

The Lamb – Notes by Karen Gordon-Grube  
John Tavener (1944-2013); poem by William Blake (1757-1827)

Alluding to Biblical images of Christ as “the Lamb of God” (“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”), and of believers as the “sheep” of His flock (Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep”), Blake’s poem draws a parallel between the Lamb of God and the innocent lamb in the field. Thus, just as the Father gives life and loving care to the earthly lamb, He sent His Son to be born on Earth, and cared for Him as a human child so He could fulfill His role as the sacrificial Lamb. Blake uses this lamb imagery to illustrate the inseparable union of humanity and divinity in Christ—a bond which is expressed in concrete personal terms when the poet likens himself (and all of humanity) to lambs: “I, a child, and thou a lamb, we are called by his name.”

As befits the dual nature of Blake’s imagery, Tavener created a musical Lamb motif that consists of two parts, and virtually his entire composition is based on this motif. As the motif is continuously repeated, it is sometimes also sung as an inversion (in “retrograde motion”), meaning that the notes and intervals move in reverse order back to the note with which the motif began. This forward/backward movement is a sort of musical palindrome. But Tavener also employs a form of inversion that is an upside down mirroring; in this case the notes and intervals that go up or down in the original motif do so in the opposite direction in the inversion. When both forms of inversion are combined in two voices singing together, the notes of the two lines are in an upside down and backward relationship to each other (called “retrograde inversion”)—while of course the music continues moving forward. The musical lines thus visually complement each other on the page, as two mirrored halves of a whole, and Tavener used this compositional device (for which J.S. Bach is well known) to express the coming together of the “lower” and “higher” realms through the “Lamb.” The inversions themselves obscure the original motif for the listener; however, the back and forth/up and down movement brings the divine and earthly aspects of the Lamb/lamb together as ONE—just as does Blake’s poem. Thus music and word express the never-ending relationship between humanity and God, as well as His intangible omnipresence. It is remarkable that despite the rational structuring, Tavener’s composition does not seem contrived, and that it touches the emotions with an intense immediacy. Tavener instructs that the piece be performed “with extreme tenderness...always guided by the words,” and the gentle lines are indeed composed with such tenderness that, as they are sung, they seem to lovingly caress the “little Lamb.”

*[Did Tavener use his motif only to illustrate Christ’s dual nature in an abstract way? or was his intention more profound? In Christian iconography religious symbols are thought by some to contain a true essence of that for which they stand, and according to this school of thought, contemplation of the religious “Lamb” symbol would channel some of His essence. Perhaps Tavener thought of his Lamb motif as a sort of musical religious symbol, and that hearing it repeated again and again in his composition would have the same effect as the contemplation of a visual religious symbol. If this interpretation is correct, Tavener has fulfilled his declared intentions as a composer. In a tribute to Tavener on his passing (in 2013), The Guardian said that he strove “to be a channel through which the music flows...” In his own words: “I wanted to produce music that was the sound of God. That’s what I have always tried to do.”]*

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed  
By the stream and o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing, wooly, bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice?  
Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee;  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb.  
He is meek, and he is mild,  
He became a little child.  
I, a child, and thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!