

Symphonic sequence after William Blake – for Symphonic Winds

The invitation to supply a commissioned work to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the College Band Directors' National Association (meeting in Kansas City, February 1991) arrived hot on the heels of another substantial commission to do expressly with the City of London. This score, needing to be delivered the sooner of the two, delayed an actual start on what was to become *Flowers of London Town*, but it also caused the two works to spring from a common seedbed. During the formative days I indulged in a favourite pursuit – prowling around the City of London giving rein to my imagination while the basic ideas for each began to take shape.

An early instinct had led me toward the seventh of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* – *Holy Thursday* – as an inspiring source on which to build. But it was only gradually that I saw how to resolve what had at first seemed a fundamental difficulty: where was the opportunity for any faster music? Blake's 12-line verse is divided into three quatrains, each with its own distinct image: the procession into the cathedral; the wait for the ceremony to begin; the unison hymn with climax in the poet's overwhelming plea for pity.

'Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,
The children walking two and two, in red and blue and green;
Grey-headed beadles walked before, with wands as white as snow,
Till into the high dome of Paul's they like Thames' water flow.

O what a multitude they seemed, these flowers of London Town!
Seated in companies, they sit with radiance all their own.
The hum of multitudes was there, but multitudes of lambs,
Thousands of little boys and girls raising their innocent hands.

Now like a mighty wind they raise to heaven the voice of song,
Or like harmonious thunderings the seats of heaven among.
Beneath them sit the aged men, wise guardians of the poor;
Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.

William Blake

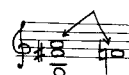
('Holy Thursday' from *Songs of Innocence*)

I recall my excitement on realising that the central tableau – while the children wait, whisper and fidget – could be expressed as a scherzo. Forward motion would be shackled by the presence of a persistent note (F), out of key with the surrounding activity. Occasionally this F sounds alone. It's frequently met as a dry muttering on xylophone and marimba in duet, but more often it's embedded deep in the texture. The score is peppered with the instruction *Sempre piano*. Multitudes may be present, but the resulting sound is only a hum. The flickering activity, the constant quiet and the essentially static nature of the music combine to match my perception of Blake's poetic image. I visualise those familiar overlong waits when we

all (not only the children!) wonder why it's all so long delayed. In those situations too, the waiting tends to end abruptly. Hence, in my metamorphosis, that long pent-up F at last breaks out and the strain of maintaining the constant *piano* is simultaneously released. The fidgets and chatterings rise quickly like 'a mighty wind' and the 'voice of song' is launched.

The music is divided into three stanzas corresponding to those of the poem, with the third obviously a direct continuation from the second. The link from first stanza to second is looser, but still a link, and I have purposely built into it a device to weld the two together. Stanza I ends on a hovering widespread harmony, whose essence is one of the two poles in the tonal disunity which generates the scherzo's energy. Opposing it is the single note F. (Ex. 1):

Ex. 1



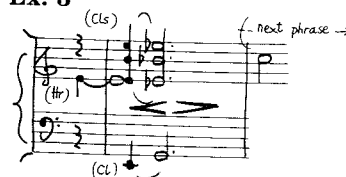
More than ten years earlier I'd written a work for winds which derived not only its expression and pictorialism but also its design from a poem by Tennyson (*The Eagle*; 1977). Part of my stimulus in *Flowers of London Town* was the chance to work once more from such a standpoint. Five of Tennyson's six lines have to do with stillness in anticipation of sudden terrifying activity in the sixth. Each brief line has a strong single image. The invitation to a straightforward variation scheme seemed clear. Blake's verse, in some contrast, ceases to respond to a line-by-line variation treatment after stanza I. Moreover, stanza III must be a culmination through organic growth, which anything resembling a standard variation coda could hardly hope to achieve. Hence the hybrid design which eventually emerged, based in a well defined variation scheme to begin with, but evolving by the time of stanza II into a dissemination all through the fabric of certain generative cells. The most pervasive of these is heard alone and unadorned from a solo saxophone at the start of the music. (Ex. 2):

Ex. 2



From it arises a pre-ludial impression of Holy Thursday and the 'innocent faces', though there is a hint of menace (as yet unexplained) when the clarinets sound (Ex. 3) in only the sixth bar.

