

BRITTEN
Songs and
Proverbs of
William Blake
Tit for Tat
Folk-songs

Roderick Williams,
Baritone
Iain Burnside,
Piano



Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Songs and Proverbs of William Blake • Tit for Tat • Folk-songs

Born in Lowestoft, Suffolk on St Cecilia's Day 1913, Benjamin Britten was a prodigious musician, showing a great determination in his pursuit of composition from a very early age. He composed his first work – a song – at the age of five, and by the time he began formal studies in composition with Frank Bridge in January 1928, when he was fourteen, he had written more than 500 works, including numerous piano and chamber works, dozens of songs, and some great symphonic essays. This application to his art was to be a defining feature of Britten's professional life as a mature composer, being perhaps the key to the apparently effortless genius he achieved in his greatest works.

As composer, pianist and conductor, Britten developed close associations with performers, writing many of his works with specific artists in mind. This was particularly so with his vocal works, many of which were composed for his partner of forty years, the tenor Peter Pears, whom he met in 1937. While many of his major song cycles and principal operatic rôles were created for Pears, Britten admittedly finding it difficult to write for any other voice, he did compose for other singers on occasion. One such association began in the early 1960s when Britten was commissioned to write a work for the celebrations surrounding the consecration in May 1962 of the newly built Coventry Cathedral: the *War Requiem*. The baritone soloist in the *War Requiem* was Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, and with this work began an association that continued with the writing of the *Cantata Misericordium* for him and Pears in 1963. Britten and Fischer-Dieskau were at this time discussing at some length the writing of an opera based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which Fischer-Dieskau would have played Lear alongside Pears as the Fool. While the opera never came to fruition, their collaboration continued in 1965 when Britten composed a song cycle for Fischer-Dieskau, of which they gave the première together at the Aldeburgh Festival of that year: the *Songs and Proverbs of*

William Blake, which Britten dedicated to Fischer-Dieskau: 'To Dieter: the past and the future'.

Britten asked Pears to select the texts for the cycle, which, as the title suggests, he chose from the writings of the English visionary artist and poet, William Blake, from his *Songs of Experience*, *Aururies of Innocence* and *Proverbs of Hell*. Fischer-Dieskau wrote that he was 'especially taken with the terseness, the British understatement, the intellectual concentration, and the enigmatic smile of these dense, linguistically original sayings.' Blake's poems and aphorisms are certainly dense and, ranging as they do from the metaphorical to the provocatively cynical, they demand some thought to elicit their meaning. The result is one of Britten's most sombre song cycles; a work that questions the human condition, our relationships both human and eternal, and the folly of man's preoccupations; and while the words were written nearly two centuries ago, Britten's music seems to make them feel contemporary; fresh and relevant for the present time.

Songs and Proverbs of William Blake is, unusually for Britten, set as one continuous piece. The seven proverbs, however, as well as providing links between the poems, act as unifying markers throughout the work. These starkly set proverbs are each based on the same four-note melodic motif; a set of variations akin to the series of variations that form the interludes between scenes in Britten's 1954 chamber opera, *The Turn of the Screw*.

In the first two songs the chimney sweeper seems to become the personification of woe, with Blake's play upon the crying of his wares, '[s]weep', embodying that sorrow, half-hidden behind Britten's imagining of the sweep's melancholy dance. At the heart of the work is the most substantial song of the cycle, *A Poison Tree*, a setting of a poem which seems to echo the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, and in which the chromatic snaking of the vocal line seems to depict the singer's wrath wrapping itself ever tighter within his being. Britten's accompaniment in *The*

Tiger, redolent of the finale of his recent *Cello Sonata*, seems to portray the tiger's growls in the first of two songs in which Blake's comparisons of man with beast and insect ask questions as to our common origins and aspirations: are we in fact all that different? The final proverbs and songs contemplate time and eternity, the variation of *Proverb VI* notably developed to sound the knells of time. In the last proverb the variation motif is developed in the voice, but also continues into the final song, its shape becoming the basis of the accompaniment of the song. The figure finally finds resolution at the close of the cycle, dwelling in the '*Realms of day*'.

In his later years Britten revisited some of his extensive juvenilia, resulting in a number of 'new' works. One such work was performed for the first time by the baritone John Shirley Quirk, accompanied by Britten, at the 1969 Aldeburgh Festival. This was a set of five settings of poems by Walter de la Mare composed between the ages of fourteen and seventeen (1929-1931), which in the spring of 1968 Britten brought together, with only minor polishings, under the title *Tit for Tat*. De la Mare was a favourite poet of Britten's youth, and was a significant poet for Britten in that his first published work was a set of de la Mare part-songs, issued in 1932 when Britten was eighteen years old. Aptly, the set was dedicated to de la Mare's son, Richard, who in 1966 had become chairman of Britten's publisher, Faber Music.

