

A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO VIRGIL THOMSON'S
FIVE SONGS FROM WILLIAM BLAKE

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ABSTRACT

Though perhaps his most well-known vocal works might be his operas, *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All*, American composer Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) did write nearly seventy songs for voice and piano, including several important song cycles. One of these cycles, the *Five Songs from William Blake*, represents an impressive composition for the baritone voice. Unfortunately, much of the previous scholarship about Thomson did not award these Blake songs adequate attention, nor was it able to draw upon many of the primary sources about Thomson's life and work that are now available. The purpose of this study is to amend these omissions with a specific guide for performers, combining recent scholarship, an analysis of Thomson's setting of Blake's text to music, and a consideration of the vocal merits and difficulties of Thomson's vocal writing into one helpful document.

Chapter 1 presents a brief biographical portrait of the composer, with special emphasis on Thomson's interest in William Blake, and addresses Thomson's theories about composing for the voice. Chapter 2 begins with a general introduction to the *Five Songs from William Blake* and a history of their critical reception. Then, this chapter undertakes a detailed examination of the pieces in order to assess Thomson's specific musical and vocal choices in setting the text. The elements of this analysis include: meter/structure of the poem, meter/structure of the music, vocal range and tessitura, expressive markings, vocal challenges, and interpretive suggestions. Finally, this document presents a conclusion that considers Thomson's overall significance as a vocal composer and the relevance of the *Five Songs from William Blake* to this discussion.

In addition, the document includes two appendices. Appendix A contains the complete text of the five William Blake poems that Thomson chose to set to music. Appendix B provides a selected discography of the *Five Songs from William Blake*.

INTRODUCTION

The American composer Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) wrote approximately seventy works for voice and piano, including several important song cycles. In his thesis *Selected American Song Cycles for Baritone Composed Since 1945*, Lawrence Rickert recognizes one of these cycles, the *Five Songs from William Blake*, as a substantial composition for baritone voice in the twentieth century.¹ In addition, Rickert provides a helpful introduction to Virgil Thomson's life and a satisfactory structural and musical analysis of the cycle. However, because Rickert's monograph dates from 1965, it could not take into account any of Thomson's published theories on how to compose for the voice, nor did it refer to any other primary sources about Thomson's life and work that are now available.² Furthermore, Rickert fails to provide an adequate explanation of the cycle's poet, William Blake (1757-1827), whose highly symbolic and often mystical verses warrant more serious consideration. The purpose of this study is to amend these omissions with a specific guide for performers, combining recent scholarship, an analysis of Thomson's setting of Blake's text to music, and a consideration of the vocal merits and difficulties of Thomson's vocal writing into one document.

Chapter 1 presents a brief biographical portrait of the composer, with special emphasis on Thomson's interest in William Blake. At this point, it is also necessary to consider briefly Blake's own biography and his significance as a poet and a visual artist. Finally, this chapter addresses Thomson's theories about composing for the voice.

¹ See Lawrence Gould Rickert, "Selected American Song Cycles for Baritone Composed Since 1945," (D.M.A. thesis, University of Illinois, 1965).

² For instance, in *Music with Words: A Composer's View* from 1989, Thomson outlines his compositional approach to vocal music. Also, a monumental collection of Virgil Thomson's private papers is now available at the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library at Yale University.

Chapter 2 begins with a general introduction to the *Five Songs from William Blake* and a history of their critical reception. Next, the chapter undertakes a detailed examination of the pieces in order to assess Thomson's specific musical and vocal choices in setting the text. The investigation was conducted with regard for how the pieces would be prepared for a performance, such as the lecture recital that will accompany this document. Finally, this document presents a conclusion that considers Thomson's overall significance as a vocal composer and the consistency with which Thomson adheres to his own theories about setting text to music (as found in the *Five Songs from William Blake*.)

Additionally, the document includes two helpful appendices. The first, Appendix A, contains the complete text of the *Five Songs from William Blake*, and the second, Appendix B, provides a selected discography of the pieces.

CHAPTER 1 VIRGIL THOMSON, “AMERICAN” COMPOSER

In *An Introduction to America's Music*, Richard Crawford succinctly summarizes one musician's views on the requirements for a composition of “American” music: “To create American music, one need[s] only to be an American and to compose.”¹ The clever gentleman who espoused such a straightforward view was none other than twentieth-century American composer and music critic Virgil Thomson (1896-1989.) At a time when many composers were enmeshed in creating ever-increasingly complex music based on highly organized intellectual formulae, Thomson's musical style championed simplicity, directness, and wit with music firmly “rooted in American speech rhythms and hymnbook harmonies.”² Furthermore, Thomson stands as one of the pre-eminent music critics of the last one hundred years, both as a chief music critic at the *New York Herald Tribune* for nearly fifteen years and as the author of several important critical volumes on musical aesthetics. This chapter will present a brief biographical sketch of Thomson, with special interest in Thomson's introduction to William Blake, provide a brief overview of his song output, and discuss Thomson's theories about setting English texts to music.

Virgil Thomson was born in Kansas City, Missouri on November 25, 1896. He was the son of a Scottish postal-worker father and an English mother, both without any strong musical inclinations. Virgil studied piano, theory, organ, and voice, and by age twelve, was assistant organist at Calvary Baptist Church in Kansas City. Thomson also displayed journalistic talent, and he organized and published his own magazine in junior

¹Richard Crawford, *An Introduction to America's Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 199.

²The Virgil Thomson Foundation, "Virgil Thomson (1896-1989)" <www.virgilthomson.org>.

college. In 1917, Virgil enlisted in the army and traveled to New York City to receive special training at the Service School for Radio Officers at Columbia University.

Fortunately, while in New York, Thomson was able to avail himself of many concerts and musical events on the East Coast. In 1919, he was discharged, and he returned to Kansas City with the ambition to raise enough money to attend Harvard University.

In the fall of 1919, Virgil Thomson arrived in Cambridge to begin his studies at Harvard. He described his own goals for attending the prestigious university:

Harvard had been chosen for my especial needs, which were three-- good keyboard lessons, available in Boston; training in harmony, counterpoint, and composition, said to be excellent at this university; and full access to its arts and letters. . . . My ultimate aim at this time was to become an organist and choir-director in some well-paying city church and from there to pursue a composer's career.³

Thomson joined the Harvard Glee Club and Choir and made an important voyage to Europe as a member of the fifty-voice ensemble. Rather than returning to Cambridge at the end of the choir's tour, however, he remained in Paris on a John Knowles Paine Traveling Fellowship and elected to study both organ and counterpoint with renowned pedagogue Nadia Boulanger.⁴

Thus, Virgil Thomson joined the ranks of the many other American composers, such as Aaron Copland and Roy Harris, who trained abroad in Paris. Thomson did indeed return to Harvard in 1922 and successfully completed his undergraduate studies there in 1923. Yet, the lure of his Parisian experience was strong, and he returned to Paris in 1925--this time to remain until 1940, when the Germans arrived in the French

³ Virgil Thomson, *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, ed. Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 35.

