

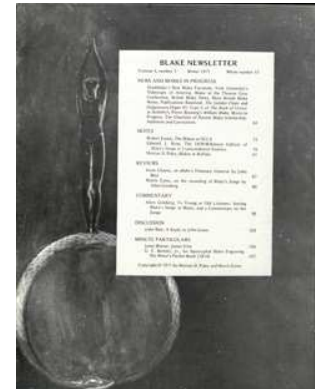
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Allen Ginsberg, Songs of Innocence and Experience, recording

Morris Eaves

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²On *Europe 4*, see my "The Presence of Cupid and Psyche" in Erdman and Grant, eds., *Blake's Visionary Forms Dramatic* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 218-19.

Allen Ginsberg. ALLEN GINSBERG/WILLIAM BLAKE: "SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE" BY WILLIAM BLAKE, TUNED BY ALLEN GINSBERG. With Peter Orlovsky, variously accompanied. [MGM "Verve" FTS-3083 \$5.98.] Side 1, *Songs of Innocence*: "Introduction," "The Shepherd," "The Ecchoing Green," "The Lamb," "The Little Black Boy," "The Blossom," "The Chimney-Sweeper," "The Little Boy Lost," "The Little Boy Found," "Laughing Song," "Holy Thursday," "Night." Side 2, *Songs of Experience*: "Introduction," "Nurses Song," "The Sick Rose," "Ah! Sun-Flower," "The Garden of Love," "London," "The Human Abstract," "To Tirzah," (and in addition) "The Grey Monk."

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This is a full stereo package in the new style of providing a single disc in double covers (as the record companies used to do for two-disc sets only), leaving room to reproduce some of the plates from the *Songs* outside, pictures of Ginsberg and Orlovsky inside, along with an extra sheet of lyrics, and--unusual these days--a whole page of very densely printed liner notes. Mr. Ginsberg has very kindly allowed us to reprint the liner notes here (see "To Young or Old Listeners" in *COMMENTARY* following this review, pp. 98-103).

I

I shall begin with a long and more or less "theoretical" digression and come back to the performances later. The reader may want to skip from here to Section II.

There are two ways of thinking about Blake's work in illuminated printing. One is Blake's way, and the other for convenience I shall call Jacob Bronowski, Stanley Gardner, and Harold Bloom's way, recognizing however that Bronowski, Gardner, and Bloom have said out loud what many others have silently believed, and that neither Bronowski, Gardner, nor Bloom has extended his argument as far as I extend it here. It may be fairest for the reader to regard my "Bronowski," "Gardner," and "Bloom" as straw men. At any rate, the two ways of thinking about Blake's work in illuminated printing, theirs and Blake's, head off in opposite directions.

Blake asserted that "Poetry Painting & Music" are "the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise which the flood did not Sweep away" (*VLJ*, in Erdman's edition of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* [hereafter *E*], p. 548). He was obviously proud of his ability to combine the first two Powers in his invention of "Illuminated Printing" (*Prospectus* 1793, *E* 670) and hoped that the public would find his combination an improvement over the separate arts: "If a method of Printing which combines the Painter and the Poet is a phenomenon worthy of public attention, provided that it exceeds in elegance all former methods, the Author is sure of his reward" (*E* 670). Although in illuminated printing he could not easily combine the Musician with the Painter and the Poet, Blake nevertheless liked to think of music as being there to make a third with poetry and painting. He called attention to the presence of music in the *Songs* simply by naming the collection, and later, to the presence of music in all poetry by speaking of poetry as "sounds of spiritual music" with "accompanying expressions of articulate speech" (*Desc Cat* 1809, *E* 532). Blake's belief in art as

the best way of improving "sensual enjoyment" (MHH 14) made combinations of the arts especially appealing to him. Improving sensual enjoyment is improving spiritual pleasure because the senses are "the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (MHH 4). Only when man is "tremblingly alive all o'er," to use Pope's hyperbole (*An Essay on Man*, I.197) and pervert his intention, can man say with Blake's Isaiah, "my senses discover'd the infinite in every thing" (MHH 12). Blake used a battery of analogies from sex (sensual enjoyment), religion (miracle, Last Judgment), and chemistry (corrosives) to suggest the cooperative, upward-striving, all-involving sensual dynamism of the artistic venture that aims to cleanse "the doors of perception" (MHH 14). One way of understanding "fourfold vision" is as a recommendation to the artist to combine the arts, and therefore as an advertisement for Blake's own medium, which made it possible for the reader (hardly an adequate word) to perceive poetry, painting, and music simultaneously.