Ex. 3



This might seem quite unrelated, except that it follows a complete sounding of the whole simple cell, and is immediately followed by a phrase starting on C. 'The children walking two and two' is treated, appropriately, in a pair of variations, both gently playful (Ex. 4), and the second of the pair (Ex. 5) an innocent *alla marcia*. The derivation of these two from Ex. 2

ANALYSIS

demonstrates the process by which melodic hybrids grow away from the simple rootstock.

Ex. 4 

Ex. 5 

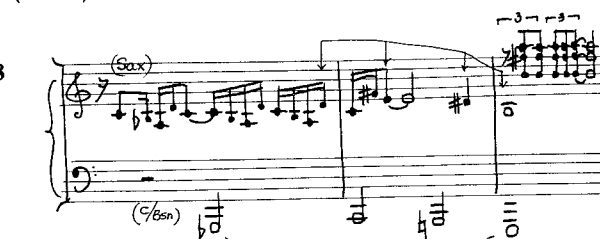
The three colours - red, blue and green (at the end of Blake's second line) - stand out in the work because they alone are *not* derived. The blue and green attract little notice, appearing once only. But not so the red Ex. 6, destined for an unsuspected significance toward the end of stanza III (Ex. 6):

Ex. 6 

The appearance of the 'grey-headed beadles' however reveals the primary kinship once more. (Ex. 7):

Ex. 7 

The 'Thames' waters flow from a clear source in the children's music of Ex. 4 - a second generation hybrid so to speak, but the original cell is in no doubt as the first stanza closes (Ex. 8):

Ex. 8 

And as for that seventh chord of Ex. 1, it has floated up from the bass of Ex. 6, and now stands poised on high ready for its important role opposing the single note F in stanza II.

The story of stanza II has already been told, but how about 'the voice of song' whose arrival must specially satisfy after such a wait? A sudden fresh tonality, touched nowhere else in the music (A flat major, or something like it) adds to a first impression of total newness. The bracketed spot in Ex. 9 might be mere coincidence, except that a trumpet tailpiece to the refrain patently denies it.

Ex. 9 

The 'voice of song' is momentarily overwhelmed by 'harmonious thunderings', the only really loud bars in the entire piece. But the hymn no sooner returns than it's confronted by a menacing feature not met since the very opening (Ex. 3), which now increasingly asserts itself. My purpose was to evoke the consequence if pity is not cherished.

I have identified 'the aged men' of Blake's 11th line with the greyheads of his third - providing the only exact, but welcome, recapitulation in the work. Influenced by this, I then allowed Ex. 6 to return for a more glowing and extended treatment, giving it the responsibility of bringing the angel to the door. It is the vivid threat of the angel's expulsion which rules out any possibility of regarding Blake's verse as sentimentality, and musically, I saw it as ruling out any possibility of a comfortable ending with the hymn triumphant. I sense a residual anxiety which outlives any easy optimism. A long and patient D major chord settles, little heard, in the centre of the music, but only shines out unclouded in the final bar.

I've gone to some length showing how one small cell lies at the root of my score. But I hope the quoted examples may also suggest how much my impulse and my methods are all to do with line and melody. I am generally resistant to density of texture in wind band scoring; it quickly tends to monochrome, and is antipathetic to sharpness of outline and melody. *Flowers of London Town* is typical of me in allowing the players few hiding places. If the Kansas University players complained on this account, they were too tactful to say it to me. It was the depth of meaning I saw as my great challenge; in fact it's hardly an exaggeration to say it haunted me. I'm still uncertain whether I managed to meet the challenge to anywhere near a sufficient degree. Concentration of that sort breeds its own reaction, for my 'Flowers' were no sooner complete than I felt an overpowering need to try my hand at yet another wind band work with a totally opposite artistic aim, and I've given that successor the most extrovert title I could think of: *Bandwagon*.