⁴ Richard Jackson, "Virgil Thomson," *Grove Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy <www.grovemusic.com>.

capital.⁵ It was during these two important Parisian stays that Thomson interacted with Cocteau, *Les Six* (Poulenc, Milhaud, Honegger, Durey, Auric, Tailleferre), Satie, Picasso, Gertrude Stein, and other members of the Parisian avant-garde. As Rickert points out, “this atmosphere of experimentation” opened up a world of ideas and opportunities for Thomson, who became a member of this imaginative sphere.⁶ Not surprisingly, this period saw the completion of several of Thomson’s most important musical works, including *Capitals*, *Capitals* (1927) and *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928,) both the result of collaborations with Gertrude Stein, and the *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* (1928.)⁷

While living abroad in the thirties, Thomson also made a mark as an astute musical critic and essayist. It was during these years that Thomson wrote *The State of Music*, a book that outlined his musical philosophies, and served as a correspondent for *Modern Music*, the journal of the New York League of Composers.⁸ Based on these accomplishments, Friedberg observes that “it was not surprising . . . that on his return to America he succeeded Lawrence Gilman as music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*.”⁹ Thomson retained this prestigious post until the 1950s, when he left in order to pursue his compositional activities full-time. Additionally, he was the founder of the New York Music Critics’ Circle, an organization that recognized outstanding works premiered in New York from 1941-1965.¹⁰ His musical output from this time period is as noteworthy as his earlier accomplishments in Paris: his second opera, *The Mother of Us*

⁵ Rickert, 232.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Glenn Watkins, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 451.

⁸ Ruth C. Friedberg, *American Art Song and American Poetry, Volume II: Voices of Maturity* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981-1987), 28.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Style & Literature* (Seattle: Pst...Inc., 1996), 242.

All (1947,) also to text by Gertrude Stein, his Pulitzer-Prize-winning film score *The Louisiana Story* (1948,) and the *Three Pictures for Orchestra* (1952.) These works stand as but a few of the monuments of Thomson's achievement during this second phase of his career.

Even after his official tenure as a music critic for the *Herald Tribune* had ended, Thomson remained an important writer, critic, and musical scholar to the end of his life. Along with these important literary contributions, he presented many guest lectures across the United States and was also active as a guest conductor throughout the United States and Europe.¹¹ Among Virgil Thomson's many awards are the gold medal for music from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Book Critics Circle Award, a Kennedy Center Honor, and twenty honorary doctorates.¹² On September 30, 1989, Virgil Thomson died at the Chelsea Hotel in New York City, where he had been a resident for fifty years. Apparently, Thomson died exactly as he had hoped: "at home, in his sleep, and in time to make all editions of the Sunday *New York Times*."¹³

Thomson's Interest in William Blake

Throughout his career Thomson cultivated important relationships with many influential friends and mentors. Certainly among one of the most fruitful of these affiliations would be the friendship he began in his early years at Harvard with S. Foster Damon. Damon, whom Thomson describes in his autobiography as a "slender, pale poet

¹¹ Jackson, "Virgil Thomson."

¹² The Virgil Thomson Foundation, "Virgil Thomson (1896-1989)," and Jackson, "Virgil Thomson."

¹³ Rodney Lister, "Virgil Thomson: A Portrait of His Music (As Glimpsed In Recent Recordings)," *Tempo* 175 (December, 1990): 22.

with a blond mustache,” was an English instructor at Harvard and a pioneer William Blake scholar. In fact, when they met, Damon was privately finishing a groundbreaking volume that would “open up the language of William Blake.”¹⁴ Not unexpectedly, in some previously unpublished notes most likely prepared for a pre-concert lecture on his *Five Songs from William Blake*, Thomson openly proclaimed that “the great authority on that poet [Blake], S. Foster Damon, who was also a friend, explained him to me.”¹⁵ Thomson continued a life-long friendship with Damon and shared his successes with him through years of visits and letters. From their correspondence, one can clearly see that Damon received an early draft of the *Five Songs from William Blake* and expressed his “delight” over them.¹⁶

The celebrated English poet William Blake was born in London in 1757, as Keynes notes, “into a world unready to receive the artist and poet of genius that he proved to be.”¹⁷ Blake showed an early interest in the visual arts, and because of this artistic inclination, he was permitted to leave school at age ten to attend drawing school. After five year’s of training, however, his father was unable to afford an apprenticeship for Blake with any well-known painter. Instead, Blake ended up working as an apprentice for seven years with the renowned engraver James Basire. It was during this

¹⁴Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 46.

¹⁵Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture on the *Five Songs from William Blake*, [ca. 1979], The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304, Special Collections, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University. Along with this important influence, Thomson explains in his autobiography that Damon, who was also a composer himself, introduced Thomson to the piano compositions of Erik Satie and to Gertrude Stein’s small book *Tender Buttons*--both contributions that were to have lasting effects on Thomson’s later musical and aesthetic development (see Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 46.)

¹⁶S. Foster Damon to Virgil Thomson, 30 December 1951, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS29/34/23, Special Collections, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University. Incidentally, the two also discussed the idea of collaborating on an opera. However, Thomson and Damon did not happen upon a subject compelling enough, and the plans never materialized.

¹⁷Geoffrey Keynes, Introduction to *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, by William Blake (New York: Orion Press, 1967), ix.

assignment that Blake became skilled in all facets of traditional printing techniques, including engraving, etching, stippling, and copying. Eventually, Blake did pursue further education by entering the Royal Academy in 1779 as an art student, but the classical curriculum did not appeal to Blake's creative nature. In fact, Blake believed that merely "copying nature" actually limited his imagination. Thus, Blake left the Royal Academy to earn his living as an engraver and copier. Fortunately, the excellent experience that Blake had as an apprentice under James Basire allowed Blake first to improve and to expand upon current printing methods, and later to create new procedures of his own.¹⁸

Not unlike Virgil Thomson, William Blake displayed early literary promise as well. Despite his lack of formal education beyond the age of ten, Blake was an avid reader and published his first collection of writings in 1783, *Poetical Sketches*, now considered a landmark in late eighteenth-century poetry (and from which comes the text for "The Land of Dreams," one of Thomson's *Five Songs from William Blake*.)¹⁹ Though his writings alone may have been substantial enough to secure his fame, perhaps what William Blake is now most famous for is his combination of his two loves, art and poetry, into the volumes that he dubbed "Illuminated" books. In these works, Blake did not generate a text with typeset and create his illustrations on separate plates; instead, Blake combined the two media by etching his text and his illustrations onto a single copper plate that essentially became the equivalent of a woodcut (an impression that

¹⁸ Keynes, ix-xvii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

could theoretically be used for limitless copies.)²⁰ Then, after printing each page by hand, Blake would add the finishing color to his design. Interestingly, because of the originality of his colorations, independent printings from identical copper plates will often appear quite different.²¹ Some of Blake's most famous of these "Illuminated" manuscripts are *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* (from which three of the *Five Songs from William Blake* are drawn,) *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *The Gates of Paradise*, *Job*, and *Milton, a Poem*.

