

SONGS OF INNOCENCE

The opening scene of David Lynch's movie "Blue Velvet" takes us to an idyllic place: a suburban garden underneath a clear blue sky, bright colors suggesting warmth, the whole setting closely resembling what the denizens of suburbia would regard as an earthly paradise. In dream-like slow motion we are shown this idealized world from a child's perspective, with us, the observers, turning into that innocent creature, beholding this colorful Garden of Eden in amazement, as though seeing it for the first time, this corner of the world where evil has no right of way, and sin has as yet no name. The song "Blue Velvet" accompanies the scenario. Some irritation, though, is created by the hissing sound of water as a man is sprinkling his garden. We hear birds twittering and insects chirping, and, eventually, we see the garden hose getting knotted, the first indication that all is not well. The music becomes blurred, other sounds interfere with the harmony, the hissing turns into a grumbling and a whistling, the hose becomes clogged, like the arteries inside the man's body: he collapses, struck down by a stroke. The camera follows this movement, finally zooming in on the turf, below the turf even; and all of a sudden we find ourselves in a world that is utterly different, that has no resemblance whatsoever to the earlier idyll: here, among the blades of grass and in the soil, a battle is waged. The insects appear larger than life, the sounds drown out the music, there is a seething and scraping and bustling. This other cosmos is an alarming place: a jungle where violence reigns, where one has to fight for survival. Beauty is only the beginning of horror.

"Pipe me a song about a lamb", is a line from the "Introduction" to William Blake's "Songs of Innocence". A child on a cloud demands such a song to be played, and: "so I piped with merry cheer". Phil Minton performs these lines in a baritone of bewitching charm, lines and tones appearing to come from the depths of the unconscious, or at least from a fairytale land. The piece is opened by Clayton Thomas's bass, then Hannes Loeschel's piano comes in, and Mathias Koch on drums conjures up a percussive landscape. It is a simple melody, the texture wholly transparent at first, the lyricism seemingly harmless; but little by little, the music begins to counteract the will to harmonization appealed to in us: underneath the semantic level, underneath the level of the song-like form a grumbling, rasping, raging commences, a murmuring and roaring, a hooting and a clamoring, a turmoil that seems to be part of another, uncontrollable world. Guitar, trumpet and piano produce such a buzz of alarm and eeriness that even the seemingly harmless message communicated by the lyrics takes on an eerie and alarming quality. It is the same effect as that created by David Lynch. The world of beautiful appearances does exist, but not without its reverse side. The surface is what we would like to perceive as true, but underneath it something imponderable and obscure and dark is lurking.

Yet the horrible and the terrifying may in fact just be more attractive and fascinating, and it looms where one least expects it. It's the familiar dialectic: that everything which we, as human beings controlled by reason, believe to be understandable and comprehensible in its beauty, can tilt into its opposite, into barbarity. Art is capable of making us aware of this moment of tilting, capable of making this correlation perceptible. In Hannes Loeschel's "Songs of Innocence", compositions based on William Blake's cycle of poems, it becomes perceptible right from the first moment, however well hidden it may often be underneath the classic song forms used by the composer – whether it's rock, folk, country, ballads, or even suggestions of doom metal and ambient of the variety preferred by bands like Bohren & der Club of Gore. Loeschel's work has frequently been situated at the point of intersection of New Music, jazz and popular song forms, and he has mastered all these genres; he uses them to create pieces that sound wholly new and yet are almost traditional. Nevertheless there are always subtle deviations that play on the unexpected, produce insecurities and generate enhancements. William Blake is turned upside down; Loeschel interprets the "Songs of Innocence" as though he was reading them through Blake's "Songs of Experience". "Songs of Innocence and Experience" – William Blake created these two cycles during the final decade of the 18th century, when the Age of Enlightenment had reached its peak while at the same time revealing its dark abysses. In his "Songs of Innocence" Blake, the painter and poet, enacts a state of creation that appears quite naive. It is the perspective of a child perceiving everything for the

very first time. The songs reflect not just the innocence referred to in the title but also inexperience and trust. Belief in goodness is coupled with amazement at the wonders of the world. "Little Lamb who made thee", Blake writes at one point, a line encompassing Christian symbolism and promise of deliverance as well as a natural piety not yet tarnished by experience. Experience will come later: in the "Songs of Experience" the beauty becomes unsettled, the dark and the evil find their way into Blake's poetry. You cannot have the one without the other.

Especially during the 20th century William Blake proved to be an inspiration for many artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians: from the occultist Aleister Crowley to Aldous Huxley, from Ridley Scott to Jim Jarmusch, from Benjamin Britten to Michael Nyman – Blake's influence can be detected in numerous different works of art. Pop and rock musicians are particularly fond of quoting Blake. Patti Smith or Nick Cave have repeatedly expressed their admiration for Blake's poetry, and referred to him in their work. The darker layers in Blake's texts and paintings have been an ample source of inspiration for heavy metal bands such as Iron Maiden or Venom. Allen Ginsberg, the beat poet, also recorded the "Songs of Innocence" – and on listening to the first measures the difference to Hannes Loeschel's approach becomes apparent immediately: Ginsberg's music and the way he sings emphasize naivety and a children's songlike quality; in his interpretation the lyrics appear to have been smoothly translated into a musical form.

Hannes Loeschel avoids the danger of sweetness without deconstructing the original idea of the songs. In his compositions the historical reception of the "Songs of Innocence" is always considered, and rendered productive. A new adaptation of a work that has already become part of the canon of quotations of popular culture therefore requires not only chutzpah but also a truly open approach, an approach that extends the boundaries of musical categorizations. Hannes Loeschel's musical work has always encompassed a great variety of genres, he is familiar with all kinds of different idioms and knows how to integrate them into his own musical language. Having started out as a performer of contemporary music, Loeschel became increasingly interested in improvisations during the 1990s; he composes scores for theater and movie productions, has an ongoing flirtation with jazz and, ever and again, with traditional musical forms. In his investigation into the traditional Viennese song on the CD "Herz.Bruch.Stück" he managed to ignore the dividing line between folk song and art song with such nonchalance and sincerity that the historical dimension became merged into the contemporary interpretation. The practically outdated CD – album – format generates a "theater space", as Loeschel himself calls it, in which conceptual work becomes possible: audio art, sound art. His approach to Blake's "Songs of Innocence" is similarly unorthodox, and also opens up sound spaces. The musicians he assembled for this project – Phil Minton (voc), Theresa Eipeldauer (voc), Michael Bruckner-Weinhuber (git), Clayton Thomas (b), Mathias Koch (dr), Burkhard Stangl (key/git) and Thomas Berghammer (tr) – were able, thanks to their diverse experience in free improvisation, jazz, classical music or popular genres, to enhance the compositions and add a multitude of associative levels – theatrical spaces in which the musicians can play different roles. The artistic skill of Phil Minton alone could make listeners go off into raptures: the way the Welsh avantgarde baritone makes the most inconspicuous lines sparkle, ruffles them up, transcends them and makes them appear ambiguous, is simply beyond belief. Loeschel could not have wished for a more suitable singer: his voice holds both the warmth and the eeriness Hannes Loeschel has detected in Blake's songs. Because beauty is always the beginning of horror.

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