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## WILLIAM BLAKE MUSICIAN

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The earliest accounts of William Blake comment on his music. Not only are his lyrics extraordinarily musical in rhythm and feeling, but he often sang them to music of his own creation. His early friend John Thomas Smith said that at the Mathew salon in the 1780s,

I have often heard him read and sing several of his poems. He was listened to by the company with profound silence, and allowed by most of the visitors to possess original and extraordinary merit.<sup>1</sup>

Even in old age, according to Gilchrist, "He himself still sang, in a voice tremulous with age, sometimes old ballads, sometimes his own songs, to melodies of his own."<sup>2</sup> During his own lifetime, his designs were used to illustrate musical works, such as *An Elegy, set to Music by Thos. Commins* (1786) and John Whittaker, *The Seraph, A Collection of Sacred Music* (?1818-28), and on his deathbed, according to his disciple Frederick Tatham, he

began to sing Hallelujahs & songs of joy & Triumph which Mrs. Blake described as being truly sublime in music & in Verse. ... No taught hymns, no psalms got by rote from any hypocritical Sty of Cant, no sickly sanctified Buffoonery; but the pure & clear stream of divine fervour...<sup>3</sup>

Some of his music was even written out. J.T. Smith says that in the 1780s,

Blake wrote many other songs, to which he also composed tunes. These he would occasionally sing to his friends; and though, according to his confession, he was entirely unacquainted with the science of music, his ear was so good, that his tunes were sometimes most singularly beautiful, and were noted down by musical professors.<sup>4</sup>

And E.G. Marsh wrote on 21 February to Blake's patron William Hayley of

The hym, which inspired our friend... [the] poetical engraver... I long to hear Mr Blake's devotional air, though (I fear) I should have been very

awkward in the attempt to give notes to his music. His ingenuity will however (I doubt not) discover some method of preserving his compositions upon paper, though he is not very well versed in bars and crotchets...<sup>5</sup>

However, none of his music is known to have survived. This loss has not prevented it from being admired by critics who never heard it. Allan Cunningham wrote in 1830 that

Of his music there are no specimens —he wanted the art of noting it down— if it equalled many of his drawings, and some of his songs, we have lost melodies of real value.<sup>6</sup>

And in the next century S. Foster Damon went so far as to write an essay on “The Unwritten Music of a Great Man” in *Harvard Musical Review*, II (1913), 3-8, 38-39.

It was, therefore, with something more than languid curiosity that I recently came across a song by W. Blake, complete with its music, in an 18th Century publication. This was *Bland's Collection of Divine Music* of ?1795-97,<sup>7</sup> and subsequent investigation demonstrated that the W. stands for William. Might one hope for a musical setting of “The Divine Image” or the “Jerusalem” lyric in *Milton* beginning “And did those feet in ancient time”?

Well, one might hope, all right, but the facts are more pedestrian. Not only are the words not by William Blake —they are from Psalm xvi, verse 9— but the music is not by the author of *Songs of Innocence* at all. But as there was a William Blake writing music during the lifetime of the poet-painter, and as his work seems to have been ignored by those who have written about William Blake's music,<sup>8</sup> it may be useful to set forth the little I have found about him in a musical context.

The earliest publication of work by the sacred melodist which I have found is:

*Divine Armony*; being a Collection in Score of Psalms and Anthems, with several other Pieces of Sacred Music Composed by the most eminent Masters Antient and Modern, The whole selected and carefully revised by Richard Langdon, Batchelor in Musick, Subchanter & Organist of the Cathedral Church of Exeter. (London: Printed for the Editor by Longman, Lukey & Co., 1774) [Bodley]

On pp. 76-84 is the “Full Anthem for four Voices Composed by William Blake Doctor in Divinity; late Prebendary of the Cathedral Church of Salisbury, and Rector of St. Thomas's Church in that City. Psalm xvi, Verse 9”, “I have set God always”.

The same work is also published in

*The Cathedral Magazine*, or Divine Harmony, being A Collection of the most Valuable & Useful Anthems in Score, Several of which are Selected, from the Works of the most Eminent Authors, both Antient and Modern. The whole Selected, and carefully revised, By Able Masters. Vol. I[-III]. (London: J. French [?1775-77<sup>9</sup>]) [Bodley (Vol. I only) & British Library]

The “Anthem composed by Dr. Blake”, “I have set God always before me”, is in Vol. III, pp. 65-75.

The same work appears in

*The Divine Harmonist*, or, Sunday Associate, containing Elegant Extracts and Original Compositions, of Sacred Music, From the most distinguished Masters, Ancient and Modern. Printed in the Tenor and Bass Cliffs, with a Thorough Bass, and Accompaniment for the Organ, Harpsichord, and Piano-Forte. The Whole Selected, Arranged, and Conducted, and the New Music Composed By Thomas Busby. (London: Printed for the Conductor; And sold by W. Locke, 1792) [Bodley & British Library]

The Duet by Dr. Blake is on pp. 211-213, and, though it begins “Thou shalt shew me”, it is merely a fragment of the longer work of 1774.