Despite its alluring mystical quality, striking visual character, and often universal appeal, there is much in Blake's work that requires explanation. Thomson himself expressed that "large proportions of Blake's works" are "symbolical [*sic*] and highly obscure"²² Yet, Thomson clearly admired Blake for his visionary work:

Now William Blake's ideas, all of them, were in his day (and still are) radical, revolutionary, and shocking. 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.²³

Though Blake is chronologically more akin to the musical world of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, it was not until the twentieth century that the vivid imagery, daring social commentary, and innate mysticism of his poetry attracted the attention of other notable composers, such as Benjamin Britten, Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Ivor Gurney, Roger Quilter, William Walton, Lee Hoiby, and Peter Warlock. In addition to the *Five Songs from William Blake*, Virgil Thomson also made two other settings of

²⁰ David Bindman, Introduction to *William Blake: The Complete Illuminated Books*, by William Blake (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

²³ *Ibid.*

Blake's texts for solo voice, "The Sunflower" and another version of "The Tyger." In fact, "The Sunflower" is one of Thomson's first original compositions, a detail that further illustrates Thomson's lasting interest in this most "Romantic" among all the English poets.²⁴

Thomson's Songs and His Theories about Setting English Text to Music

Though perhaps not the most prolific proponent of American art song in the twentieth century, Virgil Thomson's nearly seventy solo vocal works nonetheless comprise an integral part of his *oeuvre*. Friedberg correctly identifies Thomson's "devotion . . . to the vocal forms" throughout his career.²⁵ Thomson himself, however, observed "the concert song in English is . . . a never-never land from which few invaders bring home booty."²⁶ Fortunately, Thomson continued to advance the cause of art song in the English language, despite his doubts about the accolades it may or may not have garnered him. Of his overall style, many have been quick to offer their assessments. For example, Kimball asserts that Thomson's body of art songs portrays "an amazing spectrum of mood and color, and a masterful style that blends simplicity and sophistication."²⁷

While his musical language prized an overall simplicity and directness of expression, Thomson's attention to detail when setting a text to music was meticulous. Indeed, some would argue that "the clarity of his prosody" sets the standard for all other

²⁴ Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 90. Though Thomson had previously completed his share of compositional exercises, "The Sunflower" and another song to a text of Amy Lowell, "Vernal Equinox," comprise Thomson's earliest independent compositions.

²⁵ Friedberg, 28.

²⁶ Virgil Thomson, *Music with Words: A Composer's View* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), x.

²⁷ Kimball, 243.

composers of American art song.²⁸ This skill, as Kimball notes, was “no doubt fueled by his literary talent.”²⁹ The range of poetry that Thomson selected for his compositions represents a unique cross-section of his literary palette: William Shakespeare, John Donne, William Blake, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Kenneth Koch, Marianne Moore, Thomas Campion, and his fellow expatriate, Gertrude Stein.³⁰ Moreover, Thomson also composed pieces to old English texts, Spanish texts, and French texts.³¹

Interestingly, Virgil Thomson, in the book *Music with Words: A Composer's View*, takes the time to elaborate on his philosophies of how to handle setting an English text to music. Through this fascinating collection of essays, one can easily discern what elements propelled Thomson's own work and what tenets inspired his advice to fellow composers and to performers. Overall, Thomson offers several general pointers to composers about to undertake the creation of a piece of vocal music in English. Thomson advises that they be familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet and the base phonemes of English words; that they take voice lessons from a good teacher that “will serve as guides to vocal setting;” that they listen to fine actors and orators to get a sense of English clearly and meaningfully communicated; and that they underline the important words in the text and remember that these words may be best enunciated in the singer's upper-middle register.³²

Thomson's specific advice to composers may best be expressed through his idea of “word-groups,” which he defines as follows:

²⁸ The Virgil Thomson Foundation, "Songs," <www.virgilthomson.org>.

²⁹ Kimball, 242.

³⁰ Kimball, 243.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Virgil Thomson, *Music with Words*, 28.

These groups sound like words, and they operate like words in the sense that they have accents and durations that cannot, at least in English, be altered or interrupted without changing the meaning.³³

As an example of a word-group, Thomson cites “How do you do?”, a common polite expression that traditionally has a distinctive rhythm or cadence. To vary its cadence would be to suggest a meaning other than the common usage associated with its familiar speech rhythm. Thomson readily acknowledges that individual words do have their own intrinsic meaning; however, in order for words to transmit thoughts, ideas, or feelings “requires that the words be pronounced (or read) as word-groups.”³⁴ These groupings or composite groupings (i.e. groups of “word-groups”) are not conventionally notated in “the usual layouts of written or printed language.”³⁵ Rather, Thomson proposes that the speaker or composer must choose such groupings. According to this philosophy, then, it is the “word-groups,” and not the individual words themselves, that are responsible for conveying the meaning of a text, and as such, “are the minimal transmission units of either speech or song.”³⁶ Because of this reality, Thomson encourages composers to determine the inherent “word-groups” in a passage prior to setting an English text to music. Despite his rather determined promotion of the “word-group” ideal, Thomson does allow that “word-groups” themselves “have little to do with expression; they are merely phonetic units” that have the potential to impart meaning.³⁷

Also of significance in *Music with Words* are Thomson’s directives to singers. Without giving specific technical advice, Thomson provides several vocal strategies for clearly communicating an English text. First, Thomson has specific advice about how to

³³ Ibid., 23.

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 21.

enunciate the text. “Consonants need time to be heard,” states Thomson, and he argues that consonants will be heard most clearly when either slightly ahead of or behind the beat.³⁸ Furthermore, consonants require a “clean ending,” most often accompanied with a slight “uh” sound [^] to ensure their intelligibility. Since vowels are often unpure in English, Thomson finds that some modification toward the more pure Italianate vowels may be necessary. He also suggests substituting the French mute “e” sound [œ] for final syllables that end with “r” (e.g. -ar, -er, -ir, -or, -ur.)

The other principle caveat that Thomson offers to vocal performers involves the adherence to proper word stress in English. Again, Thomson reiterates that a singer should not attempt to alter the stresses of words or “word-groups.” One “common error of singers today” that Thomson identifies as particularly bothersome in this regard is the “constant use of crescendo-diminuendo on single notes.”³⁹ Thomson strongly discourages such vocal embellishments, and justifies his stance with the following supposition:

A musical phrase correctly prosodized by the composer will need no gratuitous accenting by the singer. And rhythmic stressings in the music are far best left to the accompanist. My own rule is never to misplace a tonic accent and never to allow my singers to furnish one.⁴⁰

Thus, Thomson’s comments covered a broad spectrum of important advice to singers.

Perhaps the guiding principles of his advice would best be summarized in his own words:

Vowels insufficiently differentiated, consonant finals omitted, and tonic accents misplaced produce a confusion that renders even the most straightforward writing inept as communication.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 29.

³⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

These observations comprise the crux of Thomson's concerns when it comes to singing in English.

Aside from the above guidelines, Thomson does not articulate a detailed procedure for success; rather, he seems to advocate an awareness of the flexible and the inflexible elements of text declamation in English. In fact, Thomson notes that "the combining of words with music is a technique no less frozen and no less free" than the laws that govern instrumental composition.⁴² Thomson further asserts that "prosodic declamation . . . is a constant in mature languages."⁴³ Thus, for examples Thomson suggests examining the four centuries of folk song and art song in the English language and noting the ways in which the piece either conforms or strays from its basic word-group divisions. When such care is taken, Thomson envisions a great hope for modern vocal works, such as opera, oratorio, and art song, in the English language.

⁴² Ibid., 14-15.

⁴³ Ibid., 14.

CHAPTER 2 VIRGIL THOMSON'S *FIVE SONGS FROM WILLIAM BLAKE*

Commissioned by the Louisville Philharmonic Society, Virgil Thomson composed the *Five Songs from William Blake* in 1951 for American baritone Mack Harrell (1906-1960.)¹ Thomson consciously attempted within these five pieces “to encompass . . . Blake’s broadly humane philosophy”² and thus selected from among Blake’s more innocent and sincere texts. Given his interest in Blake and his close association with eminent William Blake scholar S. Foster Damon, Thomson was, in all probability, able to choose his texts from a very informed perspective. In addition to this thematic thread, the five movements also present a noteworthy survey of Thomson’s musical style. The individual songs include the plain, hymn-like setting of “The Divine Image,” a stark, mysterious, and relentless rendering of “The Tyger,” the affectionate conversation between a father and child in “The Land of Dreams,” a folk-inspired dream of racial equality in “The Little Black Boy,” and the rousing and robust call for social reform in “And Did Those Feet.” Heightening this diversity of musical expression is Thomson’s aforementioned aptitude for English text declamation. By the end of the twenty-minute cycle, one has heard not only Blake’s expressive texts and Thomson’s musical depiction of those texts, but one has also experienced the English language in a powerful, yet sensitive setting.

