

What is the Price of Experience?

Text by William Blake

Music by Julia Usher

for soprano and piano

What is the price of Experience? do men buy it for a song?
Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No, it is bought with the price
Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.
Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,
And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain.

It is an easy thing to triumph in the summer's sun
And in the vintage and to sing on the waggon loaded with corn.
It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted,
To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer....

It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements,
To hear the dog howl at the wintry door; the ox in the slaughterhouse
moan;
To see a god on every wind and a blessing on every blast;
To hear sounds of love in the thunderstorm that destroys our enemies'
house;
To rejoice in the blight that covers his field, and the sickness that cuts
off his children,
While our olive and vine sing and laugh round our door....

It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity:
thus could I sing and thus rejoice: but it is not so with me.

from Vala: Night the Second from the Four Zoas
by William Blake

What is the Price of Experience?

In 1986 I began studying Blake's poetical works, to devise a libretto for a large-scale choral oratorio, *A Grain of Sand in Lambeth*.

It was commissioned by the Rev Donald Reeves for the Blake Society of St James' Piccadilly, where the work was first performed in the Piccadilly Festival, conducted by Ivor Bolton.

The work explored linked chains of imagery and musical motives, and I was particularly interested in Blake's extraordinary visions of time and eternity, which are surprisingly paralleled in modern science. The Blake texts were alternated in the concert programme of with quotations from modern physicists.

This poem, *The Price of Experience*, was placed at the centre of the 90-minute oratorio; but under rehearsal pressure, it was omitted from the performance. It has long been in my mind to reset these bleak and yet compassionate words for voice and piano.

I began the setting in the spring of 2001; and resumed work in early September. Their appropriateness to the sombre world of autumn 2001 has haunted me since.

Performance Notes

The piano part should be played with a slightly dry and dulled tone. There are some sections which need considerable pedalling, to build up clouds of vibrating sound; but at other times, the chordal clusters and figures should be bleakly stark, and not over-loud. Tempos should be natural and flexible; and very much *col parte* with the voice.

The Soprano should avoid heavy vibrato, and keep a simplicity and directness of delivery. Certain sections (e.g. "desolate") suggest a suppressed despair; overlaid with the contrasting "triumph" passages. These too are not over-pressed, as they prove illusory by the end.

For both musicians, there should be a sense of holding stronger feelings in reserve.

What is the Price of Experience? for Soprano and Piano (2001)

William Blake

q=70

Soprano

dry, erupting suddenly
Allegro
subsiding
mp

What is the price_ of ex pe_

Piano

f
mf
Ped.

4

Steady, intense, but not too much vibrato

S.

ri ence?nss...
p

Pno

Faster
Slowing
flexible, not too slow
p
Ped.

7

Attacca Ancora

S.

erratic
fast 8va
mp Domenbuy it

Pno

sfz
5
"whistling down the wind"
8va
Ped.

10

still quiet

S.

For a song?
fast, graceful
8va

Pno

mp
poco f
pp
5
8va
Ped.

q=90

12

S. *mf* or Wisdom for a dance in the street? *fast*

Pno *f* *laissez vibrer* *Ped.*

16

S. *More sustained* No, it is bought with the price of all that a man hath: *p*

Pno *mp* *Ped.*

20 **Freely synched**

S. his house, his wife, his child ren. *Freely synched*

Pno *p* *sffz*

25

S. *sffz* Wisdom (mm) is sold in the de *p*

Pno *echo* *pp* *f* *ff* *f* *mp* *pp*

29

S. *so late market where none (nn) cometo buy.*

Pno *pp*

33 **A Tempo**

S. *p and in the wither'd fields, where the*

Pno **A Tempo**

senza ped

p

f

p

38

S. *far mer ploughs for bread in (closed), intense (closed) fff*

Pno *flat, bleak, pushing*

mf

mf

senza pedale

41 **Poco Scherzo** *q=120*

S. *vain; (nn) mf It is anea sy*

Pno **Poco Scherzo**

mf