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### Review of William Blake

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## EXHIBITIONS

## LONDON &amp; NEW YORK

**William Blake.** Tate Britain, London (9 November 2000 to 11 February 2001); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (29 March to 24 June 2001). Curated by ROBIN HAMNYN and MICHAEL PHILLIPS; introductory essays by PETER ACKROYD and MARILYN BUTLER (London: Tate Trustees, 2000; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001) 304 pages, 250 illustrations, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-8109-5710-8. 75US\$.

*O Rose thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,  
Has found out thy bed  
of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.*

William Blake

Although William Blake is the quintessential multidisciplinary artist – his achievements in literature and the visual arts are for the most part uncontested – as far as we know, he was never particularly interested in music. Indeed, neither his poetry nor his pictures describe or depict music directly. Yet, in the last 200 years or so, his work has made an astounding mark on composers and music. One sees Blake's influence primarily in the numberless musical settings of his poems, but also in more general, indefinite, and ineffable way – a very *Blake-ian* one, I am tempted to say. I went to see "William Blake" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York with the intention of learning why and how.

By now, the list of composers who have set to music Blake's poetry (or have written scores inspired by him) is astonishing: George Antheil, Benjamin Britten, Cornelius Cardew, Arthur Farwell, Otto Luening, Ned Rorem, Dmitry Smirnov, Robert Starer, John Tavener, Virgil Thomson, Michael Tippett, Felix Werder, and Vaughan Williams, among others. Blake's influence, moreover, is not only felt in classical music, but also in popular culture and music – and very ubiquitously, one might add (see, for example, the film *Dead Man* with Johnny Depp and Gabriel Byrne). *Rolling Stone* magazine, for example, used Blake's portrait of Newton for one of its covers, an image described in the Metropolitan's catalogue as representing a "philosopher, mathematician, alchemist and biblical scholar" (p. 212), who incidentally was a multifaceted man, like Blake himself. The Doors also nodded to Blake, claiming to have taken their name from him via Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*. Furthermore, the Metropolitan's exhibition also programmed, as an additional activity, a presentation by Patti Smith, the poet, songwriter and 70's punk icon (remember *Piss Factory*?). The event was to involve "an evening of poetry, observations [?], and song". A press release went on saying: "In addition to readings of Ms. Smith's own work, the evening will center on interpretations of William Blake's work, including poems set to music with the acoustic accompaniment of Oliver Ray."

All things considered, the exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, was beautifully – and *strategically* – mounted in the lower level of the Robert Lehman Wing, adjacent to the medieval rooms and to a Balthus exhibit. The room was dimly lit and its semi-circular shape reminded one of an apse, a shrine or a tabernacle. The deliberate setting enhanced Blake's Gothic themes as well as his mythical imagery. The exhibition was organized in four sections. "One of the Gothic Artists" focused on the Gothic theme in Blake's art and included drawings of the tombs of Westminster Abbey as well as his illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. "The Furnace of Lambeth's Vale" showed Blake's innovative printmaking methods and his interest in nonconformist political views. "Chamber of the imagination" explored Blake's concern with mythological figures such as Albion and Urizen. "Many Formidable Works" presented Blake's illuminated books, showing the books he wrote in his own hand and illustrated with his own engravings. These works, above anything else, reveal the elementary and yet essential way in which words and images are related at their root.

As a visual artist, Blake does not seem to be of the stature, say, of Titian or Correggio, artists, incidentally, whom Blake chided. The works on view at the Metropolitan Museum were small, powerful illustrations (drawings, watercolors, engravings, and printed book illustrations), showing a vivid imagination and a resourceful technical execution. *The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca da Rimini*, for example ("a pen and ink and watercolor over pencil with some scratching out", states the catalogue, p. 81) is one of Blake's illustrations for the *Inferno*. Dante is depicted witnessing the punishment of carnal sinners, one of them being Francesca da Rimini who became involved in a relationship with her brother-in-law. The sinners are represented in a whirlpool design that drags them towards hell. The lovers, Francesca and Paolo, become an apparition on top of Dante's figure. Although they too are "sinners" they seem to have found salvation and they are depicted kissing.

There is little doubt that many romantic musicians shared Blake's interest in allegorical, mythological, and legendary subjects. The musical interpretations of Dante's classic, for instance, are numerous (Liszt, Rahmaninov, and Čajkovskij, among so many others) and there are more than 20 operas on the Francesca da Rimini story. Blake's interests, of course, extended to legendary figures such as Laocoon and Nebuchadnezzar and he gave us visual and literary renditions of them. Even a twentieth-century composer such as Felix Werder has also written a third symphony, subtitled "Laocoon", showing the extent of Blake's influence.