Opinions of the *Five Songs from William Blake* have varied somewhat since their premiere. Initially, reactions to both the Louisville premiere and the New York premiere

¹ Although Thomson sketched the pieces initially for voice and piano, their premiere performance was for voice and orchestra; it was not until 1953 that the version for voice and piano was published.

² Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

were positive. For instance, in a review of the Louisville world premiere on February 6, 1952, Hans Kuppenheim spoke of Thomson's pieces "in welcome contrast" to some of the other, more complex, contemporary music on the program by composers such as Roy Harris and Edgar Varèse:

Thomson's musical language, although modern, is of appealing clarity and simplicity, never overshadows the beauty of the lyrics, but adds to the poet's words music of the same feeling.³

Kuppenheim also commented favorably on Mack Harrell's interpretation, complimenting his "warm baritone" voice and his "interpretation which projected the various moods in the most convincing and congenial manner." Moreover, in the postscript of a letter to S. Foster Damon, Virgil Thomson himself declared the triumph of the world premiere:

P.S. The Blake songs were a spectacular success in Louisville. Mack Harrell and I were recalled ten times and obliged to repeat the last one.⁴

Likewise, *New York Times* critic Olin Downes expressed his approval when the Philadelphia Orchestra performed the pieces, again with Mack Harrell, in a Carnegie Hall concert in October of 1952. Downes singled out the "skillfulness of the prosody" and assessed the music as "melodious" and "tuneful in surprisingly conventional ways."⁵ Also writing about the New York premiere, critic Jay S. Harrison called Thomson's pieces "music as simple as it is tender . . .," adding that "Serenity is the rule, understatement the technique."⁶

Despite these early warm receptions, in the 1960s and 1970s Thomson's music seemed to have less appeal as some deemed it too conservative and perhaps too simple to

³ Hans F. Kuppenheim, "Thomson's Five Songs Are Premiered In Louisville," *Musical Courier* 145 (March 15, 1952): 14.

⁴ Virgil Thomson to S. Foster Damon, 14 February 1952, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29/34/23.

⁵ Olin Downes, "Ormandy Troupe In Seasonal Bow," *New York Times*, 15 October 1952, 38.

⁶ Jay S. Harrison, quoted in John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965) 434.

be taken seriously. For example, in a 1961 concert review in *Musical America*, one critic objected vehemently to the label of “new music” for Thomson’s pieces:

Virgil Thomson’s *Five Songs from William Blake*, a harmless effort (not even an effort, maybe!), is a further instance of his facility with and accurateness in prosody, as well as of his efficiency in writing transparent accompaniments. But is this enough to make a composition worthwhile? As a critic, Mr. Thomson has on every occasion advocated the virtues of impersonality in musical creation. As a composer, he lives up to his word. These songs are as impersonal as, say, Christmas carols.⁷

Another critical assessment of the pieces in 1974 charged that “in most of these songs no attempt has been made to underline the spirit of the poems.”⁸

Fortunately, in the last twenty years the *Five Songs from William Blake* have regained some stature. Perhaps this resurgence is in part thanks to specific performers, such as American baritone William Sharp, who won the 1987 Carnegie Hall International American Music Competition for Vocalists with these pieces. Of Sharp’s performance and Thomson’s music, Bernard Holland wrote:

Mr. Sharp’s smooth baritone and nicely communicative personality were set off by a wise choice of repertory. Mr. Thomson’s music is simple, folksy and self-assured, and it mixed nicely with Blake’s irresistible poems . . .⁹

Perhaps, too, an ever-increasing tolerance of diversity in musical expression is also to thank for a renewed acceptance of Thomson’s Blake songs. Musicologist Wilfrid Mellers endorsed the pieces when he disclosed that if he were to select one work “to count as quintessential Virgil Thomson,” he would choose the Blake songs.¹⁰ Rodney Lister also singled out the *Five Songs from William Blake* as “among the most

⁷ Ilhan K. Mimaroglu, “Gamson Conducts New American Music,” *Musical America* 81 (December 1961): 59.

⁸ Halsey Stevens, “Virgil Thomson,” *Notes*, 2nd ser., 31, no. 1 (September, 1974): 162.

⁹ Bernard Holland, “Music: Baritone Wins at Carnegie,” *New York Times*, 29 September 1987, C18.

¹⁰ Wilfrid Mellers, “The Demotic Innocent,” *The Musical Times* 138, no. 1850 (April, 1997): 6.

beautiful”¹¹ of Thomson’s vocal works, and Glenn Watkins praised the “compelling and expressive language” of the pieces and Thomson’s “capacity for imagery and poignant sentiment.”¹² In the landmark biography of Virgil Thomson, Kathleen Hoover may have expressed it best when she argued, “Rarely in this century have instruments or vocal writing been turned to expressive channels that penetrate so deep.”¹³

Analysis

Having presented an overall introduction to the work, this document will now turn to an individual examination of each of the *Five Songs from William Blake*, arranged as a guide for performers. First, each song will have an informational table that provides relevant details about the piece, such as the source of the text, the meter of the poetic text and of the music, the form of the poetic text and of the music, and the vocal range and tessitura. Next will follow a prose account of the music, including details from Virgil Thomson’s personal notes on each piece. Then, it will be appropriate to consider specific musical and vocal issues that might arise when the songs are prepared for performance. Finally, each analysis will provide some suggested interpretive solutions to any concerns raised by the in-depth examination.¹⁴

¹¹ Lister, 19.

¹² Watkins, 453.

¹³ Kathleen Hoover and John Cage, *Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 109.

¹⁴ Of course, such a discussion will certainly warrant some musical analysis; however, it will by no means be extensive, as Rickert’s monograph already provides an admirable musical investigation.

Table 1 – “The Divine Image”

Source of Text	<i>Songs of Innocence and Experience</i> , no. 18
Meter of Poetic Text	Iambic
Meter of Music	4/4
Structure of Poetic Text	Five quatrains
Structure of Music (Form)	Vocal line is through-composed, while accompaniment displays an ABA' form
Vocal Range	A-flat 2 to E-flat 4
Tessitura	E-flat 3 to C4 (D4)

This first piece in the cycle, “The Divine Image,” clearly helps establish the overall thematic goal of conveying “Blake’s broadly humane philosophy.” With a text that repeatedly emphasizes the words “mercy,” “pity,” “peace,” and “love” and counts them both as qualities of the human form and of the divine form, these verses provide a poignant opening to the five pieces. In his private notes, Virgil Thomson explained it in this manner:

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 moslem. But admit that it is attractive.¹⁵

Perhaps it was this “attractive” vision of humanity that drew Thomson to this text in the first place.