Bronowski, Gardner, and Bloom's position with regard to illuminated printing is based on a reverse line of thought. As I gather it chiefly from Bronowski's *William Blake and the Age of Revolution*, pp. 24-27, from the Preface to Gardner's *Blake in the Literature in Perspective* series, from the Preface to Bloom's *Blake's Apocalypse* and from his essay "The Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry" (*Partisan Review*, 1968; reprinted in Rosenfeld, ed., *William Blake: Essays for S. Foster Damon*), the position is essentially this: Blake's illuminated books are performances of his poetry, as a movie is a performance of someone's screenplay. Bloom says in effect that he doesn't like Blake's film, but that the screenplay is sometimes the best poetry since Milton's. One implication of this view is that someone else might do a better job of performing the poetry than Blake. Ginsberg, Benjamin Britten, and Ralph Vaughn Williams, for example, each of whom has set some of Blake's poems to music, are simply readers, like you, or me, or Blake himself, directing their versions of the screenplay that Blake provided. The composers happen to have chosen a medium other than illuminated printing in which to perform, but their choices and their performances are as legitimate as Blake's and should be judged on the same basis. Since this kind of logic is offensive to one's critical sense, one tends to prefer the negative alternative, which is to regard all performances as equally illegitimate. This accords with Bloom's incredulity at Blake the illustrator's having isolated an image that Blake the poet had better sense than to isolate ("Visionary Cinema"): all performances (the argument implicitly goes) have an aspect of interpretative bias. To get rid of the bias and free the reader for his own imaginative effort, Blake's poetry must be stripped of all accompaniments (a word that follows from the point of view), even of those provided by Blake himself. This quintessential Blake is to be found in the printed editions, where the "poetry" is least biased by an interpretative aspect that may be labeled "performance."

The Ginsberg disc is not for those who take the latter point of view. In setting *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to music, Ginsberg is conscious of having taken his direction from Blake, who called this group of poems "songs" and is said to have sung them himself, and who in both theory and practice promoted an art of expansion to plenitude rather than one of reduction to purity. The Ginsberg recording will allow any reader with Blake's attitude toward art and a copy of the Trianon Press facsimile of the *Songs* to have not only the whole Blake, but an ultra-Blake amalgamated of the trinity of primary arts.

But once those who choose to go so far are reading, looking, and listening at the same time, the question will arise, I assure them: does this music deserve a place in the Trinity? I fear that few will think so. I would go along with them to a point, but then I'd have to confess that in my opinion Ginsberg's compositions are the best of any yet written for Blake. Among the others, the compositions by Benjamin Britten (with texts selected by Peter Pears) and Ralph Vaughan Williams are the best known, but I find those notable composers reading black where I read white, though they read

very well in the conventional way. (The Britten-Pears songs have recently been re-recorded by Britten and Pears on London OS 26099; their performances are very fine. The Vaughan Williams songs, written for the film *The Vision of William Blake* in 1958, the year of the composer's death, are poorly performed and recorded on Desto DC 6482, the only available recording. There is a long but incomplete list of musical works related to Blake--not in every case poetry set to music--at the back of Bentley and Nurmi's *Blake Bibliography*, and some additions in the "Checklist of Blake Scholarship/June 1969-September 1970" in the last issue, Fall 1970, of the *Newsletter*.)

Ginsberg is the first to put many of Blake's *Songs* together with the forms of popular music (in which I am including rock, country, folk, and jazz), though the Fugs, a New York group, once tried something similar with a song or two. Ginsberg places his work in musical history as follows:

Ma Rainey, Pound, Dylan, Beatles, Ray Charles, Ed Sanders & other singers have returned language poesy to Minstrelsy. As new generations understand & decipher poetical verses for gnostic-psychedelic flashes & practical Artistic messages, I hope that musical articulation of Blake's poetry will be heard by the Pop Rock Music Mass Media Electronic Illumination Democratic Ear and provide an Eternal Poesy standard by which to measure sublimity & sincerity in contemporary masters such as Bob Dylan, encouraging all souls to trust their own genius Inspiration.

