

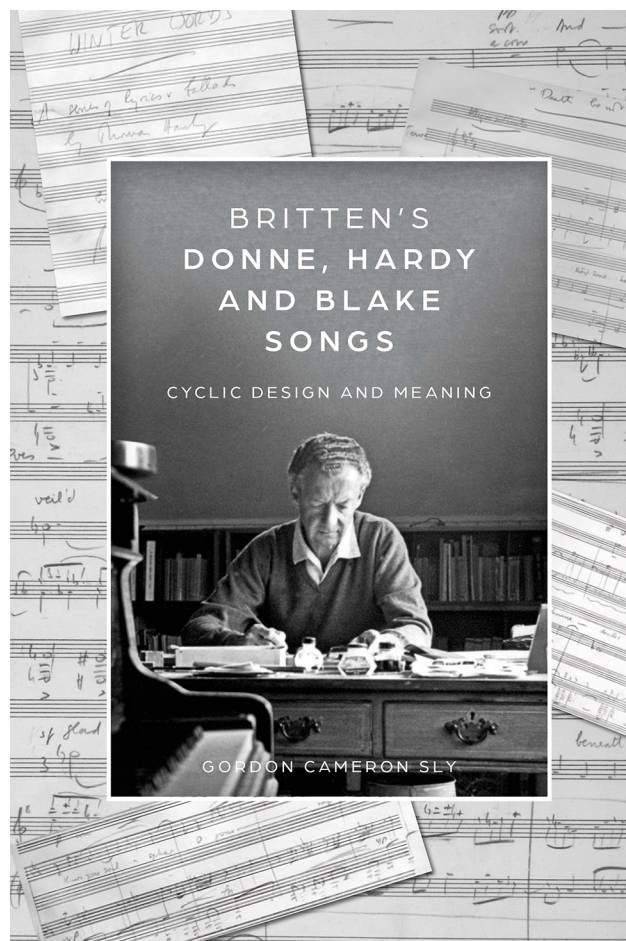
Gordon Cameron Sly, *Britten's Donne, Hardy, and Blake Songs*

CAMILA OLIVEIRA<sup>a</sup>

Gordon Cameron Sly. *Britten's Donne, Hardy, and Blake Songs*. Boydell Press, 2023. xix + 177 pp. £85.00/\$120.00, hardcover; £19.00/\$24.00, e-book.

IN recent years, there has been a growing interest in the relationship between Blake and music, notably from the reception point of view. Between the 1960s and 1980s the focus was on musical and poetic works that had influenced Blake's own songs,<sup>1</sup> but since the publication of Donald Fitch's extensive catalogue *Blake Set to Music* (1990) and his supplement (*Blake*, vol. 35, no. 2, fall 2001), discussions have gradually shifted to the field of reception studies and concentrated on responses to his work by musicians and composers.

In the realm of classical music, a number of dissertations on the topic have been produced in this century. Most of them articulate poetry and music through a meticulous examination of the scores, such as A. D. Whitfield, *A Performer's Guide to Virgil Thomson's Five Songs from William Blake* (Louisiana State University, 2004); M. A. Cracchiolo, *A Comprehensive Case Study on the Ten Blake Songs by Ralph Vaughan Williams: From "Infant Joy" to "London"* (Florida State University, 2009); and J. Berkebile, *A Study in Songs: Comparative Analyses of Twentieth-Century Settings of William Blake's Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (West Virginia University, 2017). Taking a different path, Jason Whittaker's book *Jerusalem: Blake, Parry, and the Fight for Englishness* (2022) concentrates on the production of the hymn "Jerusalem" and offers a comprehensive history of its reception, including its appropriation (and misappropriation) by social and po-



litical groups throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>2</sup> While Parry raised Blake's famous stanzas to the status of anthem, some fifty years later the composer

a. Camila Oliveira ([camila.querino@edu.ulisboa.pt](mailto:camila.querino@edu.ulisboa.pt)) is a research fellow at the University of Lisbon. She holds a PhD in English literature from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and King's College London on the translation of Blake's *Jerusalem* into Portuguese and biblical intertextuality. She is currently working on Romanticism and music reception and writing a monograph on Blake and contemporary music.

1. For example, George Sampson, "The Century of Divine Songs," 1943; Albert B. Friedman, *The Ballad Revival*, 1961; Martha Winburn England and John Sparrow, *Hymns Unbidden*, 1966; John Adlard, *The Sports of Cruelty*, 1972; Nick Shrimpton, "Hell's Hymnbook," 1976; and B. H. Fairchild, *Such Holy Song*, 1980.