Musically, this piece evokes a folk-like quality with gentle broken chords in the piano and a simple, direct vocal line that moves comfortably throughout the singer’s

¹⁵ Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

range. The middle section (mm. 29-36) recalls a solemn, hymn-like style, with the primary melody in the right-hand of the piano part. The final section returns to the key and harmonic patterns of the opening, yet the vocal line is different. Thus, what would seem to the ear to resemble an ABA form is really only the suggestion of an ABA form, since there is no return of specific thematic material in the vocal line. In his analysis, John Cage asserts that this through-composed format focuses the listener on “the meaning of the words rather than the structure of the poem.”¹⁶ Mellers further suggests that the music’s “apparent commonplaceness” does not at all detract from the noble ideals put forth in Blake’s text, but in fact, lends the poem a measure of credibility.¹⁷

Expressive markings in this piece are mainly limited to dynamic indications (several *crescendi* and *diminuendi*) and slight alterations of tempo, though the presentation of the text is rather straightforward and simple overall. The tempo at the beginning is marked with a metronome marking, rather than a tempo description, so Thomson does not indicate the mood other than through the music itself and the expressive markings mentioned above. Some vocal challenges might include staying sonorous in the lower register, most noticeably in the middle section, mm. 29-36, where the vocal line dips down to low A-flat.

¹⁶ Hoover and Cage, 226.

¹⁷ Mellers, “The Demotic Innocent,” 6.

Example 1 – “The Divine Image,” mm. 28-30¹⁸

The musical score for Example 1 shows three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with the lyrics "dress." followed by "Then ev - 'ry man of ev - 'ry clime," with a long slur over the latter part. The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, featuring dynamic markings such as *mp*, *poco rit.*, *mf*, *a tempo*, *p*, and *pp*. The bottom staff continues the piano accompaniment. Performance instructions include *armonioso* and *marcata la melodia*.

Also, the singer might find it challenging to impart specificity and clarity to the four qualities of mercy, pity, peace, and love while still retaining an overall legato delivery of the text. Thus, even though Thomson often sets off these four words with rests in between or with characteristic rhythms, the individuality of these words should not distract the listener from the flowing, lyrical quality of the music.

When considering the text-setting of “The Divine Image,” several interesting issues arise. First, if one were to compare Virgil Thomson’s two 1951 manuscript drafts of this piece for voice and piano, a peculiar fact would emerge: in the first setting, the word “human” in m. 22, m. 23, and m. 27 is presented in the same format--as two, equal quarter notes.¹⁹ Yet, apparently upon later revision in the same day, Thomson took occasion to vary the word “human” at each of these occurrences, to stress the word through varied rhythmic means as it appears in the copyrighted piano/vocal score.

¹⁸ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, piano/vocal score (New York: Southern Music Publishing Company, Inc., 1953), 5.

¹⁹ These manuscripts (MSS29/15/6) were also examined as part of The Virgil Thomson Papers at Yale University’s Irving S. Gilmore Music Library.

Example 2 – “The Divine Image,” mm. 22-28²⁰

hu-man heart, Pit-y, a hu - man face, And

Love, the hu-man form di - vine, And Peace, the hu-man

dress.

Could this be an attempt of Thomson to highlight his own thematic choice of texts, those that focus on the “humane” aspects of Blake’s works? Mellers counts the “subtle rhythmic modifications suggested by the words” as an important success of Thomson with this piece,²¹ and perhaps the case of Thomson’s care with the word “human” may supply us with an example of these slight “modifications.” The importance of these

²⁰ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 5.

²¹ Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 212.

rhythmic adjustments thus informs the singer to take great care with rhythmic accuracy, since Thomson has clearly done so in his composing.

Another point that raises some important questions concerns the word “And” in m. 36.

Example 3 – “The Divine Image,” mm. 34-39²²

Curiously, this word has no fermata in either Thomson’s first or second draft. Why then did Thomson add it? It does create an awkward interruption in the vocal line, though Thomson has indicated that the fermata should be “short” in the piano/vocal score. Does this fermata help usher in the return to the accompanimental figures and musical language of the beginning? If, as Cage suggested, the through-composed vocal line helps to bring out the text, then it follows that the singer must take care not to indulge in this fermata and thus disturb the natural flow of the poem. Indeed, throughout the whole

²² Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 6.

piece the singer would do well to follow the lead of the harmonic rhythm and the bass line, both of which frequently change on the half bar and mold the movement into an easy, flowing two, rather than a moderate four. This interpretation would highlight the through-composed structure of the piece, while still allowing for some slight *rubati* in the melodic variations and textual groups.

Table 2 – “Tiger! Tiger!”

Source of Text	<i>Songs of Innocence and Experience</i> , no. 42
Meter of Poetic Text	Trochaic
Meter of Music	4/4 (3/4 in mm. 31-32 and mm. 57-58)
Structure of Poetic Text	Six quatrains
Structure of Music (Form)	ABA'
Vocal Range	A2 - G4
Tessitura	E3 - E4

William Blake’s “The Tyger” is perhaps one of his most well-known poems. Posed as a series of seemingly unanswerable questions, the poem seeks to unravel the mystery of good and evil, to explain the origin of each. Virgil Thomson noted:

“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?”²³

Though the problem of evil in the world is often cited as the essence of the poem, it is worth noting that Blake’s illuminated versions of this poem did not always portray the tiger identically. In fact, Keynes reveals that in some versions the tiger is depicted

²³ Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

ferociously in “lurid colours” and in others the animal seems as “tame” as a kitten.²⁴

Keynes further suggests that Blake may not have wanted to solve the enigma of the poem “by painting an animal of consistent or obvious character.”²⁵ Incidentally, some wonder if “The Tyger” held special meaning for Thomson, as he composed another solo setting for soprano and later adapted the version in *Five Songs from William Blake* for chorus (SATB and TTBB.)²⁶

Despite the ambiguous nature of Blake’s renderings of the tiger, Thomson’s musical setting clearly advocates the animal as a creature of evil, as something to be feared first, and only cursorily admired afterward. Thomson creates this atmosphere through the relentless, hammer-like rhythm in the accompaniment and by stark leaps and angular rhythms in the vocal line. Mellers actually refers to the “sinister . . . march beat” of this piece.²⁷ The formal design of the piece is the standard ABA form, in which Cage claims the text is merely at the service of a “conventionalized” musical map.²⁸

The expressive indications in the piano part, such as *marcato senza pedale* at the beginning (that creates a hammer-like rhythmic ostinato) and the regular accents from m. 23 to the end, very much help to establish the foreboding atmosphere for this piece. In the vocal line, one will find specific dynamic indications that lend shape to the phrases and help the singer to pace the delivery of the text. Furthermore, in m. 56-59 Thomson uses the only accent marks in the vocal line, likely as a way to emphasize the pinnacle of the poem: “What immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” Some

²⁴ Geoffrey Keynes, commentary to plate no. 42 in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Virgil Thomson Foundation, “Songs,” <www.virgilthomson.org>.

²⁷ Mellers, “The Demotic Innocent,” 6.

²⁸ Hoover and Cage, 227.

potential vocal difficulties in this work might include negotiating the wide range, creating sufficient contrast between the marcato sections and the legato sections without endangering vocal quality, and observing the subtle rhythmic variations in mm. 14-26.

In addition to these vocal considerations, “Tiger! Tiger!” also elicits one potentially troublesome stylistic observation. Though his prosody is often cited as a model example in the English language, sometimes Thomson’s treatment of the questions in the poem might not follow a true speech pattern. For instance, Thomson actually sets the question that comprises the end of the first quatrain (“What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?”) not with a rising, inquisitive inflection as in speech. Rather, the phrase ascends to the word “eye,” and then descends strongly down a diatonic scale to the end of the question.

Example 4 – “Tiger! Tiger!” mm. 7-12²⁹

The musical score for Example 4, "Tiger! Tiger!" measures 7-12, is presented in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and D5. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand. The lyrics are: "In the for-ests of the night, What_ im-mort-al hand or".