This same version was republished in

*Bland's Collection of Divine Music*, Consisting of Psalms, Hymns & Anthems, For One, Two, Three, & Four Voices, The Bases Figured, & proper Harmonies annexed, for the Organ or Harpsichord, The Words chiefly from Dr. Watts. (London: J. Bland, [1795-97]) 18s. [British Library]

In Vol. I, No. 7 Song 68 by “W. Blake” is “Thou shalt shew me”.

The most elaborate publication of Dr. Blake’s Anthem I have seen is in

*Sacred Harmony* in Parts Consisting of a choice Collection of Anthems, and other Church Services, Selected from the Works of Doctors Boyce, Croft, & Green, Messrs. Blake, Bond, Clark, Kent, King, Purcel, Travers, &c. The Whole Judiciously Arranged and Adapted for the Use of Societys & Practitioners in General, By Robert Willoughby. (London: Printed for the Editor & Sold by him Singly or in Sets [?1795]) [British Library]

The work consists of five volumes for different voices or instruments, each with the same titlepage. “I have set God always before me” from Psalm xvi is found as anthem 12 in the Key of E in the volume for Organ “with the greater 3d.” by the “Revd. Dr. Blake”, omitting most of the words (pp. 56-60); in that for Treble voices as from “Roms: 6th. [sic] Blake” (pp. 31-36); in the volume for Contra Tenors as by “Blake” (pp. 34-36); in the Tenor volume “with the greater 3d. Psalm 16th. Dr. Blake” (pp. 333-35); and in the Bass volume as by “Blake” (pp. 31-34).

The last printing known to me is



*Harmonia Sacra*; A Collection of Anthems in Score Selected for Cathedral and Parochial Churches; From the most Eminent Masters of the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries,... by John Page of St. Paul's Cathedral (London: Printed and Published for the Editor, 1800) [Bodley]

In Vol. III, pp. 80-91, is the "Anthem for five Voices In the Key of D with the greater third by the late Revd. Dr. Blake, Canon Residentiary os Salisbury Cathedral". Clearly Dr. William Blake had died by 1800.<sup>10</sup>

We have no evidence that the author of *Songs of Innocence* relished such formal and elaborate musical compositions, and he might even have agreed with the extreme dissenting scorn of Frederick Tatham for "taught hymns,... psalms got by rote from any hypocritical Sty of Cant,... sickly sanctified Buffoonery" rather than the "pure & clear stream of [*unpremeditated*] divine fervour". But it is also imaginable that he knew and admired the music of his contemporary ecclesiastical namesake.

#### Notes

1. *Blake Records* (1969), 26.
2. *Ibid*, 305.
3. *Ibid*, 528.
4. *Ibid*, 457.
5. Quoted from the manuscript offered at Sotheby sales of 6-7 December 1984, lot 87, and 22-23 July 1985, lot 74, and acquired privately by Professor Robert N. Essick.
6. *Blake Records*, 482.
7. The work was apparently issued in twenty Numbers of six leaves each, with the same titlepage on each "No." expanded in MS to identify which Number it was, e.g., "No. 7". In Vol. II, the title of No. 18 is emended in the engraving so that it begins "Linley's Continuation of Bland's Collection of Divine Music", and in the imprint "J. Bland" is replaced by "F. Linley successor to Mr. Bland". The dates of publication are established by these imprints. John Bland (c. 1750-c. 1840) built up a flourishing music-publishing business which was taken over by Lewis, Houston, & Hyde in 1795 and by Francis Linley (1771-1800) in 1797, though Linley gave place to William Hodsoll in 1798. The Numbers of *Bland's Collection* must therefore have commenced before 1796 and continued at least until 1797, though they probably finished before Hodsoll took over the firm in 1798, since no Number bears his imprint.  
In the "Catalogue of Vocal Music London Printed & Sold by J. Bland" at the back of some Numbers, the full "I have set God always" is offered at 1s.6d.
8. E. Martha Winburn England & John Sparrow, *Hymns Unbidden*: Donne, Herbert, Blake, Emily Dickinson and the Hymnographers (1966) and B.H. Fairchild, Jr., *Such Holy Song*: Music as Idea, Form and Image in the Poetry of William Blake (1980).

9. The British Library also has a solitary issue of *The Cathedral Magazine* No. 5 dated August 1775 which announces that one 14-page Number will be issued each month. If this actually occurred, the first of the 33 Numbers must have come out in April 1775, the last in December 1777, and No. 29 with Dr. Blake's Anthem in August 1777.
10. The Very Reverend S.H. Evans kindly wrote to me from the Deanery at Salisbury that the only 18th Century Blake recorded in the Cathedral's Volume of Fasti was Edward Blake, a Prebendary of Chardstock in 1756-65 and Vicar of Sarum St. Thomas, whose place of residence makes it seem unlikely that he was also a residentiary Canon.