The levity and directness of these early songs contrast most notably with the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, but while the songs are juvenilia, they already show Britten's sympathetic approach to word-setting. In his

preface to the published score Britten writes, 'although I hold no claims whatever for the songs' importance or originality, I do feel that the boy's vision has a simplicity and clarity which might have given a little pleasure to the great poet, with his unique insight into a child's mind.' *Tit for Tat* takes its name from the final song in the set, a fancy in which de la Mare imagines the poacher, Tom Noddy, becoming the poached.

Britten and Pears gave numerous recitals together, for which Britten would sometimes arrange folk-songs for inclusion as lighter numbers in the programme, often as encores. His unique and colourful arrangements breathe new life into these traditional songs, going well beyond the simple harmonies of those published by Cecil Sharp and others. His first arrangements were made in late 1941, while in America, at which time he was feeling homesick for England. This selection of folk-songs from the British Isles (he also arranged a number of French folk-songs) includes three songs that are not officially folk-songs, being attributable to an author, but which are regarded as being in the spirit of folk-songs: a setting of W. B. Yeats's *Down by the Salley Gardens* (Salley gardens: a field of willow trees), Robert Burns's *Ca' the yowes* ('Call the ewes to the knolls', in which a stream rolls along ('burnie rowes'), a song-thrush ('mavis') is heard, and a hobgoblin ('bog'ie') seen, by 'Clouden's silent towers' – the ruins of Lincluden Abbey), and a song from Charles Dibdin's 1789 show *The Oddities, Tom Bowling*, a song familiar from its inclusion in Sir Henry Wood's *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*, heard at many a Last Night of the Proms.

Philip Lancaster



Roderick Williams

The baritone Roderick Williams encompasses a wide repertoire, from baroque to contemporary music, in the opera house (where he is particularly associated with the baritone rôles of Mozart), on the concert platform and in recital. He has also sung world premières of operas by, among others, David Sawer, Sally Beamish, Michael van der Aa and Alexander Knaifel. He has worked with orchestras throughout Europe, including all the BBC orchestras in the United Kingdom, and his many festival appearances include the BBC Proms, Edinburgh, Cheltenham and Aldeburgh. His recital appearances have taken him to London's Wigmore Hall and many European festivals. He has an extensive discography and his recordings of English song with Iain Burnside have received particular acclaim. Roderick Williams is also a composer and has had works performed at the Wigmore and Barbican Halls, the Purcell Room and live on national radio in Britain.

Photo: Benjamin Ealovega



Iain Burnside

Iain Burnside enjoys a unique reputation as pianist and broadcaster, forged through his commitment to the song repertoire and his collaborations with leading international singers. In recent seasons such artists have included Rebecca Evans, Ailish Tynan, Susan Bickley and Ann Murray; John Mark Ainsley, Andrew Kennedy, Mark Padmore, Roderick Williams, William Dazeley and Bryn Terfel. His extensive recording portfolio reflects his passion for British music: the complete songs of Gerald Finzi, together with Butterworth, Gurney, Ireland and Vaughan Williams on Naxos; Britten, Tippett, Herbert Hughes, FG Scott and Judith Weir on Signum; Richard Rodney Bennett on NMC; contemporary Scottish repertoire on Delphian. The NMC Songbook received a Gramophone Award. In 2012 Albion Records will issue a solo disc of Vaughan Williams and Gurney. His broadcasting career covers both radio and television and has been honoured with a Sony Radio Award. He is Research Associate at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

Photo: Adrian Weinbercht

Songs and Proverbs of William Blake, Op. 74

Texts selected from the writings of William Blake (1757–1827)

1 Proverb I

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

2 London

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

3 Proverb II

Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels
with bricks of Religion.

4 The Chimney-Sweeper

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying 'weep 'weep in notes of woe!
'Where are thy father & mother? say?'
'They are both gone up to the church to pray.'

'Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy & dance & sing
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven of our misery.'

5 Proverb III

The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.

6 A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole
When the night had veil'd the pole:
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

7 Proverb IV

Think in the morning. Act in the noon.
Eat in the evening. Sleep in the night.

8 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?

9 Proverb V

The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.
If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.
If others had not been foolish, we should be so.

10 The Fly

Little Fly,
Thy summer's play
My thoughtless hand
Has brush'd away.

Am not I
A fly like thee?
Or art not thou
A man like me?