²⁹ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 7.

Example 4 (cont.) – “Tiger! Tiger!” mm. 7-12³⁰

eye — Could frame thy_ fear - ful symmet-ry?

Does this setting convey accurately the sense of the poem, or does it work against the text? Other examples of a descending pattern where the poem asks a question may be found in mm. 44-45, mm. 46-49, and in the last phrase of the piece, mm. 55-59. To his credit, Thomson does, in fact, set some of the questions of the poem to a rising vocal line (see especially mm. 17-36.) However, the decisive questions of Blake’s poem appear with a predominately descending vocal line, perhaps ignoring or perhaps commenting on the text.³¹ Is Thomson taking a more declamatory view as a way to signal his own interpretation of the poem? Whereas William Blake’s various illustrations of the poem left room for debate on the tiger’s ultimate nature, Thomson’s setting seems to argue strongly through the vocal line and the musical atmosphere that the tiger is an object to be feared more than admired. In light of this connotation, the performer should most likely conform to the same interpretation.

³⁰ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 8.

³¹ For a contrasting setting of “The Tyger,” examine Benjamin Britten’s setting in *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*. There, the overriding contour of the vocal line is ascending, lending the piece an extra air of mystery and curiosity.

Table 3 – “The Land of Dreams”

Source of Text	<i>Songs & Ballads</i> (contained in <i>Poetical Sketches</i>)
Meter of Poetic Text	Iambic (but with some dactylic lines)
Meter of Music	3/4 & 4/4, varying irregularly
Structure of Poetic Text	Five quatrains
Structure of Music (Form)	Through-composed
Vocal Range	C3 - F#4
Tessitura	E-flat 3 - E4

“The Land of Dreams” is the first of two dialogue pieces contained in the *Five Songs from William Blake*. In this poem Blake transcribes a father and son’s discussion of reality and imagination, and Thomson’s music delights in depicting this fanciful exchange. Thomson’s own understanding of the poem no doubt informed his musical choices:

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.³²

In order to create this dual world of father’s reality versus son’s imagination, Thomson uses a harmonic language that is widely varying, at times even bitonal. Cage describes this approach as “suitably complex and bewildering,” and asserts that Thomson’s music in “The Land of Dreams” is clearly “at the service of the poetry.”³³

³² Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

³³ Hoover and Cage, 226.

Musically, the different settings of the two character's voices are significant. While the father's vocal line is usually accompanied with a clear triplet motive and strong chords, the son's line languidly flows amid a flurry of rolled and cross-relational triads. The through-composed nature of the movement implies an almost recitative-style (or *arioso*) text delivery. Thomson highlights the flexibility of this declamation through many expressive tempo indications, dynamic markings, and text articulations. Indeed, one potential vocal challenge for the performer would be the wide range of dynamic expression indicated in the score. Also of particular difficulty are the constantly shifting meter and the highly ambiguous harmonic language. Although the vocal writing in this movement is quite gracious overall, the last phrase, where the singer must ascend to a high F# and decrescendo the note over several measures, is nonetheless quite demanding. Because of these challenges, Rickert suggests that "The Land of Dreams" is perhaps the most difficult piece in the cycle.³⁴

Despite these inherent complications for the singer, the text setting in "The Land of Dreams" might be described as some of Thomson's best prosody of the cycle. Whereas Blake's poem is nearly impossible to read convincingly in either strict iambic or strict dactylic meter, Thomson's approach embodies a textual fluidity with which he shifts in and out of duple and triple subdivisions to accommodate the rhythm of the poem. For instance, Thomson places the word "Why" in m. 6 on a downbeat and groups it together with the next two words to form an eighth-note triplet unit.

³⁴ Rickert, 259.

Example 5 – “The Land of Dreams,” mm. 5-7³⁵

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 5 and 6. The vocal line begins with a fermata over the word 'joy;'. The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand and a triplet of eighth notes in the left hand. The second system shows measures 7 and 8. The vocal line continues with the lyrics 'Why dost thou weep in thy gen-tle sleep?'. The piano accompaniment continues with similar triplet patterns.

In the iambic meter of the poem, the true stress of the line would fall on the word “dost,” since the initial “Why” of the line is like an anacrusis to the next word. Cleverly, this shift of “Why” from an upbeat to a downbeat also aids the trouble with the words that follow. Read strictly in iambic meter, the entire line would sound like this: “Why DOST thou WEEP in THY gen-TLE sleep?” Read solely in dactylic meter, the line would almost work (but not quite): “WHY dost thou WEEP in thy GEN-tle sleep?” An important stress on the word “sleep” is noticeably absent in this otherwise acceptable reading. Yet, with a shift of the first word into a triplet-group with the two words that follow and by placing clear metric and vocal stress on the first syllable of “gentle,” Thomson rendered his musical scansion of the line as a mix of the two meters: “WHY

³⁵ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 12-13.

dost thou WEEP in thy GEN-tle SLEEP?” Thomson uses a similar approach throughout the movement to help other phrases that blur the lines between iambic and dactylic meter.³⁶ Here, it is clear that Thomson’s “word-groups,” not the meter of the original poem, dictate the flow of the music.

Table 4 – “The Little Black Boy”

Source of Text	<i>Songs of Innocence and Experience</i> (no. 9-10)
Meter of Poetic Text	Iambic
Meter of Music	4/4 (with some 3/2, 2/2, and 3/4)
Structure of Poetic Text	Seven quatrains
Structure of Music (Form)	ABA’
Vocal Range	A-flat 2 - F4
Tessitura	C3 - E-flat 4

“The Little Black Boy” represents the second dialogue piece in this cycle, although this time the poem gives voice to a mother and her son, the little black boy. As the boy sits with his mother at sunrise, he learns from her that even though he is black, he will still be welcomed “round the tent of God” as an equal to the white, English child. In his notes, Thomson clearly acknowledged this vision of racial equality:

“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.”³⁷

Yet, Thomson ultimately denounces Blake’s vision as too utopian:

³⁶ See for example mm. 18-22 or mm. 26-29.

³⁷ Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

A charming thought but naïve as sociology, since it fails to admit the evil in mankind, and because too, like the child in “The Land of Dreams,” it chooses a euphoria over reality.³⁸

Keynes suggests that this poem may have been Blake’s response to “contemporary indignation against slavery and the supposed inferiority of black races.”³⁹

Unfortunately, when CRI reissued the recording of the Blake songs with Mack Harrell and the Philadelphia Orchestra in 1979, there were some who believed this poem to be racist.⁴⁰ In response, Thomson sent a letter to several of his musical colleagues and sought their input:

Once or twice there have been objections on the part of the black community to this being performed. I would love to know your view of the matter.⁴¹

Certainly it would have been interesting to have read the responses of Thomson’s trusted advisors. Nevertheless, against the composer’s wishes, “The Little Black Boy” was not released on the reissued recording in question.⁴²

Musically, the opening of this piece evokes an early American folk tune or parlor song, and this is the atmosphere in which the little black boy begins his dialogue. In fact, Cage suggests that “the footsteps followed are those of Stephen Foster.”⁴³ The piano accompaniment in this opening section centers around steady, rocking arpeggios in the right hand over the left hand’s clearly marked bass notes. Rickert interestingly notes that this is the accompanimental approach heard also in the first piece of the *Five Songs*,

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Keynes, commentary to plates no. 9-10.

⁴⁰ Lister, 19-20.

⁴¹ Virgil Thomson, *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, 368.