Actually, Ginsberg's own music resembles none of the musicians he names so much as it does the Incredible String Band. At any rate, he is relying on the experience of a generation that has taken its popular music seriously, more seriously than it has taken any other art except the cinema, which, however, does not lend itself easily to the same kind of popularity, since--to name only one reason--it cannot manufacture a portable environment in which virtually all one's business can be conducted. So Ginsberg is "imagining" this music ("after 20 summers musings over the rhythms," he says) in the terms of a generation that recognizes Bob Dylan and the Beatles, Ma Rainey and Ed Sanders as honest-to-God artists competing for excellence with all composer-performers in musical history.

But for the critic who wants to talk about them, the popular arts present a tremendous problem that we have not begun to solve. Recently a reviewer for one of the musical monthlies said that even though he is a professional reviewer of popular music, most popular music cannot be discussed in "musical terms," only in sociological terms. He couldn't see that what he calls "musical terms" are the critical vocabulary of conventional music, and they are adjusted to its values. But the values of modern popular music often seem to insult conventional values, and using the old critical vocabulary to talk about the popular arts gives only a parody of music criticism. The closer the popular music under scrutiny is to some form of conventional music, the more sensible-sounding the criticism is apt to be: the rock music that is most like the jazz music that is most like classical music is easiest for the critic to discuss. This has nothing to do with the excellence of the music.

There are elements of popular culture (as it is sometimes called) in Blake. Take the simplest of the *Songs*, say "The Lamb" and "The Blossom." The innocent reader immediately notices the resemblance of both to nursery-rhymes and to "Jesus Loves Me," and the student often wants to know just what is so great about poems that sound like a Methodist Mother Goose with crude illustrations. The experienced reader, who can talk at length about "London," is at a loss for words when he confronts "The Lamb" directly, and so he resorts to explaining its meaning chiefly in its relation to other poems in the collection. At this stage the progress of criticism has ceased, and no passage from experience to a higher innocence has revealed itself to the critic. Of

course I include my own helplessness in this description.

Ginsberg places his music right there in the critic's sorest spot, sore for Blake and sore for popular music. Ginsberg and Orlovsky have outrageous voices, Orlovsky's more outrageous than Ginsberg's. Ginsberg's rabbinical chant and Orlovsky's asthmatic squawk could have been voices behind a cartoon. No one, including the professional sidemen (there are a number of well-known musicians present), stays consistently in tune, and the rhythms are seldom firm for more than a measure or two. The amateur skills of the amateurs and insufficient rehearsal for the professionals cause a lot of stumbling. Ginsberg and company demand of the listener a child's indifference to conventional musical values. Sincerity, simplicity, and spontaneity are the words that come to mind in such a critic's emergency.

But by the time I had listened to the record a time or two and my skin had stopped crawling at the missed notes and my toes had stopped curling at the tentative rhythms, I had begun to notice a true charm in Ginsberg's music. By the time I had listened a dozen or so times more, I had realized that Ginsberg's music and Blake's *Songs* possess corresponding powers, and that the power of the music reinforces the power of the *Songs*. Both--this is the power I am speaking of--want to render their audiences naive. This is not the end of Blake's art, but it is the necessary beginning for the change of vision that he insisted upon. Blake's is an art of rebirth, and the power of naiving that the illuminated books possess is responsible for the preceding death on which any such art is based. The progression from innocence to experience to a higher innocence that readers have found in the *Songs* is among other things an aesthetic formula, that is, a description of the reader's changing response to a work of art in illuminated printing. Neither Ginsberg nor Blake builds on what the audience may already know. Instead, having seen with Jesus and Wordsworth "Custom starving Truth, / And blind Authority beating with his staff / The child that might have led him" (*The Prelude* III), they demand that the audience abandon its education and look with new eyes at what they have to offer. Anyone who is looking at one of Blake's illuminated books for the first time is conscious of being powerfully urged to become one of the children whom Blake said understood his work best. Blake referred to this aspect of his work when he wrote of Jesus in *The Everlasting Gospel*,

When the rich learned Pharisee
Came to consult him secretly
Upon his heart with Iron pen
He wrote Ye must be born again

(E 510)

Blake's illuminated printing--which is Jesus writing upon the heart of the conventionally learned, "Ye must be born again"--is aimed at the death of the old sleepy senses of conventional knowledge and their rebirth in a sensual awakening. To that end are directed all Blake's reveilles for drowsing artists, such as the Preface to *Milton*.

