ETERNAL WINTER

"Holy Thursday" from *Songs of Experience* by William Blake (1758-1827)

Joan Szymko





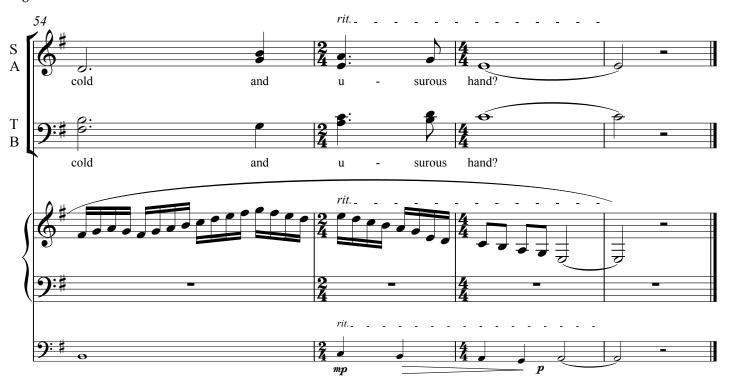






* Tenor solo may be substituted by an Alto





Eternal Winter is a setting of the poem "Holy Thursday" from William Blake's "Songs of Experience." (1794). The context for the poem is the annual Ascension Thursday service at St Paul's Cathedral (forty days after Easter), when poor and orphaned children from London's Church run charity schools sang as they were paraded into St Paul's for religious services. The tone here is much darker than in Blake's poem of the same name from his "Songs of Innocence," written five years earlier. He portrays the children's voices not as the angelic singing from "Songs of Innocence," but rather as a "trembling cry." The England of Blake's time was the richest, most powerful nation on earth. But in his eyes, "rich and fruitful" Britain is a "land of poverty," implying that society had turned a blind eye to these children, who will live in an "eternal winter" - perpetually impoverished and destined for a cruel life of "days filled with thorns." I set this poem because I was drawn to the powerful metaphors of Blake's "eternal winter," but also because I was so struck by how time passes and yet how little has changed in regard to society's regard toward childhood poverty. While the poor of Industrialized London most certainly lived in more wretched conditions; the fact is that today, in America, one in five of children under age six live in poverty. The child poverty rate in the USA, the country with the largest economy in the world, is two to three times higher than that of other major industrial nations.

Holy Thursday (from "Songs of Experience")

Is this a holy thing to see
In a rich and fruitful land.
Babes reduced to misery,
Fed with cold and usurous hand?

Is that trembling cry a song? Can it be a song of joy? And so many children poor? It is a land of poverty!

And their sun does never shine And their fields are bleak & bare, And their ways are fill'd with thorns: It is eternal winter there.

For where-e'er the sun does shine. And where-e'er the rain does fall, Babe can never hunger there, Nor poverty the mind appall.

William Blake (1757-1827) was an English artist and poet. (pictured on cover). He was born in London and lived much of his life there. From a very early age he was inclined toward painting and poetry. Despite his prolific output he lived in poverty much of his life, as he struggled to make a living as an illustrator and engraver. Blake was a mystic and spoke openly of his visions. Most certainly a nonconformist, he kept company with some of the leading radical thinkers of his day, such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. He believed in sexual and racial equality and justice for all, and abhorred oppression in all its forms. "Songs of Innocence and Experience" is his most popular work. Both books of "Songs" were printed in an illustrated format much like illuminated manuscripts. The earliest copies were printed and illuminated by Blake himself.

For information on composer, Joan Szymko, visit: www.joanszymko.com