⁴² Some have incorrectly stated that Thomson approved of this omission. Lister emphatically denies this claim. (See Lister, 20.)

⁴³ Hoover and Cage, 226.

where the text spoke of the God-like qualities of mercy, pity, peace, and love.⁴⁴ It is seemingly no accident that Thomson chose the same gentle accompaniment figures to open this number as well, since it evokes a similar emotional response in its call for human reconciliation. When the boy finishes his initial speech in m. 17, the music turns to the words of the mother: “Look on the rising sun, there God does live” Here, the style shifts to a more dramatic one, with block chords punctuating strong rhythmic beats and reinforcing the mother’s fervent speech. As her monologue arrives at its apex (“And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice,” mm. 41-43,) the music builds intensity as the gentle arpeggios that began the piece have now accelerated to more rhapsodic flourishes and the tempo has surged ahead accordingly.

Example 6 – “The Little Black Boy,” mm. 40-45⁴⁵

The musical score for Example 6, "The Little Black Boy," measures 40-45. It is written for voice and piano. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice." The piano accompaniment features arpeggiated chords. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *dim.*, and performance instructions like *cresc. sempre* and *dim.*. The score is presented in two systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

⁴⁴ Rickert, 262.

⁴⁵ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 22.

From here, the music relaxes to its initial tempo and returns to the same style as at the beginning, only now with a slightly more varied and contrapuntal accompaniment.

To set this dialogue between mother and son, Thomson uses extensive dynamic markings, frequent text articulations, and many subtle tempo fluctuations, in much the same way he did in “The Land of Dreams.” In fact, a potential difficulty for the performer might be fitting together the complex rhythms and speech-like inflections in a way that sounds natural rather than studied or calculated, particularly since the piano line remains more straightforward despite these nuances in the vocal line. Furthermore, though the piece pays homage to a folk-like style, it is important that the performer not over-emphasize this influence and thus render the music as merely a trite parody. Rather, the performer must capitalize on the folk-like style and use its simplicity as a means to convey the sincerity and validity of the boy’s revelation. Though some have accused the piece of being “simple to the point of audacity,”⁴⁶ when dealing with the complex issues of racial equality, simplicity might well be the most capable advocate.

⁴⁶ W.D. Shirley, “10. North America,” In *Music in the Modern Age*, ed. F. W. Sternfeld (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1973), 378.

Table 5 – “And Did Those Feet”

Source of Text	Introduction to <i>Milton</i>
Meter of Poetic Text	Iambic
Meter of Music	3/4; 6/8, 9/8, 12/8, varying
Structure of Poetic Text	Four quatrains
Structure of Music (Form)	ABA'
Vocal Range	A2 - G4
Tessitura	C#3 - E4

The final selection in Thomson’s *Five Songs from William Blake*, “And Did Those Feet,” offers the bold vision of a new “Jerusalem,” and the movement serves well as the rousing culmination of Thomson’s brief tour through Blake’s “humane” philosophy. Though written from the point of view of one who prophesies the new Jerusalem built on the English isle, the larger implications of the poem decry the need for widespread social revolution and restoration. S. Foster Damon wrote that in Blake’s *Milton* “Jerusalem is Liberty,” and the day is approaching when “Jerusalem shall return and overspread all the nations.”⁴⁷ Thomson himself described this liberation as follows:

This 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,” he calls them and to build a new Jerusalem “in England’s green and pleasant land.”⁴⁸

Although the text is taken from Blake’s introduction to *Milton*, it is perhaps most well known today because of a boldly patriotic setting for orchestra, chorus, and organ by

⁴⁷ S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1965), 207.

⁴⁸ Virgil Thomson, Notes prepared for a pre-concert lecture, The Virgil Thomson Papers, MSS 29A/86/304.

English composer Sir Hubert Parry. Though Thomson's setting does not achieve the same level of tonal bombast, it nonetheless does justice to Blake's text. Ultimately, as he did with "The Land of Dreams" and "The Little Black Boy," Thomson voiced his skepticism of the vision in the poem:

One hundred and fifty 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.⁴⁹

Fortunately, regardless of his personal beliefs, Thomson's musical setting of this text can certainly be convincing. The movement begins with the longest accompanimental introduction among the five pieces, thirteen measures that consist of right-hand pentatonic melodies and left-hand drones clearly evocative of Scottish bagpipes. When the voice enters in m. 14, the accompaniment shifts to strong block chords underneath the right hand's continuing pentatonic patterns. The vocal line itself lays down broad triadic phrases on top of these accompanimental patterns in a way that slightly blurs the rhythmic framework, yet that still enlivens the first two quatrains of Blake's text. After the voice has asked, "And was Jerusalem builded here among these dark Satanic mills?" the accompaniment surges ahead into a thirteen measure interlude (mm. 35-47) closely related to the melodies and motives of the introduction. Next, the voice enters again in m. 48, and as the texture of the accompaniment scales back, the singer asks for the weapons that will help to restore Jerusalem--his "bow of burning gold," his "arrows of desire," his "spear," and his "chariot of fire." This impassioned call to arms sees the vocal line rise to its zenith (mm. 52-55.)

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Example 7 – “And Did Those Feet,” mm. 52-55⁵⁰

Bring me my spear! O clouds, un-fold!

Bring me my chariot of fire!

Subsequently, this vocal climax propels the accompaniment into a return to the music of the initial vocal entrance, in which the singer delivers the final stanza of the poem.

Ironically, though one might describe this piece as some of Thomson’s most vigorous and declamatory vocal writing in the cycle, there are no accents marks or textual articulations in the score. Thomson’s indications are reserved for the dynamic shapes only. Thus, one potential vocal difficulty might be maintaining the rhythmic vitality of the movement while still sustaining good legato phrases and following Thomson’s large-scale dynamic shapes. Also somewhat of a challenge could be the large vocal range of

⁵⁰ Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 29-30.

this movement, which demands full command of the baritone's compass, from low A to high G, and full volume at both ends of the staff. Coupled with this extensive range are the many broad leaps in the vocal line; in fact, there are only two conjunct passages in the entire piece—m. 18 and m. 31. The remainder of the vocal melody is composed of broken chords, with frequent melodic skips of a third, fourth, fifth and sixth. In addition to these observations, Cage points out another intricate musical feature that could pose some difficulty in performance--the “cross-metrical relation of melody to accompaniment.”⁵¹ For example, at the first vocal entrance, the accompaniment is clearly operating in a compound meter (9/8), while the voice line must retain a duple division of the beat in a simple meter (3/4).

⁵¹ Hoover and Cage, 226.

Example 8 – “And Did Those Feet,” mm. 14-18⁵²

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 14-18. The vocal line is in G major and 6/8 time, with lyrics: "And did those feet in an - cient". The piano accompaniment features a strong, rhythmic bass line with chords. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "times walk - up-on Eng-land's moun - - tains green?". The piano accompaniment continues with a similar rhythmic pattern. Dynamics markings include *mp* and *p* in the first system, and *simile* in the second system.

Perhaps one way for the singer to elude this rhythmic conflict would be to focus not on the right-hand melody in compound meter, but rather on the strong pulses of the left-hand chords.