Stephen Dodgson is a versatile composer whose works cover almost every genre from symphony and opera to miniatures for flute and clavichord. For many years he taught theory and composition at the Royal College of Music, where he was himself a student. He has a worldwide reputation as composer for the guitar - an instrument he does not play. As broadcaster, he is well known for

his reviews and other spoken comment on music. Over many years he enjoyed a close association with the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, providing a number of original works and arrangements for them. With his 1974 Wind Symphony he extended his activity into the wind band repertory, and has completed eight other works subsequently more or less within its confines. One of the more marginal and fantastic

was Arlington Concertante (1987), commissioned by the University of Texas at Arlington for its resident harpsichordist, Linton Powell. It was performances of this work in USA which led directly to the invitation to compose *Flowers of London Town*. Increased activity in the medium generally brought Dodgson into close contact with the National Youth Wind Orchestra, of which he is currently the chairman.



A decorative drawing by William Blake himself. The figures at the head of this article are of a charity school boy and girl at the Bishopsgate Ward charity school, London.

Historical Note

What was 'Holy Thursday' and what actually did Blake observe in this procession of children into St Paul's Cathedral, London, to move a vision of flowers and of angels? To assist in our understanding both of the event and of the music, Stephen Dodgson had researched into the background.

On its foundation in 1698, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) declared that one of its prime objectives was 'to promote and encourage the erection of charity schools in all parts of England and Wales'. Nowhere was there a more immediate,

zealous or lasting response than in London. Within five years of this declaration there were already 54 charity schools in London and Westminster with over 2,000 children. Momentum was maintained throughout the 18th century, so that by the time William Blake witnessed an *Anniversary Meeting of the Charity Children* (probably in 1784), it had become a great London event, focussed on a procession of '... children well-matched, marching two and two, in good order, all whole and tight in the same clothes'. In Blake's own illuminated engraving of *The Songs of Innocence* (1787), a file of the boys follows a beadle carrying a wand above the verse and a file of the girls follows a dignified matron in the opposite direction below the verse. Each school had a distinguishing colour for its uniform, a fact noted by Blake both as artist and poet.

Originally, each City parish organised an Anniversary Meeting for its own Charity Children. The one held at St Andrew's, Holborn, had been specially notable. A move to combine them was long in prospect, but had to wait till the new St Paul's Cathedral was ready to receive such a throng in 1782. This allowed approximately 6,000 children to take part. Inside the cathedral, lofty platforms were erected to accommodate this large number - which incidentally explains Blake's reference to the aged men sitting *beneath* them. An eminent divine was engaged to preach upon charitable education, specially in its pious dimension, and these sermons were invariably published for an avid readership. Public entry was by an ornate printed ticket and the service sheet too was published as a broadsheet. It was a tradition to begin the service with massed singing of the *Old Hundredth*, and many a hearer, in addition to Blake, testified to the overwhelming impact this had upon them. The Anniversary Meeting constituted a major and highly effective stimulus to charitable giving.

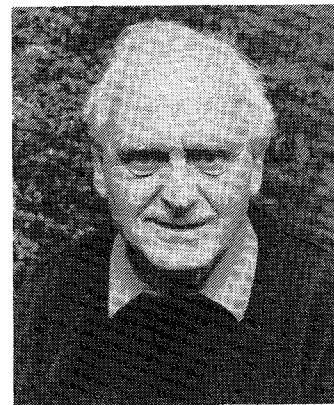
It was only with the approach of modern times and the coming of national education that the momentum declined. In the 18th century, the annual event became so much a

token of civic pride that an extra procession by the Charity Children for a service in St Paul's was sometimes called to mark some national event such as to celebrate the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 or to offer thanks for the recovery of George III from illness in 1787.

Properly speaking, *Holy Thursday* is Ascension Day. The Anniversary Meetings always took place on a Thursday and, while avoiding Ascension Day itself, borrowed the tradition of the Ascension Day procession of the early Christian communities (symbolizing Christ's journey to the Mount of Olives), and took place (in Blake's time) on another Thursday close by in the calendar, usually at the beginning of June.

To what extent 'Holy Thursday' was a generally used term for the Anniversary Meetings, or private to Blake because of its special significance to him, I have not been able to establish. **SD**

Flowers of London Town is published by **Novello** to whom we are indebted for permission to reproduce extracts from the published score.



