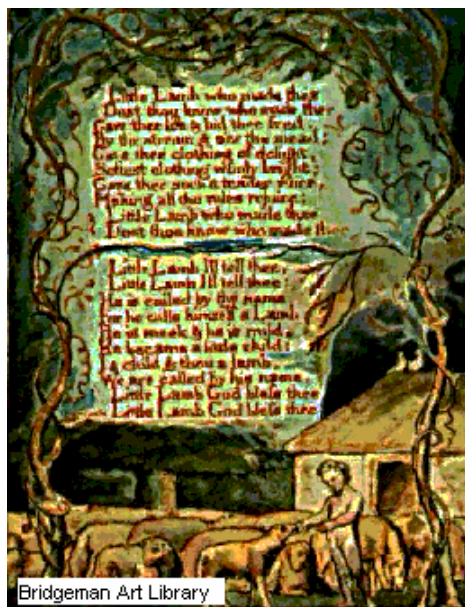


John Tavener: The Lamb



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Blake's illustration to The Lamb in Songs of Innocence and Experience

The text for The Lamb comes from a poem by William Blake, from a collection entitled “Songs of Innocence and Experience” (1789).

The Lamb is a hauntingly beautiful piece. It is for full SATB choir and is unaccompanied, although the first four bars of each verse are for just SA. It is almost entirely syllabic which, along with its homophony adds to the simplicity of the piece, and creates a serene, uncomplicated atmosphere, and as such could be compared to the impressionist movement. Performance directions state that tempo should be flexible and also guided by the words, perhaps indicating the importance Tavener saw in them as the basis of this music.

The Lamb is quite mathematical in its construction. It makes use of some features of the 12-tone system, otherwise known as serial music. The system was devised around 1921 as Arnold Schoenberg tried to find a method to organise atonal music, a technique utilised and extended by Anton Webern and Alban Berg, both students of Schoenberg, whose collective works of serial music were categorised as the “Second Viennese School”. The system he created has the composer arrange the 12 notes of the chromatic scale in a particular order, forming a row. A composition is built by using each note of the row in turn. Notes may be used consecutively, as a melody, or simultaneously, as chords.

While Tavener’s piece avoids this principle, a second feature of serial music is the variations that the rows could be subjected to, and it is these that Tavener uses at the start of each of the 2 verses. In the second bar, the alto part sings an inversion of the prime order sung by the soprano solo in bar 1. This means it is sung ‘upside down’, so that an upward movement becomes a downward movement of the same interval and vice versa. Bars 3 and 4 are also soprano solo, with bar 4 being the retrograde of the previous bar. This means that it is the same music but in reverse. The same technique is used in the soprano part in bars 5 and 6, with the alto singing a retrograde inversion (combining both ideas, sung upside down and backwards). The overall effect of this section is blatant dissonance, though the fact that each line returns to the same point returns serenity to the atmosphere.

After an atonal start, the full chorus joins for the second half of the verse. The music here is gently dissonant, and could be considered more modal than tonal, with a feeling of E-minor but without the expected D#s. This section is entirely based upon repetition of the first exposition of the tune in the soprano solo of bar 1. The soprano and alto parts sing in thirds throughout, with the tenors and basses helping to create subtle suspensions. Each bar ends with an E-minor chord. The second verse is similar to the first, however sopranos and altos sing in unison in bars 1, 3 and 4 adding a little extra power to the tune.