Though the many leaps in the vocal line and the declamatory writing for the voice might well be challenging for the performer, these very same characteristics imbue the narrator's lines with a level of enthusiasm and fervor appropriate to the spirit of the poem. Here Thomson appeals to the listener through all the means at his disposal: a rousing accompaniment, a declamatory and bold vocal line, energetic rhythms, and

⁵² Virgil Thomson, *Five Songs from William Blake*, 25.

exhilarating musical climaxes. Yet, once the singer has communicated his ardent dedication to building a new Jerusalem and once the grand musical flourishes are over, the movement disappears in an ethereal “pentatonic arabesque.”⁵³ Mellers accounts for this unassuming dénouement as part of Thomson’s bow to Blake’s philosophy, namely that “the child mind may perceive the New Jerusalem.”⁵⁴ Thus, regardless of whether or not Thomson himself subscribed to the proposed vision in “And Did Those Feet,” his music remains a bold testament to Blake’s philosophy all the same.

⁵³ Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land*, 213.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

In a 1949 article on Virgil Thomson in *The Musical Quarterly*, one author offers the following critical assessment:

His music is the subject of continual controversy not because of its idiom, which is simple, direct, and free of innovation, but because of its content; for idiom and terminology can be analyzed, assessed, traced to its component sources and comfortably pigeonholed, but one who plays games with content, who handles moods, genres, whole forms with the objectivity that makes of them stylizations, is a musical paradox, and his freedom from the restrictions of a specific “personalized” idiom in an age of stylists delights some while it enrages others.¹

Though written over fifty years ago, this description of Virgil Thomson and his approach to composition still remains valid. Many questions about Thomson and his place in the American musical landscape still remain unanswered: How will musicians ultimately deal with Virgil Thomson? Will they ignore him? Dismiss him as an insignificant composer, though his work as a music critic deserves attention? Will they count him as “American” as Aaron Copland, for instance, or Samuel Barber? Will they perform his music? If so, which pieces and why? Certainly the *Five Songs from William Blake* should figure right into the heart of this discussion, as the pieces raise many important questions of their own. Even though intentionally varied and intriguing, can one really say that the pieces have an underlying sense of stylistic or musical unity? Do they truly do justice to Blake’s poetry, or are they merely one man’s idiosyncratic setting? Are the five Blake songs, as Mellers has suggested, in fact “quintessential” Virgil Thomson?

Unfortunately, the scope of these questions surpasses the limits of musical scholarship and dashes headlong into the realm of musical speculation. Despite these limitations, this document has undertaken a serious examination of Virgil Thomson’s

¹ P. Glanville-Hicks, “Virgil Thomson,” *The Musical Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (April, 1949): 209.

Five Songs from William Blake. Thanks to firsthand information available about Thomson's theories for setting an English text to music and about his reactions to the Blake poems in the cycle, one may still formulate some overall observations about Thomson's compositional style and his writing for the voice within these pieces.

Of Thomson's vocal writing in the *Five Songs for William Blake*, one might note that all songs display care in setting the important phrases in a favorable vocal range (the upper-middle register, as Thomson explained.) Furthermore, each movement certainly demands an overall, Italianate legato vocalism, which Thomson believes is achieved through a clarity of English vowels. Since Thomson clearly disliked the arbitrary use of *crescendi* or *diminuendi*, his dynamic markings in his musical scores were quite specific. Additionally, these intricate markings should help to prevent the singer's cardinal sin: a misplaced tonic accent, according to Thomson.

Compositionally, one must first consider the quality of Thomson's prosody, which, as previously noted, is frequently cited as a model for the English language. Throughout the cycle, Thomson is always careful not to obscure his text by means of an overly dense accompaniment; sometimes, the result is quite the contrary, where it seems as if the vocal line is joined only by the mere outline of an accompaniment, as in "The Divine Image" and "The Little Black Boy." The simplicity of these movements might well be what renders their subject matter sincere. One might surmise that Thomson's use of "word-groups" are what helped to guide the subtle rhythmic inflections that he frequently weaves into his vocal lines, as found in "The Land of Dreams." Another way of specifying the "word groups" of a piece may be found in Thomson's detailed dynamic markings in each piece. Finally, Thomson's overall musical response to the texts are

somewhat varied. In pieces such as “The Divine Image,” “The Land of Dreams,” and “The Little Black Boy,” the music seems to take its structure and its impetus directly from the essence of the poem: the form, the musical atmosphere, and the quality of the vocal writing all emanate from ideas communicated by the text. However, in the other two pieces, “Tiger! Tiger!” and “And Did Those Feet,” the poems seem subservient to a calculated musical structure. Perhaps, because the text of these two pieces might be better known than the others, Thomson may have felt justified in superimposing a traditional musical form on these Blake texts.

With a brief look at Virgil Thomson’s career, his interest in William Blake, and his theories about composing for the voice, and through an in-depth examination of Thomson’s *Five Songs for William Blake*, this document has attempted to remedy several important omissions of previous scholarship. Presented as a guide for performers, hopefully this paper will prove useful to those who would like to perform or to study this cycle in the future. Certainly the meeting of such great minds, like those of William Blake and Virgil Thomson, will always merit future presentations and further research.

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APPENDIX A
COMPLETE TEXTS OF THE *FIVE SONGS FROM WILLIAM BLAKE*

The Divine Image

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 every man of every 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.
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell,
There God is dwelling too.

The Tyger

Tyger, Tyger, 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, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & 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 heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

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

The Land Of Dreams

Awake, awake my little Boy!
Thou wast thy Mothers 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 & what are its Streams?
O Father, I saw my Mother there
Among the Lillies by waters fair

Among the Lambs clothed in white
She walkd 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 wanderd all Night in the Land of Dreams
But tho calm & warm the Waters wide
I could not get to the other side

Father O Father what do we here
In this Land of unbelief & fear
The Land of Dreams is better far
Above the light of the Morning Star

The Little Black Boy

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 kissed 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 & trees & beasts & men receive
Comfort in morning joy in the noon day.

And we are put on earth a little space,
That we may learn to bear the beams of love,
And these black bodies & this sun-burnt 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 & care,
And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice.

Thus did my mother say and kissed me,
And thus I say to little English boy;
When I from black & 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 fathers knee.
And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,
And be like him and he will then love me.

And Did Those Feet

And did those feet in ancient times
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 these 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.

APPENDIX B
SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Performers:** Mack Harrell, baritone; The Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Virgil Thomson
Label: Bay Cities, BCD-1006 (re-issue of CRI's SRD 398)
CD Title: *Virgil Thomson, Ernest Bloch*
Track Nos.: 7-10
Year: Issued: 1989; Recorded: 1952
Note: Because of concerns about racism, "The Little Black Boy" was not released on the CRI re-issue and is, thus, omitted from the Bay Cities release as well.
- Performers:** Philip Frohnmayer, baritone; H. Jack McCracken, piano
Label: Centaur #2180
CD Title: *Virgil Thomson, Plainchant*
Track Nos.: 2-6
Year: Issued: 1995; Recorded: 1995
- Performers:** William Sharp, baritone; Phillip Bush, piano
Label: Albany Records, TROY 272
CD Title: *Nothing Divine is Mundane: Songs of Virgil Thomson*
Track Nos.: 8-12
Year: Issued: 1997; Recorded: 1996

VITA

Andrew D. Whitfield, baritone, is originally from Shelbyville, Indiana. A graduate of Butler University and Wichita State University, Andrew has appeared with Des Moines Metro Opera, Opera Southwest, and Pensacola Opera. He has also been a resident artist with Portland Opera Works and participated in educational outreach programs for Opera Birmingham and Opera Kansas. While in residence at Louisiana State University, Andrew was featured in productions of *The Magic Flute*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Le Nozze di Figaro*. A member of the voice faculty of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, since the fall of 2003, Andrew will receive the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in August of 2004.