

From 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'

Lisa Bielawa

WWW.LISABIELAWA.NET

Note

Premiere: April 19, 1997, Minneapolis, MN. New Choral Music Award Commission from the Dale Warland Singers.
Duration: 16'
Instrumentation: Chorus (SSAATBB) & Percussion (3)

Guidebooks to Hell were a popular literary genre in medieval Europe, written by monks from their own visionary experiences or as a service to other visionaries who couldn't write. These stories were considered to be absolutely factual and assumed a moral, didactic role in medieval life through the 13th century. *Dante's Divine Comedy*, written in the early 14th century, described the fantastical terrors of Hell so definitively and authoritatively that no other contributions to the genre were made after it. William Blake revived the Guidebook to Hell genre with his prophetic book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, written in 1789-90, but it arises from a poetic and philosophical point of view rather than a didactic, moralistic one. Blake's Hell is a place of knowledge and complexity; it reflects the part of the human spirit which responds to the serpent in Eden, the part which desires to know and to strive. His Heaven and Hell represent not good and evil, but innocence and knowledge or simplicity and complexity; it is a view which Blake shared with Eastern philosophy, in which the forces of yin and yang comprise the whole person. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is an illuminated manuscript comprised of 27 plates, using Blake's famous technique: copper etchings which were then colored by hand. The two movements of this choral setting correspond to plates 14 and 15, and they are scored for SSAATBB chorus and percussion.

The first movement is a passacaglia, a form which appears in the music of Hindemith, Webern, Shostakovich and, most famously, in Purcell's aria *When I am Laid in Earth* from the opera *Dido and Aeneas*. I felt drawn to the expressive possibilities of the passacaglia for two textual reasons. Firstly, Blake speaks of "displaying the infinite, which was hid" from man; the passacaglia melody is circular and therefore infinite, but it also is often "hid" because of the counter-melodies and textures which shape it into a musical statement. Secondly, it is because man has "closed himself up" that he cannot see the infinite, and I also hear in the passacaglia a kind of closed feeling, perhaps the sense that one is trapped by fate, as in Dido's lament. As a circular form, the passacaglia can be seen as both infinite and closed.

In the second movement, Blake presents us with the six chambers of the Printing House in Hell, each inhabited by a medieval beast with a symbolic role. These rooms organize the piece into musical sections – the opening line ("I was in a Printing House...") also serves as a refrain after the second,

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Press Contact: Christina Jensen PR LLC | 646.536.7864 | christina@christinajensenpr.com

fourth, and sixth rooms. Blake's descriptions and drawings use medieval images – Dragon-Men at the mouths of caves, jeweled palaces in cliffed walls - such as one might see in a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Musically, this movement also takes medieval ideas and reworks them. The harmonic language is generated by the interaction of two familiar medieval sounds: melodies in organum, the practice of doubling chant melodies at parallel consonant intervals, and chanted drones, passed around the chorus on different texts. The rhythmic relentlessness of the chanted text and percussion patterns convey the sound of medieval machines – printing presses and torture devices (which also often appeared in medieval Guidebooks of Hell). Other musical elements borrow from later church traditions: the refrain melody appears in several canonical permutations and in chorale form, as in a Bach cantata. These familiar elements inhabit the piece, but in the end it is inspired by Blake's transformation of medieval images and symbols into a strange new poetic world.

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Text

I. Passacaglia

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul, is to be expunged: this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

II. A Memorable Fancy

I was in a Printing house in Hell & saw the method in which knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation.

In the first chamber was a Dragon-Man, clearing away the rubbish from a caves mouth; within, a number of Dragons were hollowing the cave.

In the second chamber was a Viper folding round the rock & the cave, and others adorning it with gold, silver and precious stones.

In the third chamber was an Eagle with wings and feathers of air; he caused the inside of the cave to be infinite; around were numbers of Eagle like men, who built palaces in the immense cliffs.

In the fourth chamber were Lions of flaming fire raging around & melting the metals into living fluids.

In the fifth chamber were Unnam'd forms, which cast the metals into the expanse.

There they were reciev'd by Men who occupied the sixth chamber, and took the forms of books & were arranged in libraries.

texts by William Blake

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