

Motto to the Songs of Innocence and of Experience by Wm. Blake.

Choral Setting by David Avshalomov.

Composers's gloss on the poem

Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience are not about the lone journey of the human soul in isolation (though in the end he reinforces the widespread philosophical conclusion that spiritual isolation is in fact what we all ultimately live in, no matter how well we connect with others along the way). These poems are about the (largely negative) effect of human society on the natural innocence with which he deeply believed (and I believe) we all are born. And this Motto is a quick overview of that devolution. How does society kick the innocence and love and spirit and beauty out of us and make us shrewd and avaricious and false? Answer: By example and through our experiences of what others do to us.

The Good (innocent, young, naïve) are attracted (meaning hooked, artificially drawn) to Men's perceptions (I take this to mean both other's perceptions of ourselves, needing approval and validation/feedback, and other's projected values as examples). The young (and young at heart, those who hold out longer) are vulnerable, they take in what comes at them from others before they are able to think for themselves.

So Experience means painful experience (I feel). And the fairies and elves are both the inner creative, intuitive, empathetic impulses and spirits of children, and their counterparts in the *natural* world (which I also think were as real to Blake as they were to Smart or even Yeats). Learning to catch and cage them means not actually to destroy them outright, but to make them powerless, to deprive them of the essential freedom without which they cannot be themselves. To bottle them up, and not act on their energy. Like spiritual toilet training, if you will . . .

When the Knave begins to snarl, this suggests both the knave in society around you, and for some, your own inner knave, the one that society has taught you to be. And snarling is what you do. Snarling means intimidation, especially of even lower underlings in the power structure (knaves are not rulers, after all; the root, I believe, is *Knecht*, OHG, "boy servant," see also Knabe in German. I didn't look them up.) So: Knaves can act out without inhibition or compunction (as society does not control them), and some of us innocents begin to mimic them, as they Seem powerful . . . I'm not certain if Blake means to suggest that you could still withstand the Knave and the Hypocrite before you caged your inner fairies and elves, but it seems likely.

And the Hypocrite similarly, either those around us or those that, by [or after] caging our inner fairies and elves, we are starting to become, start to howl, I would suggest in triumph, as the ways of men can favor the hypocrite. Hypocrites rule.

Now our hero starts to find that all his Good Friends are not friends at all—or at least that, like most in society, they have ulterior motives, and that usually these stink like one's fundament (private [back] end, as you immediately saw). It's not clear whether

they show them more freely as the innocent becomes tarnished, or whether the innocent's increasing experience allows him to see them. But the stink is the same.

And at this point, anyone who can see how the world is, can see who is an Eagle, and who is an Owl. These are not the natural creatures, but symbols, of course. My gloss on this is that while in nature both are fierce, proud, skilled, powerful predators, in Blake's mind they represent two different ('successful') paths through the human world (though clearly there must be others; predators must have prey). Blake's Eagle is straightforward, proud, predatory, vicious, clear, direct. But his Owl is nocturnal, covert, stealthy, mysterious, unknowable. So these paths to "effectiveness," or "victory" are (1) direct, bold, perhaps almost noble aggression, and 2) mysterious covert dealings, private ends, hypocrisy and knavery. (For parallels regarding the role of mystery and hypocrisy in human character and relations, see Blake's poem *The Human Abstract*.)

Now there are no warm and fuzzy paths left. You're lucky if you even remember the last time you had an elven thought. But if you are discerning, you may be able to survive by knowing which type you are dealing with—knave, hypocrite, false friend, Eagle or Owl. Or by knowing which one you have become . . . and running with that.

Kind of a bleak outcome, isn't it?

My opinion only, and I set it as I saw it.

Musically, you will find that the feel of the opening, while not cheerful, is at least coherently tonal (E flat minor plain and simple), you know where you stand. The first time through the melody, the expressive twists (forays into a half-step/whole-step scale, the "diminished" scale, that the Avshalomov dynasty of composers uses reflexively sometimes, hinting at a modulation that does not, in fact, take place) are straightforward; simple madrigalisms in a sense. And so are the stage business touches. (BTW, I have been using these increasingly for the last decade; the difference between me and others who shall remain nameless is that "effects" are not the substance of my music, it works fine without them. But the visual effect of music is even more important to today's audiences than ever before, as you know. A generation of shrinking attention spans.)

Then once the canon starts, the picture changes—just as in life. Now each line has to deal with its relationship with each and all of the others—and it has not been crafted to harmonize nicely with others. This is actually a sort of "accidental" or "hypocrite's" fugue. Once the tune was wrought, I thought at first that I would simply harmonize and extend the tune and do echo repetitions and counterlines and passing tones, etc., as in others of these Blake settings. I didn't originally write the tune to work as a canon, exactly. But I could hear that it was close to working canonically, at the unison and octave—except for the little chromatic diminished-scale excursions away from the home key. I had some uneasy feelings about what evolved from this procedure by measures 37-48, until I realized that the environment of dissonantly clashing repeated snarls and howls could provide just the right expression for life among the dangerous tribe of men. So I tweaked it just slightly, and then it clicked into place, because where the nasty touches

for knave and hypocrite occur is precisely where the interesting (“wrong”-seeming, unplanned, unexpected and harsh) harmonic effects start to happen—and these suggest the acquisition of experience as perceived by the innocent (in fact, that should be the individual singer’s sensation as well while singing it—how can I hold onto my tune while all these other stinky “Good Friends” are singing in opposition to me?). All of a sudden you are in an increasingly unpleasant texture of people singing what at first seemed like a plausible, if not innocuous tune, but which now has the effect of taking turns souring each other’s line, bumming each other’s flow, breaking each others’ spirit focus. Kind of like being in a crowd in a place of commerce . . . or politics . . .

The effect of this scourging passage is that after it, the plain, slightly heroic leaps on Eagle, which were sort of reassuring in a macho way the first time, do not provide the same sort of focus at the end, although the harmonic tension lessens, and the line peters out. So when we get our final repeated statement, it is with a completely new consciousness, a new point of view, the view of experience (you can never go back). NOW the Eagle can be heard as completely different from the Owl. And for that summary statement, I provided the completely new harmonies in the last phrases, including the deliberately inconclusive cadence that leaves us to ponder what, after all, the mystery of the Owl is.

In the end, I think it works rather well.