scholars now confront: the reluctance of journals to print long essays. Increasingly, one must either write a 25-page article or a 200-page book; essays of intermediate size, like this one, are so rarely accepted by journals that authors understandably seek to bring them out as books. But in this case, there are so many problems that I wonder whether the press, the author, or the scholarly community is well served by publication in hardback.