The fascination of many composers for Blake's poetry, one could speculate, is sustained not only because of its subject matter, but also primarily by the intrinsic musicality of the text. Consider the poem "The Tyger", an illustration of which is included in the show. Antheil, Britten, Farwell and Taverner set the poem to music, among other composers. The catalogue gives a fine exegesis of the poem: "'The Tyger', arguably Blake's most famous poem, describes a creature of brutal and terrifying strength. For Blake's earliest readers, his questioning of God who could unleash such cruelty onto the world, would have evoked notions of the Apocalyptic and the Sublime, and recalled the contemporary Revolutionary violence in France. The illustration's narrow cat with mottled fur hardly conveys such awesome power. Shown in profile beneath the pale blue bark of a tree trunk, the tiger of this copy is lightly colored, printed in orange-brown ink, touched with pinkish-red and blue-grey washes, and outlined in black" (p. 268).

Blake, however, was a true bard, a minstrel, a troubadour and it is the musicality of the poem what makes it so appealing to musicians, not its meaning. Just "listen" to the first stanza:

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

Indeed, the strophe exudes rhythm and rhyme. Alliteration creates a sense of form like a musical motif restated pervasively once and again. In the poem, the picturesque and exotic subject clashes with nightmarish, fearsome images, like a folk-like tune in a somber, gloomy Mahler symphony.

And yet, I don't think the inherent musical qualities of Blake's poetry can account alone for his success among musicians. Ideology is another factor to take into account. Blake's mystic vision, his revolt against authority, his embracing of madness, the macabre, the irrational, and his determined individualism are features nowadays accepted (at least in the popular mind) as being inherent to art and artists. Stephen Deuchar, the Director of the Tate Britain, states that Blake "has been affectionately adopted by a wide British public as a kind of patron saint". He also remarks on a progress from "ostracised outsider" to "a gradual process of canonization" (p. 7). Blake himself was careful to cultivate an image of quintessential romantic artist ("The Labours of the Artist, the Poet, the Musician, have been proverbially attended by poverty and obscurity," he stated in a "Prospectus to the Public" preceding an edition of his poems). These are traits that have a strong appeal for artists, especially musicians, whose medium is said to be immaterial, without precise meanings and indefinite in its colorings, or to put it in a single word: ineffable.

ANTONI PIZÀ

## BORDEAUX & PARIS

**Inventaire 97.35: La collection Henri Sauguet au Musée d'Aquitaine.** Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux (19 October to 18 November 2001) — **Henri Sauguet et la scène.** Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, Paris (20 November 2001 to 24 February 2002). The exhibition organized by the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, and curated by Pauline GIRARD. *Henri Sauguet et la scène*, edited by Bruno BERENQUER, Denise BOUCHET-KERVELLA, and Pauline GIRARD; prefaces by Jean-Pierre ANGREMY and Dominique PROBST (Paris: Séguier, 2001) 174 pages. ISBN 2-84049-250-4. 25 €.

It was the peculiar good fortune of France that a great number of its artistic avant-garde survived the devastations of the Second World War and Nazi occupation. These artists, many of whom had first come to prominence during the 1920s — *les Années Folles* — became key players in the resuscitation of French cultural life in the immediate post-War period. Indeed, battles were still raging in many other parts of Europe when the signal event of the post-War renaissance of Paris theatrical life took place on 2 March 1945: the one-act ballet *Les Forains* achieved its premiere at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Its composer, Henri Sauguet, would have been 100 years old in 2001. His anniversary was celebrated with two commemorative exhibitions: the Musée d'Aquitaine of Bordeaux, Sauguet's hometown, presented selections from its permanent collection, while the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra in Paris focused on Sauguet's works for the stage. Appropriately, the sumptuous halls of the Paris Bibliothèque-musée in the Palais Garnier are adjacent to the very auditorium where some of Sauguet's greatest successes were staged.

The Bordeaux exhibition, or *exposition-dossier* as specified by its curators, allowed a glimpse into the riches of the Sauguet collection held at the Musée d'Aquitaine. Personal photographs, program notes, posters, and other memorabilia documented both the career and the personal life of Bordeaux's native son. These included such mundanities as Sauguet's Légion d'honneur, but also more relevant and lesser-known items, such as the manifesto of the Groupe des Trois, a Bordeaux association Sauguet founded in 1920 on the model of the Groupe des Six with two other local composers, Louis Émié and Jean-Marcel Lizotte. Especially for the exhibition, Sauguet's Bechstein piano (1890–91) underwent a complete restoration by the Esquerré firm.

Although the Paris exhibition endeavored to present only Sauguet's work for the stage, what with eight operas, twenty-six ballets, and countless pieces of incidental music for theater, film, radio, and television to his name, the 126 items on display represented virtually the composer's complete oeuvre. Moreover, thanks to Sauguet's friendships and professional associations with the likes of Milhaud, Satie, Poulenc, Cocteau, Chris-