Ginsberg has tried and to my mind succeeded in adding to the naiving power of Blake's *Songs*. The listener may recognize this power at first as a vague feeling of embarrassment at witnessing such a public display of childish musicianship from a forty-two year old man whose vocation is poetry. But the makers of cartoons have always been grown men, and Ginsberg's music is cartoonlike in the best sense, that is, the sense in which Blake's *Songs* are also cartoonlike. The animation of nature, for example, has always come naturally to cartoonists, whose techniques free them to make everything come alive, and whose medium urges childlike acts of the imagination such as homemaking animals, sick flowers, and choral hills, all alien to ordinary cinema. Along with the animistic nature go equally childlike views of man's conduct and his relation to nature. This does not imply a child's foolishness as opposed to an adult's wisdom, of course, but the clearsightedness of Jesus as opposed to the sophistry of the

Pharisee, to whom Jesus' maxims sound like innocent and commonplace wishful thinking, unsuited to the complex real world of affairs.

The best music on the Ginsberg disc has the power to corrode one's resistance--no matter how great the sour force of one's learned wit--to the further corrosive powers of illuminated printing in Blake's *Songs*. This undressing of the wit, this unlearning, is as fundamental to Blake's artistic strategy as to Christian salvation. It is my opinion that Ginsberg is the first composer to understand Blake's strategy and to strengthen it with music. But many readers, either upon reading what I have had to say or, unfortunately, upon listening to their new purchase from the record store, will think my opinion of Ginsberg's music-making powers and my understanding of illuminated printing rather over-subtle and eccentric. Certainly many who read Blake with pleasure and profit will dislike Ginsberg's music, or they will find it simply amusing.

Regretfully then, and praying he remember that I wished him no disappointments, I must leave the reader to his own devices and to the following brief comments on individual compositions and performances.

II

The next few paragraphs are fearfully impressionistic. I couldn't help that, but I have done the reader what I think is a favor by balancing my impressions (in roman type) as often as possible with the counter-impressions (in parentheses and italic type) of one who knows Blake and popular music well, and who also generally likes the Ginsberg recording. Together the two sets of commentary should give the reader a fuller picture of the recording than either set alone.

SIDE 1, SONGS OF INNOCENCE (Generally I prefer Ginsberg's Songs of Experience, particularly "The Sick Rose" and "Ah! Sunflower," to his Songs of Innocence. I think this is because it is very hard to convey pure joy to jaded human ears: it's better left to the aural imagination. Ginsberg's diction is quite odd and self-conscious in, for example, "The Ecchoing Green" and "The Lamb." And Orlovsky's voice does not add anything in the duets.):

(1) "Introduction" will be a surprise to all but the most blasé listener (and what is a blasé listener doing listening to Ginsberg perform Blake?). This is a good introduction to the album, since most of the qualities that characterize Ginsberg's treatment of Blake are present, but the composition is not one of Ginsberg's best.

(2) "The Shepherd," which is born on the dying wrong notes (insistently wrong) sustained from the "Introduction," is a failure. It drags and stumbles terribly; Orlovsky's insensitive voice seems to cut through everything else.

(3) "The Ecchoing Green" begins with strong gospel piano chords and never loses its power. Ginsberg, who accompanies himself in 3/4 time on the finger cymbals, for the first time shows the clarity of his voice and its sensitivity to the changing verse. Note especially two lines: "Such, such were the joys When we all girls and boys . . ." and "And sport no more seen on the darkening green."

(4) "The Lamb" is another disappointment; its rhythms are Sunday-School stiff and monotonous.