Stephen Dodgson

International Diary

June 21-27 1992 **Sigurd M Raschèr Saxophone Study Week**, New Haven, Connecticut, USA. Yale University Conference Services, 246 Church St Suite 101, New Haven, CT 06510 Tel. (203) 432-0465 Fax (203) 432 7345.

June 20-July 4 1992 **Bournemouth (England) Musicmakers Festival** - amateur bands, choirs and orchestras performing at various venues with optional competitions and excursions. Paul B Buck, Bournemouth Tourism, Westover Road, Bournemouth, BH1 2BU, England. Tel: 0202 291718.

June 24-28 1992 **Hamina Tattoo** - the Second International Military Music Event - Finland. Military bands from Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, France, Poland, USA and (potentially) the Navy Band from St Petersburg. Captain Juhani Leinonen, POB 125, SF-49401, Hamina, Finland.

June 27-July 2 1992 **Göteborg Music Festival 92**, Box 44020, 440 Göteborg, Sweden. Tel: +46 (0) 31 22 34 74.

June-August 1992 **International Music Camp**, North Dakota - Manitoba border. Joseph T. Alme, Director, IMC, 1725 - 11th Street SW, Minot, ND 58701, USA.

July 15 1992 - deadline for entries to be received for the **13th International Competition for Original Composition for Band**

organised by the *Pro Loco Tourist Association of Corciano Segreteria Organizzativa*, Via Laudati, 4 06073 Corciano, Italy. Tel: 075/6979109. July 18-25; July 25-August 1 1992 **Musicfest International Summer School**, Aberystwyth, Wales - includes courses for brass and woodwind (standard and advanced). Ms Gina Syngé, 4 Eyford Cottages, Upper Slaughter, Cheltenham, Glos GL54 2JL, England. Tel 0451 31823.

July 19-31 1992 **Guildhall Summer School**, London. Director: Scott Stroman, with Denis Wick. Includes courses for Winds, Midi/Sequencing Workshop, Jazz, Rock, Studio and Gospel Music. Heather Swain, Co-ordinator, Guildhall Summer School, Guildhall School of Music & Drama, Barbican, London EC2Y 8DT, England.

July 24-26 1992 **The London International Flute Convention**. Royal College of Music. British Flute Society, PO Box 252, Oxford OX1 1XG, England.

July 25-August 2 1992 **Third International Summer Course for Symphonic Wind Orchestra** in Vallendar bei Koblenz. LMD Hans-Albert Schwarz, Postfach 1104, 5502 Schweich, Germany. Tel. and Fax: 06502-8164.

July 26-August 4 1992 **Anglo-German Youth Music Week**. Jugendgastehaus, Oberwesel am Rhein, Germany. Malcolm H. Goodman, 2

Gilbertyn Drive, Worle, Weston-Super-Mare, Avon, BS22 0TR, UK. Tel. 0934 520130.

August 26-29 1992 **Flicorno D'Oro. 1st International Band Competition**, Riva del Garda, Italy. Five band categories with valuable cash prizes: *Flicorno d'oro*, Via Pilati 5 - CP 70 -38066 Riva del Garda (TN) Italy.

September 1-18 1992 **41st International Music Competition**, Munich, Germany (includes clarinet). *Internationaler Musikwettbewerb, Bayerischer Radfunk*, D-8000 München 2, Germany. Tel: (089) 5900-2471.

September 25-27 1992 **11th Annual BASBWE Conference**. University of Warwick, England. Colin Touchin or Tony Veal (see BASBWE Executive Committee list for addresses).

December 15-19 1992 **46th Annual Midwest International Band & Orchestra Clinic**, Chicago, USA. Barbara Beuhman, Executive Administrator, 1503 Huntington Drive, Glenview, IL 60025, USA. Tel: 708 729 4629.

May 28-31 1993 **Europäisches Musikfest 1993** in Trier, Germany: *European Music Festival 1993*, 2 rue Sosthène Weis, L-2722 Luxembourg-Grund. Tel: (352) 46 25 36. Fax: (352) 47 14 40.

July 13-20 1993 **WASBE International Conference**, Valencia, Spain. Leif A. Jansson, Conference Committee Chairman, Presidentgatan 25, 553 38 Jönköping, Sweden.