

Virgil Thomson (1896-1989)

“Five Songs from William Blake”

Composed 1951. First performance: February 6, 1952, Louisville, Virgil Thomson cond., Mack Harrell, baritone soloist. *Only previous Boston Symphony Orchestra performances:* November 1986 (commemorating the composer’s 90th birthday), Dennis Russell Davies cond., John Cheek, baritone. *Today’s performance is the world premiere of a new, corrected edition of these songs in their version for full orchestra, an edition funded by the Thomson Foundation and edited by Charles Fussell.*

Virgil Thomson’s music achieves a unique synthesis of the homespun Americana of his native midwest and the sophisticated, knife-edged neoclassicism in which he was steeped during his many years of residence in Paris. His straightforward sense of melody, grown from and often quoting folk songs and Baptist hymns; his stark simplicity of harmonic motion, synthesizing Satie and Sunday school; his buoyant rhythmic figurations, blending Stravinsky and hoe-down, mark him as one of the most distinctive voices in 20th-century music. “Thomson has the gift to be simple; his notes come down where they ought to be, in the place just right,” wrote Andrew Porter in *The New Yorker* with a double reference to the Shaker tune “Simple Gifts” and Aaron Copland’s quotation of it in *Appalachian Spring*. “His simplicity is not artless, but rather it is careful, refined and purified, by a process that has not destroyed its zest.”

“William Blake’s ideas, all of them, were in his day (and still are) radical, revolutionary and shocking,” Thomson said in a lecture about the *Five Songs from William Blake* that he composed in 1951 on a commission from the Louisville Orchestra. “But he expressed them in verses of such touching beauty that their very willfulness, their contradictions of common sense, could excite in people both anger and love. And they still do. Let us not after all forget that he was the farthest-out romantic among all the English poets.” Thomson first came to know the work of the visionary artist-poet during his undergraduate days at Harvard in the early 1920s through S. Foster Damon, who was then teaching freshman English while pursuing a master’s degree in literature at the university. Damon, a poet, scholar, and sometime composer (he also introduced Thomson to the work of Gertrude Stein and Eric Satie) was then beginning what would become a lifelong devotion to Blake by preparing his pioneering study of *William Blake, His Philosophy and Symbols* for publication in 1924. (Damon rounded out his career in 1965 with *A Blake Dictionary* after teaching for thirty-five years at Brown.) Thomson wrote his first song, in 1920, to Blake’s *The Sunflower*, and he turned again to the English poet’s verses for the 1951 Louisville Orchestra commission.

Thomson said that he attempted with the *Five Songs* “to encompass Blake’s broadly humane philosophy,” but he also made with them a virtual compendium of his own varied musical styles, from the hymn-like simplicity of *The Divine Image* and the drama of *Tiger! Tiger!*, to the intimately conversational *The Land of Dreams*, the Stephen Foster-inspired *The Little Black Boy*, and the impassioned declamation of *And Did Those Feet* (which text also inspired one of England’s most beloved patriotic anthems from Sir Hubert Parry in 1916 under the title *Jerusalem*). Thomson’s insights into the philosophical nature of each poem also summarize the expressive trajectory of his *Five Songs from William Blake*:

“*The Divine Image* holds that mercy, pity, peace and love are qualities of ‘the human form divine.’ In other words, that body and soul are not two aspects of our humanity but one—inseparable and indivisible. This idea is obviously not acceptable to any orthodox faith—be that Judeo-Christian or even Muslim. But admit that it is attractive.

“*The Tiger* raises the problem of evil. How did evil come to exist? Who dared to create it? As Blake puts it to the tiger, ‘Did He who made the lamb make thee?’

“In *The Land of Dreams* a little child tells his father that only the unreal, only the things that we know to be not there, are the good things in life. And his widowed father, though not convinced, is also not able to dispute the point.

“*The Little Black Boy* insists with compassion on the pathos of racial antagonisms. But the hope it offers for a reconciliation of black with white is simply the summons of God himself that they ‘come out of the grove and round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.’

“*And Did Those Feet* evokes, as many sacred texts have done, an Arcadian and a mythical past. Then comes the call to arms, to restore pastoral blessedness, to abolish the factories, ‘those dark Satanic mills,’ Blake calls them and to build a new Jerusalem ‘in England’s green and pleasant land.’ All these years later, this hope seems still impractical. But it is an inspiring thought, a grand and daring dream-up by a great and grand poet.”

RICHARD E. RODDA

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VIRGIL THOMSON

Five Songs from William Blake

1. The Divine Image

(Text: *Songs of Innocence*, No. 12, from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; 1789)

To Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
All pray in their distress;
And to these virtues of delight
Return their thankfulness.

For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is God, our Father dear;
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love
Is man, His child and care.

For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity, a human face,
And Love, the human form divine,
And Peace, the human dress.

Then ev'ry man of ev'ry clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;
When Mercy, Love, and Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

2. Tiger! Tiger!

(Text: *Songs of Experience*, No. 12, from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; 1789)

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heav'n with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

3. The Land of Dreams

(Text: from *Poetical Sketches*; 1783)

Awake, awake my little boy!
Thou wast thy mother's only joy;
Why dost thou weep in thy gentle sleep?
Awake! thy father does thee keep.
"O, what land is the land of dreams?
What are its mountains, and what are its streams?
O, father! I saw my mother there,
Among the lilies by waters fair.
Among the lambs, clothed in white,
She walked with her Thomas in sweet delight.
I wept for joy, like a dove I mourn.
O! when shall I again return?"
Dear child, I also by pleasant streams
Have wander'd all night in the Land of Dreams;
But tho' calm and warm the waters wide,
I could not get to the other side.
"Father, O Father! what do we here,
In this land of unbelief and fear?
The Land of Dreams is better far,
Above the light of the morning star?"

4. The Little Black Boy

(Text: *Songs of Innocence*, No. 5, from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; 1789)

My mother bore me in the southern wild,
And I am black, but O! my soul is white;
White as an angel is the English child,
But I am black, as if bereav'd of light.

My mother taught me underneath a tree,
And, sitting down before the heat of day,
She took me on her lap and kiss'd me,
And, pointing to the east, began to say:

"Look on the rising sun, there God does live,
And gives His light, and gives His heat away;
And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive
Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.

"And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love;
And these black bodies and this sunburnt face
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

"For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,

The cloud will vanish; we shall hear His voice,
Saying: 'Come out from the grove, My love and care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.'"

Thus did my mother say, and kisséd me;
And thus I say to little English boy:
When I from black and he from white cloud free,
And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,

I'll shade him from the heat, till he can bear
To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him, and he will then love me.

5. And did those feet

(Text: from the Preface to *Milton: A Poem*; c.1804)

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark Satanic mills?
Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land!