(5) "The Little Black Boy" has splendid moments, chiefly toward the last, when Jon Sholle's guitar, Ginsberg's voice and even Orlovsky's rasping vocal organ (*I like "The Little Black Boy" very much except for Orlovsky's voice, which to me seems out of tune, though maybe it's supposed to be harmonizing.*) hit a note here and there in perfect unison, and the effect (sort of oriental) shows that the method Ginsberg has used to set most of these *Songs* to music could be very successful, though none of the *Songs* set by this method are among the best on the disc. The method I am referring to is described at length by Ginsberg in the liner notes; it has to do with the effort to "articulate the significance of each holy & magic syllable of [Blake's] poems." Ginsberg says he "tried to hear meanings of each line spoken intentionally & Interestedly, & follow natural voice tones up or down according to different emphases and emotions vocalized as in daily intimate speech: I drew the latent tunes, up or down, out of talk-tones suggested by each syllable spoken with normal feeling."

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Id:

Thus the flute pipes notes down from the hill into the deep valley floor with accurate melody." This is clearly a poet's, not a musician's, method. The result is usually something between chant and recitative; the chant to bind the recitative to a rhythm pattern latent in the poem, and to hold the recitative within a vocal range whose proportions seem to derive from ordinary speech (that is, no room is left for virtuoso vocal effects; Peter Pears would not be at home here). As I said earlier, the result is a music like the Incredible String Band's. If the songs on this disc are to be taken as evidence, the chief danger of the method is monotony. One might expect the success of the method in performance to depend more than it actually does on precision. It seems to hold up very well under a great deal of hunting and pecking for pitches and rhythms, and I would even go so far as to say that one of the most interesting effects of the method is the listener's pleasure when out of the obscure crosscurrents of voices and instruments comes a moment of clarity with unity. Blake's later work in illuminated printing sometimes lends itself to similar effects. (*I basically like the album for its homemade sound--see Ginsberg's remarks about modern minstrelsy in the notes. I think weird primitivism is the right way to do Songs of Innocence and of Experience, though it inevitably flounders in the truly innocent songs. I do think the album is to be classified as primitivism rather than over-simplification. When it falls into over-simplification, it's at its worst.*)

(6) Harpsichord, finger cymbals (played this time by Don Cherry, a well-known jazz trumpeter), flute, bass, and Ginsberg without Orlovsky imitate seventeenth-century music with gusto--almost as though they had invented it on the spot--and make "The Blossom" one of the two or three best songs on the disc.

(7) "The Chimney-Sweeper" is poorly performed; Orlovsky is overbearing, and though it gathers some force as it goes, there is scarcely a moment of unity; but the composition, as far as I can tell, is much better, and deserves another chance in another performance. (*"The Chimney-Sweeper" is very interesting. Ginsberg reads it as sincere rather than ironic and speaks in his notes of "vision of the Heaven Desire we can imagine once we do accept our soul feelings as more real than the material fix we have*

been trapped in." His musical setting of it, especially the vision of the Heaven Desire in the second half, seems to be a Protestant hymn. The instrumentation and the enthusiasm of Ginsberg and Orlovsky at the beginning of the fourth stanza give the impression of a ragged congregation suddenly coming through loud and clear and triumphant, with the power all in the human voice rather than an organ. This idea of using a hymn, assuming that's what Ginsberg had in mind, strikes me as a much more interesting way of fitting historically appropriate music to the songs than the music preceding "The Blossom.")

(8)(9) "The Little Boy Lost" and "The Little Boy Found" are simply and perfectly combined. The rhythm, like the child and searchers, walks insistently 4/4, occasionally syncopated in the bass.

(10) When I hear "Laughing Song" with sleigh bells, Don Cherry's strange trumpet, and a chorus of laughers, I think of those festive, but not altogether pleasing, scenes of swaying and singing trees, plants, animals, insects, and rocks in Walt Disney cartoons. Disney was less successful than Blake and Ginsberg and company. (*One musical touch I do like; that's the use of the flute on Side 1 and not on Side 2, except in "Tirzah," which is a special case. I prefer the simple competent flute-playing to the flipped-out trumpet and french horn in "Laughing Song."*)

(11) Ginsberg's liner notes on "Holy Thursday" indicate what to expect: "--spaced out Orlovsky singing against Don Cherry on Flute and trumpet Zapped the tune up to ecstatic joy instead of a tender lamblike chorus it might also supposed to be." (*The instrumentation of "Holy Thursday" is a mystery to me. Ginsberg claims he's trying to achieve "ecstatic joy," but I don't think he does.*)

(12) For the first time Orlovsky adds more than he takes away. His contribution is to keep the childishness in the spiritual mystery of "Night." In each stanza 3/4 time is alternated with something like recitative.

