

SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE by David Avshalomov

The amazing cycle of poems (with accompanying engravings), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*, by the self-taught British Enlightenment poet and engraver William Blake, displays a broad range of touching emotions, wild and inventive imagery, heavy symbolism, poignant vignettes, and deeply insightful, often ironic philosophical observations. I believe his verses still have much to tell us about the human condition in society. My intention in setting them for chorus was to encompass this entire range and to express, echo, amplify, and illuminate them so as to etch sharply the contrast between the childlike quality of Innocence, and the inexorable movement through Experience towards bitterness and even cynicism, that he depicts.

My goal was to write humane, emotional, personal, simple, accessible new music that is also very singable. This music is meant to have wide appeal while still maintaining artistic quality and ideals. I write for people with ears and hearts. Clara Longstreth, conductor of the New Amsterdam Singers in New York has described these songs thus: "Clarity, real melodies, melodic ease, accessible harmony, harmonic naturalness; well-written, simple, will sing well indeed." So one hopes.

This is a huge set of mostly short poems. Before starting out, I gave myself a few ground rules. First, I chose to set them individually (acknowledging some obvious relationships among occasional pairs or sub-series). Hence, as with a Baroque oratorio, my project synthesized the contrasting elements of miniaturization and large scope. It was a real stretch for me, even though I love to write miniatures, especially those that tell a story. The biggest challenge was to stay fresh (through composing nearly two hours of music) and not repeat myself excessively.

Additionally, I chose to set them *a cappella*, so the chorus must provide the whole fabric—harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic—and lay out both theme and background, set the moods, *and* carry the main thread. And I chose to write strictly in four parts almost throughout; there are few (optional) *divisi* to fatten a harmony or texture.

Within the set I experimented with a variety of textures and forms to set Blake's traditional but sometimes quirky verse/stanza poems. I almost always reflect the meter and rhyme, capitalize on the rhythm and swing and vitality of the words, and always track the dramatic shape (or story, where one is told) of each whole poem. Always, the *melody is paramount*, then the harmonization, rhythmic affect, and form. In many cases, I deliberately echoed older traditional British classical, liturgical, and popular choral styles—hymns, anthems, glees, fa-las, madrigals, etc., and thus the musical flavor is often a slightly Anglicized version of my own "voice" which is neo-tonal, conservative, apprehensible. (The two exceptions to the common cloth from which they are cut is in the East African/Gospel borrowings of Freedom/Uhuru—an amazing anti-slavery poem—and the blues moan feel of Infant Sorrow.)

I did not write the set in a pre-planned order. As usual, I indulged myself: In the first flush of falling in love with the poetry, I cherry-picked the ones that appealed most (*Tyger Tyger!*), the ones that caught my creative fancy, that immediately evoked musical motives or moods—in short, the ones that *sang* to me. (I must also confess a lifetime weakness for setting short, direct, metric, rhyming poems.) After I had completed a good number, the ones I loved most, I took a deep breath and decided to forge on and set them *all*—even the ones I wasn't as fond of. (To do this properly, in some cases I began almost from the stance of parody, yet I challenge the listener to discern which ones were thus begun.)

When I had finished about 30 of the complete set of 45 pieces, I saw the need to discover—or devise—a good order to put them all in so as to shape a coherent work. No basis for this is given or implied in the poems themselves, most of which are self-contained. Blake's printed sequence is almost random (and then there are the fantastical *engravings*—which, however, had scant influence on my music). With some study, I found that the cycle can convincingly be ordered and

experienced (no pun) as a *progression* from Innocence through Experience, gradually introducing his notes of doubt, trouble, anxiety, bitterness, cruelty, and cynicism in a way that throws the contrast into sharp relief while at the same time affirming the two states as complementary sides of the same life force or soul, shaped by the process of living itself—in human society.

The full concert order and how I arrived at it are a topic for a different concert's program notes. For the last piece of my full cycle I chose the same one Blake did in his publication, the *Divine Image (II)*. Though the journey teaches us that the heart has room for love and compassion, at the end, having reviewed the darker impulses and painful experiences of adult life, we are left with Blake's own conclusion that "cruelty has a human heart." I envision this cycle, which took over two years to complete, as a work eventually to be performed whole (across two evenings, with alternating double choirs and solo quartets). Most conductors will choose to perform a thoughtful selection from the full set, which will give you the flavor and thrust of the whole experience.

My one recommendation: Try listening with innocent ears.

(Note by the composer, David Avshalomov)