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Songs of Innocence

Hannes Loeschel

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British mystical poet William Blake's 1794 cycle *Songs of Innocence and Experience* has inspired many composers including Benjamin Britten and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Yet this treatment of the unconventional poet's masterwork is notable for more than full-color illustrations for each of the 18 songs included in the session's the lavishly produced booklet. The top-flight and ever changing arrangements here were created by Viennese composer/keyboardist Hannes Loeschel, and performed by him plus an Austrian combo of guitars, electric pianos, bass, drums and trumpet.

Loeschel's compositions echo his familiarity with Continental jazz, improv, notated and theatre music. How then does he retain the intrinsic English nature of Blake's work? By having the verses sung by British vocalist Phil Minton. Minton, whose usual performances involve wordless vocalese of yowls, retches and cries, rises to the occasion. His parlando respectfully reflects Blake's singular, quasi-religious beliefs, while his lilting and passionate musicality makes it appear as if singing the poet's words is an everyday occurrence.

Meanwhile the highly syncopated and heavily rhythmic backing could impress pop fans with its beat, and jazzers with its supple sophistication. Intelligent jazz-rock, the music is driven by drummer Mathias Koch's backbeat and illuminated by rough-hewn twangs and distorted snaps and echoes from guitarists Michael Bruckner-Weinhuber and Burkhard Stangl plus trumpeter Thomas Berghammer flashing grace notes. Redefining and extending Blake's 18th Century visions with modernistic, but not alienating sounds is a momentous achievement. Loeschel, Minton and the others should be lustily applauded.