

400 musicians will 'illuminate' Bolcom

Kevin Lynch

The Capital Times, Madison, WI

A quarter of a century in the making, William Bolcom's "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" is a quintessential American effort, almost heedless in ambition, scale and polyglot style. But Bolcom's talent and where-withal succeeded as a recording.

The massive composition sets all 46 poems of William Blake's most revered work of verse to a two-hour-plus score for 400 performers: orchestra, chorus and 10 vocal soloists. Other featured soloists play harmonica and country fiddle, which suggests the work's aesthetic range.

The Naxos CD won four Grammy awards in 2006, adding to Bolcom's other career honors, including a Pulitzer Prize and a National Medal of Arts.

The composer's career is currently enjoying a public climax with a two-week festival, "Illuminating Bolcom," in Minneapolis. The fest will peak this weekend with a multimedia staging of "Songs of Innocence and of Experience" at 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at Orchestra Hall in downtown Minneapolis. Tickets are \$20, \$27, and \$35, plus service fees, and half-price for students. For information, or to order, call 800-292-4141 or go online at www.illuminatingbolcom.org.

Blake's incantatory text is quite accessible, in a style that may have influenced Walt Whitman, attesting to what a Penguin edition of the poems termed "the indestructibility of innocence" and the necessity of immersing oneself in life.

The performance will include the VocalEssence chorus and ensemble singers, the Minnesota Chorale, Minnesota Boy Choir and an orchestra conducted by Philip Brunelle, multi-level staging, live video and projected "illuminations" from Blake's own famous colored engravings for the poem.

In Bolcom's massive work, the formal extremes -- from solo harmonica to orchestra-and-chorus explosions -- might have collapsed under its own uneven weight.

But Bolcom somehow keeps it all afloat with music both folksy and phantasmagorical: rock, blues, bluegrass, reggae and Bolcom's modernist orchestral language.

The work evokes a human consciousness recollecting an archetypal lifetime, recasting Blake's expressive immediacy and prophetic wisdom. There are a few idiomatic flaws -- the clunky stuck-on-the-beat phrasing of "The Little Black Boy" and some moments of arch-operatic manner in the tenor singing.

The Boston Globe called it "the greatest achievement of synthesis in American music since Porgy and Bess." "

I think it falls short of Gershwin's folk opera, a perfect weave of rough-hewn storytelling, indelible blues melodies and soulful humor. But even being compared to "Porgy" is plenty o' somethin'.

Born in Seattle in 1938, Bolcom grew up in Washington state's lumber towns. He started studying piano and composition at age 11. He earned a tuition scholarship to the University of Washington, but paid his own way through the rest of school, he recalled in an interview with Minnesota Public Radio.

"My parents had no money, so I played every kind of dance band," Bolcom said. "I played stag parties, burlesque halls and churches. More than once I played a burlesque house on Saturday night and a church on Sun-

day morning. That contributed to my curiously skewed musical background and nonjudgmental interest in different kinds of music, and how they would all relate.”

Other events to conclude the festival will include “Dynamite Tonight,” a cabaret-style operetta with World War I-era pop songs, which Bolcom wrote during the Vietnam War, at 7:30 p.m. Monday in the Nautilus Theater in St. Paul (\$5 at the door). Then Edo de Waart (who conducted the Madison Symphony Orchestra last weekend) will lead the Minnesota Orchestra on Thursday through Saturday in Bolcom’s “Commedia, for (almost) Eighteenth-Century Orchestra,” and works by Leonard Bernstein and Kurt Weill.

Included in the festival is an exhibit of William Blake’s rhapsodic artwork, “Illustrations of the Book of Job,” first published in 1825, at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, through June 17.

E-mail: klynch@madison.com

Published: April 24, 2007