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THERE IS NO NATURAL RELIGION (2008)

Program notes:

While looking for a Blake poem to set to music, I came upon this fascinating text. I was immediately attracted to its spare and precise language, even before I had deciphered some of its complex philosophical and theological meanings (which I am still working on...). I was also intrigued by the idea of setting it for baritone as a sort of sermon. Therefore, although the text is generally set quite lyrically, the piece also has moments of a declamatory and even pretentious nature. The sermon-like setting allows for a certain dramatic quality which is not always present in art song, including such elements as recitative and use of the full ranges of both the piano and the voice.

There Is No Natural Religion was begun in Omaha, Nebraska in late 2006 while in residence with Opera Omaha.

Text:

Part I:

THE ARGUMENT: Man has no notion of moral fitness but from education. Naturally he is only a natural organ subject to sense.

I. Man cannot naturally perceive but through his natural or bodily organs.

II. Man by his reasoning power can only compare and judge of what he has already perceived.

III. From a perception of only 3 senses or 3 elements none could deduce a fourth or fifth.

IV. None could have other than natural or organic thoughts if he had none but organic perceptions.

V. Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceived.

VI. The desires and perceptions of Man untaught by anything but organs of sense must be limited to objects of sense.

Part II:

I. Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (though ever so acute) can discover.

II. Reason or the ratio of all we have already known is not the same that it shall be when we know more.

III. [Missing]

IV. The bounded is loathed by its possessor. The same dull round even of a universe would soon become a mill with complicated wheels.

V. If the many become the same as the few, when possessed, 'More! More!' is the cry of a mistaken soul. Less than all cannot satisfy Man.

VI. If any could desire what he is incapable of possessing, despair must be his eternal lot.

VII. The desire of Man being infinite the possession is infinite and himself infinite.

CONCLUSION: If it were not for the poetic or prophetic character the philosophic and experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again.

APPLICATION: He who sees the infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the ratio only sees himself only.

Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is.

-William Blake, ca.1788

Instrumentation: Baritone and Piano