SIDE 2, SONGS OF EXPERIENCE:

(1) The appropriately harsh, ominous tone of "Introduction" is broken occasionally by the rasp of Orlovsky's voice, which is otherwise effective.

(2) "Nurse's Song" is cartoon dark and quieter than any other song on the record. It loses a great deal of its effect by being sung twice through.

(3) "The Sick Rose" displays Ginsberg's priestly voice at its best. His method of composition (described above) has worked better on "The Sick Rose" than on any other song in the collection. It is also sung twice through, but to no harm. (*"The Sick Rose" is my favorite cut, and to me it seems about half Blake, half Ginsberg. I prefer Ginsberg as a chanter to Ginsberg as a singer. I am also impressed with his use of organ and harmonium on this album, and I especially like the organ in "The Sick Rose" because it comes through as pure energy. The harmonium has a more powerful effect: it has a droning sound that rearranges the brain. But it is used a little cornily, somehow: perhaps it is so direct as to be unfair. It works best in "Ah! Sunflower" because that's a short song; it wears thin in "The Little Black Boy," though it's effective at first.*)

(4) "Ah! Sunflower" shows all the dangers of Ginsberg's method.

(5) Ginsberg sings "The Garden of Love" solo to a 3/4 quasi-hillbilly background. The hillbilly mode is either just right or absolutely wrong (see italics be-

low). To my ears and my understanding of the poem, the mode is right, although I think a better hillbilly than Ginsberg would have found a better melody and would have taken a slower tempo. The imagery of the poem, except for the Priests in the last stanza, is the imagery of thwarted love in a lot of country music, right down to the use of the "'Thou shalt not' writ over the door." The lesson of Blake's poem is the reverse of the lesson of the (hypothetical) corresponding hillbilly song, but that's the point. The insistence of the 3/4 time suits the rhythm of Blake's line perfectly. *(The worst thing in the album is "The Garden of Love." I'm tempted to explain it by saying that it's obviously ghosted by Ed Sanders. Why Ginsberg decided to go hillbilly here is beyond me--it would make much more sense to treat a really innocent song that way ("A Cradle Song"? "The Divine Image"?). Sanders does it beautifully in "How Sweet I Roam'd" on the first Fugs album.)* I should answer this by saying that real Blakean Innocence is not the subject of very much good hillbilly music, which is made of unrequited and forbidden love, misery, jealousy, hate, crime--songs about life gone sour, usually told from the point of view of blind Experience.

(6) Though Ginsberg sings "London" by himself, poor ensemble playing and his own faltering sense of rhythm spoil it.

(7) "The Human Abstract" is another song in the chant-recitative manner, this time a solo by Ginsberg over a single sustained note on the harmonium. This is as good as "The Sick Rose."

(8) It is followed by another great success, Ginsberg singing "To Tirzah" with harpsichord, organ, flute, and guitar accompaniment. Singing over sustained chords is alternated with strict 3/4 time.

(9) "The Grey Monk" is a tour de force, with Ginsberg and Orlovsky and the french horn of Julius Watkins all wailing while the percussion of Elvin Jones drives several old friends from other cuts on the album. The song builds with military force like the march of an occupying army, and goes out in a barrage of drums.

In a letter to me Ginsberg has written that "Before recording I'd visited S. Foster Damon & sung what I'd done to him. He said he used to tune one song a year at Xmas. I'm working on ahead & have finished another ten songs including *Schoolboy*, *On Another's Sorrow*, and *Cradle Song* ("Sweet Sleep, from a Shade"). . . . I'll make a second record this spring, recorded more simply--like the method of quiet low vibration 'Nurse's Song.'" When I wonder how Blake might have sung his *Songs*, I somehow find it hard to believe that it was in the style of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears or Ralph Vaughan Williams, though they have certainly caught a side of Blake's poems in their music. I can hear the spiritual Cockney voice of Blake himself, though, in the New York voice of Ginsberg. The poet and amateur musician has made better music for Blake than the professional composer so far. I look forward to the spring and the second stage of Ginsberg's tuning.