2. See my review in *Blake*, vol. 58, no. 4, spring 2025, <https://doi.org/10.47761/biq.380>.

Benjamin Britten converted Blake's poetry into one of the greatest vocal works of the twentieth century. The time has come for a *tour de force* study of Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*.

Well known for his deep interest in and engagement with literature, Britten set 360 poems to music in the course of his career,<sup>3</sup> making him one of the most prolific art-song composers in Britain. His settings are mostly of English-speaking poets, as one might expect, and range from Edmund Spenser to W. H. Auden, a close friend of his. However, Blake was the only poet who accompanied Britten throughout; he was a pervasive presence in the composer's catalogue. Britten's earliest version of "Nurse's Song" dates from 1930, when he was only sixteen. A few individual pieces followed, including a first version of "A Poison Tree" (c. 1935) and a setting of "The Sick Rose" for the song cycle *Serenade* (1943). In 1965, Britten again returned to Blake's poetry for the large-scale cycle *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*.

*Britten's Donne, Hardy, and Blake Songs*, by the music theorist Gordon Cameron Sly,<sup>4</sup> examines three cycles inspired by the poetry of the respective authors. His main argument is that they constitute examples of "true" cycles out of fifteen poetry collections set to music by Britten. While *The Oxford Companion to Music* defines "cyclic form" simply as "a term to describe any such work in which the movements are connected by some musical theme or themes common to all,"<sup>5</sup> for Sly, as obvious as it may sound, a cycle *must* be cyclical. It presupposes a well-defined architectural structure, or, more precisely, an overarching design. He believes that this structure imparts a sense of interconnectedness and interdependency to the poems or texts assembled. This cohesion is also explored by Sly on a more subjective level in his analysis of the themes and content of the cycles in relation to Britten's own philosophical and personal views over the years.

The opening chapter, "Britten's Clever Subconscious," references a previous study on Britten by Paul Hamburger, which identified cohesive principles found in some of his earlier works that play a crucial role in shaping the musical structure of his later cycles. Sly discusses some of these compositional techniques, such as "framing," "non-contiguous continuities," and "nested formal structures" (2-3), all of which impose an architectural form on a piece composed of several movements or units, and were extensively incorporated into Britten's cycles of Donne, Hardy, and

Blake. Moreover, Sly is clearly interested in the textual narrative(s) or "statements" implied in the selection, ordering, and arrangement of individual poems, as well as symmetrical relationships and sequenced and nonsequenced correspondences. He believes that any extramusical meaning that a cycle conveys is ultimately produced by the composer. To support his point, he turns to Schumann's cycles, which evince the role of the composer's subjectivity in the construction of the narrative on both textual and musical levels, and exerted an unquestionable influence on Britten's own experiments with the cyclic form.

For the preliminary analysis, Sly compares Schumann's *Eichendorff-Lieder* to Britten's *Serenade*, which contains six poems by six different poets, including Blake. He identifies in both cycles a number of musical and textual relationships within the ordering of the poems. Through the observation of an inversionally symmetrical relationship between the first half and the second half of the texts selected, he discerns an overarching design structure: a mirrored correspondence between the first and the last poem, the second and the penultimate, the third and the antepenultimate, and so on.

In the case of Britten's *Serenade*, Sly identifies the pairings in symmetrical positions linked by motivic connections on a musical level and commonalities in regard to themes/images and formal structure on a textual level. "The Sick Rose" stands at the center of the cycle, paired with the fifteenth-century "Lyke-Wake Dirge"; their position reflects Britten's tendency to place crepuscular poems in the middle, creating what Sly calls a "dark core" (15). In terms of formal structure, although the two are substantially disproportional in length (eight and thirty-six lines, respectively), Britten compensates by elongating "The Sick Rose" with horn soliloquies. Musically, they present an inversionally arrayed design, with reversed contrapuntal pairings, but a similar tonal plan, with a half-step key relationship. Sly argues that the reversed ascending structure of the "Lyke-Wake Dirge" redeems that of "The Sick Rose" and constitutes an indication of the composer's reading of the pairing, suggesting hopefulness and salvation. He associates his musical interpretation with Britten's sentiment at the time, when the composer returned to England after an unexpectedly long season in America.