For I dance,
And drink & sing,
Till some blind hand
Shall brush my wing.

If thought is life
And strength & breath
And the want
Of thought is death;

Then am I
A happy fly,
If I live,
Or if I die.

11 Proverb VI

The hours of folly are measur'd by the clock;
But of wisdom, no clock can measure.
The busy bee has no time for sorrow.
Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

12 Ah! Sun-flower

Ah, Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime,
Where the traveller's journey is done:
Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,
Arise from their graves and aspire
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

13 Proverb VII

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

14 Every night and every morn

Every Night & every Morn
Some to Misery are Born.
Every Morn & every Night
Some are Born to sweet delight.
Some are Born to sweet delight,
Some are Born to Endless Night.

Folk-songs of the British Isles

Traditional except where attributed

20 The Plough Boy

A flaxen-headed cowboy, as simple as may be,
And next a merry plough-boy, I whistled o'er the lea;
But now a saucy footman I strut in worsted lace,
And soon I'll be a butler, and whey my jolly face.
When steward I'm promoted I'll snip the trademen's
bill,
My master's coffers empty, my pockets for to fill.
When lolling in my chariot, so great a man I'll be,
So great a man, so great a man, so great a man I'll be,
You'll forget the little ploughboy that whistled o'er the
lea.
I'll buy votes at elections, but, when I've made the pelf,
I'll stand poll for the parliament, and then vote in
myself;
Whatever's good for me, sir, I never will oppose;
When all my ayes are sold off, why then I'll sell my
noes.
I'll joke, harangue, and paragraph, with speeches
charm the ear;
And when I'm tired on my legs, then I'll sit down a
peer;
In court or city honours, so great a man I'll be,
So great a man, . . .

We are led to Believe a Lie
When we see not Thro' the Eye
Which was Born in a Night to perish in a Night
When the Soul Slept in Beams of Light.

God appears & God is Light,
To those poor Souls who dwell in Night;
But does a Human Form Display
To those who Dwell in Realms of day.

21 The foggy, foggy dew

When I was a bachelor I lived all alone,
And worked at the weaver's trade
And the only, only thing that I ever did wrong,
Was to woo a fair young maid.

I wooed her in the winter time,
And in the summer too;
And the only, only thing I did that was wrong
Was to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew.

One night she came to my bedside
When I lay fast asleep,
She laid her head upon my bed
And she began to weep.

She sighed, she cried, she damn near died,
She said, 'What shall I do?'
So I hauled her into bed and I covered up her head,
Just to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew.

Oh, I am a bachelor and I live with my son,
And we work at the weaver's trade.
And ev'ry single time that I look into his eyes,
He reminds me of the fair young maid.

He reminds me of the winter time,
And of the summer too,
And of the many, many times that I held her in my arms
Just to keep her from the foggy, foggy dew.

22 Tom Bowling *Charles Dibdin (1745–1814)*

Here, a sheer hulk, lies poor Tom Bowling,
The darling of our crew;
No more he'll hear the tempest howling,
For death has broach'd him to:

His form was of the manliest beauty,
His heart was kind and soft.
Faithful below, Tom did his duty,
And now he's gone aloft.

Tom never from his word departed,
His virtues were so rare;
His friends were many and true-hearted,
His Poll was kind and fair:

And then he'd sing so blithe and jolly –
Ah! many's the time and oft –
But mirth is turn'd to melancholy,
For Tom is gone aloft.

Yet shall poor Tom find pleasant weather,
When He, who all commands,
Shall give, to call life's crew together,
The word to pipe all hands:

Thus death, who kings and tars despatches,
In vain Tom's life hath doff'd,
For though his body's under hatches,
His soul has gone aloft.

23 O Waly, Waly

The water is wide, I cannot get o'er,
And neither have I wings to fly.
Give me a boat that will carry two,
And both shall row, my love and I.

O down in the meadows the other day,
A-gathering flowers both fine and gay,
A-gathering flowers both red and blue,
I little thought what love can do.

I leaned my back up against some oak
Thinking that he was a trusty tree;

But first he bended, and then he broke;
And so did my false love to me.

A ship there is, and she sails the sea,
She's loaded deep as deep can be,
But not so deep as the love I'm in:
I know not if I sink or swim.

O, love is handsome and love is fine,
And love's a jewel while it is new
But when it is old, it groweth cold,
And fades away like morning dew.

24 Oliver Cromwell

Oliver Cromwell lay buried and dead,
Hee-haw, buried and dead.
There grew an old apple-tree over his head,
Hee-haw, over his head.

