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John Hawkins (b.1949) 'Blake Visions' for Piano Quartet (2024)

Pity

Innocence and Experience

The Ghost of a Flea

John Hawkins writes:

"I first encountered William Blake in my parallel role as a book designer while working with the poet and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine. I have since written many settings of Blake's words and instrumental music based on his work. These include 'This World' for choir and two trumpets, 'Urizen' for viola and piano and the song cycle 'Portions of Eternity'. The Piatti Quartet performed the string quartet 'Fuzon' at the Nicholas Yonge Society in 2023.

"Blake's, visionary ideas often include apparently irreconcilable opposites, as in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. In these three short pieces I have alternated such contrasts. The first movement, 'Pity' follows Blake's print illustrating lines from Shakespeare's Macbeth: *'Pity, like a naked newborn babe striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin like angels on horseback, riding the sightless couriers of the air.'*

The movement begins with the piano sounding the rhythm of the word 'Pity' while the strings suggest a lulling mood which is abruptly interrupted by the wild sightless horses taking up the babe. It ends with 'Pity'. The second movement explores the contrast between Blake's books of Innocence and Experience beginning with the sound of a young piper, instructed by a child-like angel to write down his joyful songs. But the playing is interrupted and ultimately 'stains the water clear', hinting at the lessons of experience and ending in joyless emptiness. The final piece illustrates Blake's bizarre vision of 'The Ghost of a Flea' which, although one of his tiniest images, seems monumental and threatening, contrasting the sinister muscled bulk of the spirit with what we expect of a fragile insect. In the painting, the flea is seen 'swaggering among shooting stars, carrying a bowl of blood'."

John Hawkins studied composition with Malcolm Williamson and Elisabeth Lutyens. He lives in Lewes, where the song cycle 'Strange Bridge' was recently included in the Festival of Song. Another cycle, 'Both Beauties', was premiered at Brighton's Chapel Royal in 2025. As well as 'This World' (BBC Singers), broadcasts include a 'Sea Symphony' (by both the Bournemouth and BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestras), 'Variations' for piano solo and 'Urizen'. His opera 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose', was recently performed in the Tête à Tête opera season in London. 'Blake Visions' was first played by the London Piano Quartet in London in 2025 and 2026 will see the release of a CD with them including that and several others of the Blake pieces.