In the next three chapters, Sly provides a forensic analysis of the architectural and narrative structures of the cycles *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne* (1945), *Winter Words*

3. See Boris Ford, editor, *Benjamin Britten's Poets: An Anthology of the Poems He Set to Music*, 1994.

4. Professor of Music Theory in the College of Music at Michigan State University.

5. Alison Latham, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 2002, p. 331.

(1953), and *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965). Although all three share a similar overarching structure, Sly draws attention in his chapter dedicated to *Songs and Proverbs* to some substantial differences between the Blake cycle and the other two. For a start, Blake's texts were not selected by Britten, as usual, but by his partner, the tenor Peter Pears.<sup>6</sup> He took the poems and proverbs from *Songs of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and *Auguries of Innocence*. While Sly concedes that such a fact could easily drive a coach and horses through his defense of the intimate connection between the poems and Britten's subjectivity, he places emphasis on meaningfulness on the level of ordering and compositional strategy, assuming that Pears had no further role beyond selecting the poems.

Another dissimilarity concerns the tonal scheme. Compared to the other two cycles, the songs from *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* are less tonally related. In spite of that, Britten reinforces their commonalities and preserves their cohesion by resorting to a clever and inventive strategy: he interposes proverbs between the songs as declamatory excerpts, producing "'recitative-aria' pairings" (133). The proverbs contain a sequence of four-note progressions (tetrachords), generating a substantial degree of symmetry and creating a sense of stylistic unity. Similarly, Sly ascertains that the proverbs amplify the dramatic progression in the songs that follow, and shape a poetic narrative. Textually, the first group of proverbs and songs represents confinement and the second expresses struggle to break free of confinement. Musically, the proverbs in the first group expand on the qualities of proverb I and those in the second group expand on the qualities of proverb IV. Sly also observes a retrograde relationship, with mirrored gestures at the end of one proverb and the beginning of another "in dynamic, rhythm, gesture, and pitch" (144). This intimate interrelatedness between nonadjacent sections constitutes a successful example of "non-contiguous continuities."

Sly argues that the poems that follow the proverbs elucidate and expand on the dicta both textually and musical-

ly, although opposed musical strategies are applied to each half of the cycle. While in the first three songs there is an attempt to confine the structure, inversions and dissimilar intervals abound in the second group. Thus, the second group breaks free of the sense of repression that defines the opening group and, according to Sly, "enacts the freedom and spontaneous energy that Blake saw as essential to meaningful human experience" (156).

Sly never neglects the literary dimension when he discusses at length the minutest details of the scores. He skillfully explores the underlying and unifying themes of the poems and proverbs and is able to establish convincing correlations and parallels between the structure of Britten's music and Blake's poetry within a cyclic dynamic. The musical strategies that Britten uses in his Blake cycle are closely connected to the poems' motifs and interpretations, so that they mirror the texts: for this reason, he often resorts to an inversions relationship between opening and closing phrases. He clearly sees the indispensability of the affirmation of the opposite, of the element of subversion intrinsic to human nature. Sly closes the book with a reflection on the affinity of Britten's views and Blake's—their idealistic and universalist characters, their obdurate belief in human redemption through kindness and compassion—in an attempt to explain the composer's enduring fascination with one of England's most provocative artists.

The book may come across as too dense and inscrutable for an audience not particularly well versed in bars and quarter notes, which I imagine is the case for the vast majority of literature scholars. Although interdisciplinarity is considered a byword in academia today, it can be challenging to deal with material that requires fluency in a specific language or idiom. This book is richly illustrated with scores that demonstrate Sly's reasoning, but one can hardly grasp what he sees if one doesn't have a clue about the meaning of musical symbols on the staff. While *Britten's Donne, Hardy, and Blake Songs* represents an unquestionable contribution to reception studies of Blake in music, it is definitely a much more accessible book for a musician interested in literary studies than vice versa.

6. According to Britten's biographer Paul Francis Kildea, "Pears too had long admired the artist, poet and printmaker: in 1949 he bought Blake's *St. Paul and the Viper*, a gorgeous watercolour (c. 1803–5), which hung in pride of place over the fireplace ..." (*Benjamin Britten: A Life in the Twentieth Century*, 2013, p. 480). In regard to the selection by Pears, Kildea conjectures that Britten left the task to his partner as an attempt to make amends for the fact that he wrote the cycle for another singer, the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.