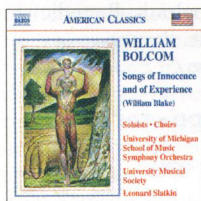


Bolcom

Songs of Innocence. Songs of Experience
**Christine Brewer, Measha
 Brueggergosman, Ilana Davidson, Linda
 Hohenfeld, Carmen Pelton** *sops* **Joan
 Morris** *mez* **Marietta Simpson** *cont* **Thomas
 Young** *ten* **Nmon Ford** *bar* **Nathan Lee
 Graham** *sng* **Peter 'Madcat' Ruth** *barc/sngr*
**Michigan State University Children's
 Choir; Orpheus Singers; Choir, Chamber
 Choir, Musical Society Choral Union,
 Contemporary Directions Ensemble and
 Symphony Orchestra of Michigan
 University / Leonard Slatkin**

Naxos American Classics © ③ **8 559216/8;**

DVD (M) ② **5 110083-84 (138' • DDD • T)**



This is a *magnum opus* that occupied Bolcom for 25 years, starting as early as 1956. In his teens he was steeped in Blake and dreamed of setting the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of*

Experience. When he came across a different ordering from the original publication, Bolcom decided to base his composite work on that. He finds Blake's vision as relevant to society today as in the poet's own time, another period of change, and has drawn on a wide range of musical styles to parallel Blake's method of moving from sophisticated to almost folk idioms.

Songs of Innocence and of Experience was premiered in Stuttgart in 1984 and even Bolcom himself is amazed that there have been 16 performances so far. This recording is based on a live performance with massive forces comprising 10 soloists, three choirs totalling almost 350 singers and a full symphony orchestra plus a harmonica and various extra electronic players and percussion – in itself a tribute to the vitality of music-making at the University of Michigan.



Life is a cabaret: poet Arnold Weinstein and William Bolcom celebrate their rediscovery

The composer's strategy is to embody the different aspects of Blake's poetry through contrasted musical styles. Some aspects of Blake seem to have been waiting for 20th-century idioms to make their full musical impact – nothing in 18th-century music could have packed the multi-faceted punch that Bolcom has here. In some features – diatonic writing, English text and children's voices – Britten's *Spring Symphony* is in the background, but Bolcom is defined by the styles he juxtaposes with carefully calculated transitions between them. Some of the most memorable moments involve the popular idioms, evoking Bolcom's ragtime performances or the songs he has recorded so vividly with his wife Joan Morris. Nathan Lee Graham is an actor-singer who knows exactly how to project his catchy tunes and spoken poems; Joan Morris exercises all her magic in a range of styles but Thomas Young seems too consistently declamatory.

The word-setting is straightforward, reflecting the strophic poems, and is refreshingly free from elaboration. The *Songs of Innocence* are charming and pastoral but in the *Songs of Experience* there is real anger at the human predicament. Christine Brewer is magisterial in numbers that reflect the modernistic side of Bolcom, and Carmen Pelton has a rare purity of sound. The well-known 'The Tyger' is treated as choral declamation, widening the overall range of expression; 'A Divine Image' is a kind of celebratory pop number with everything thrown in. As the Festival Hall performance in 1996 – also under Slatkin – amply demonstrated, this unique Blake spectacular makes a cumulative impact that represents Bolcom's wide stylistic embrace at its most ambitious. **Peter Dickinson**