The apples were ripe and ready to fall,
Hee-haw, ready to fall.
There came an old woman to gather them all,
Hee-haw, gather them all.

Oliver rose and gave her a drop,
Hee-haw, gave her a drop.
Which made the old woman go hippety hop,
Hee-haw, hippety hop.

The saddle and bridle, they lie on the shelf,
Hee-haw, lie on the shelf.
If you want any more you can sing it yourself,
Hee-haw, sing it yourself.

25 The Ash Grove

Down yonder green valley where streamlets meander,
When twilight is fading, I pensively rove,
Or at the bright noontide in solitude wander
Amid the dark shades of the lonely Ash Grove.

'Twas there while the blackbird was joyfully singing,
I first met my dear one, the joy of my heart;
Around us for gladness the bluebells were ringing.
Ah! then little thought I how soon we should part.

Still glows the bright sunshine o'er valley and
mountain,
Still warbles the blackbird his note from the tree;
Still trembles the moonbeam on streamlet and
fountain,
But what are the beauties of nature to me?
With sorrow, deep sorrow, my bosom is laden,
All day I go mourning in search of my love.
Ye echoes, O tell me, where is the sweet maiden?
She sleeps 'neath the green turf down by the
Ash Grove.

26 The Salley Gardens *W. B. Yeats (1865–1939)*

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white
feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the
tree;
But I, being young and foolish, with her would not
agree.
In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white
hand.
She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the
weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

27 There's none to soothe

There's none to soothe my soul to rest,
There's none my load of grief to share
Or wake to joy this lonely breast,
Or light the gloom of dark despair.
The voice of joy no more can cheer,
The look of love no more can warm
Since mute for aye's that voice so dear,
And closed that eye alone could charm.

28 Little Sir William

Easter day was a holiday
Of all the days in the year,
And all the little schoolfellows went out to play
But Sir William was not there.

Mamma went to the school wife's house
And knocked at the ring,
Saying, 'Little Sir William if you are there,
Pray let your mother in.'

The school wife open'd the door and said,
'He is not here today.
He is with the little schoolfellows out on the green
Playing some pretty play.'

Mamma went to the Boyne water
That is so wide and deep
Saying, 'Little Sir William if you are there,
Oh pity your mother's weep.'

'How can I pity your weep, mother,
And I so long in pain?
For the little pen knife sticks close to my heart
And the school wife hath me slain.

Go home, go home my mother dear
And prepare my winding sheet,
For tomorrow morning before 8 o'clock,
You with my body shall meet.

And lay my Prayer Book at my head,
And my grammar at my feet,
That all the little schoolfellows as they pass by
May read them for my sake.'

29 Ca' the yowes *Robert Burns (1759–1796)*

*Ca' the yowes tae the knowes,
Ca' them where the heather grows,
Ca' them where the burnie rowes,
My bonnie dearie.*

Hark, the mavis' evening sang,
 Sounden Clouden's woods amang,
 Then afolding let us gang,
 My bonnie dearie.
Ca' the yowes . . .

We'll gang down by Clouden side,
 Through the hazels spreading wide
 O'er the waves that sweetly glide
 To the moon sac clearly.
Ca' the yowes . . .

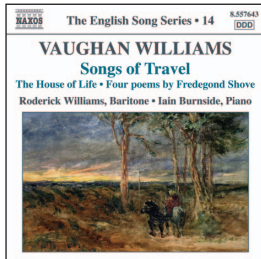
Fair and lovely as thou art,
 Thou hast stol'n my very heart;
 I can die but canna part,
 My bonnie dearie.
Ca' the yowes . . .

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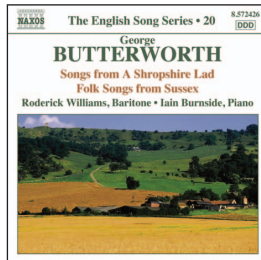
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Available sung texts included

Britten wrote his *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake, Op. 74* for the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau in 1965. The singer admired the 'concentration and enigmatic smile' of the settings, and Britten constructed, through alternation of proverbs with songs, and an intense contemplation on the human and the eternal, one of his greatest song cycles. By contrast *Tit for Tat* sees Britten revisiting youthful, light-spirited settings of the poet Walter de la Mare. The folk-song arrangements are amongst his most famous, and beloved.

Benjamin BRITTEN

(1913–1976)

Songs and Proverbs of William Blake, Op. 74 26:03

- | | | |
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- | | | |
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Roderick Williams, Baritone • Iain Burnside, Piano

Recorded at Potton Hall, Westleton, Suffolk, 4–6 January 2011

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