Inspired by the poems of William Blake, William Bolcom, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and School of Music faculty member, worked in spurts over the course of many years to complete his monumental Songs of Innocence and of Experience. A recording of the three-hour performance, requiring over 30 microphones and 450 performers, was made at Hill Auditorium in April 2004 and released by Naxos Records. The work was nominated for multiple Awards; winning four coveted Grammys was cause for celebration and pride in the School of Music community.

The suspense was killing us. As the countdown to the Grammy Awards on February 8 seemed to stretch on forever, we did what we could. We waited. Finally the first email came. It was from Jerry Blackstone, Director of Choirs, who had a mole at the ceremonies to call him from back stage. The subject line of the email said it all.

“WE WON!”

Who, one might ask, is we? Well, in this case it’s the 450 performers, most of them students at the School of Music, and the composer.

But it’s also Kenneth Kiesler, Director of Orchestras at the School of Music who prepared the symphony orchestra for months leading up to the performance into a shimmering, note-perfect ensemble. And Jerry Blackstone, Director of Choirs and Conductor of the Choral Union, who had the daunting task of pulling five choirs together into a unified, seamless whole ready to hit the stage at Hill in top form.

Of the performers, William Bolcom told The Ann Arbor News, “They spent a lot of hours in rehearsal and it showed. They knew the piece, didn’t just play the notes. There was the kind of cohesion and flow you don’t get when people are sitting there just flying by the seat of their pants, hoping to hit most of the notes on the page.”

Songs, we found out—recorded live at Hill Auditorium on April 8, 2004, almost 20 years to the day after its American premiere there—won Grammys for best contemporary classical composition, best choral performance, best classical performance, and classical producer of the year for Tim Handley, both for Songs and for several other works, including Professor of Composition Michael Daugherty’s UFO from his CD Philadelphia Stories.

The announcement of the wins at the televised Grammys came in a grouping of awards presented “earlier in the day,” listed on the screen before a commercial break. Classical works don’t get prime time, which is saved for rock stars, rappers, and pop divas—the Beyonces, Bonos, and Black Eyed Peas—who pull in the ratings for the annual televised program. But the news was official nonetheless.

Most remarkable of all? No other university music school has ever received such Grammy acclaim.

Others who could share in the glory include Michael Daugherty, who had the idea in the first place and pushed to have Bolcom’s work performed. And Kenneth Fischer, President of
the University Musical Society, and Karen Wolff, then Dean of the School of Music, who decided to collaborate on the project as a way to celebrate and show off the newly renovated Hill Auditorium.

“This project would not have happened without an incredible partnership between two of Ann Arbor’s oldest musical institutions: the University Musical Society and the University of Michigan School of Music,” said Fischer. “We’re so proud of the UMS Choral Union and the many, many faculty and student musicians from the School of Music who pulled together to make this ambitious project a reality—and who demonstrate the uncommon experiences that our two world-class institutions provide.”

“And, of course, none of this would have happened without Bill Bolcom’s creative genius.”

Because of its enormity, the work has been performed only 16 times since it was completed in 1982, some thirty years after Bolcom first started work on the ambitious piece. “Ever since I was seventeen,” Bolcom wrote, “when the reading of William Blake was to make a profound difference in my life, I have wanted to set the entire Songs of Innocence and of Experience to music. ... The Blakean principle of contrariness would also dominate my approach to the work, particularly in matters of style.”

The Pulitzer prize-winning composer was finally able to resume work on the masterpiece in earnest when hired by the School of Music 1973. “I was once afraid it would never be heard or even finished,” Bolcom wrote. “Songs is one of those works one does without commission. Finding time and relative peace to compose it in the sheer all-day effort to survive freelance ... had proved impossible. When we moved to Ann Arbor, finally I was able to put the piece together.”

The work draws from genres as diverse as classical, jazz, folk, country, and rock, and includes lush choral parts, the spoken word, hymns, cabaret songs, and reggae. “The apparent disharmony of each clash and juxtaposition eventually produces a deeper and more universal harmony, once the whole cycle is absorbed,” Bolcom wrote. “All I did was to use the same stylistic point of departure as Blake in my musical settings.”

Songs made its world premiere in January of 1984 in Stuttgart under the baton of Dennis Russell Davies. In April of the same year it made its American debut at Hill with then Director of the University Symphony Orchestra, Gustav Meier.

To stage such a massive work would normally prove prohibitively expensive. But with the availability of musicians at the School of Music and financial backing from the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation and longtime music supporters Linda and Maurice Binkow, it became a reality.

In fact, even though the piece had its world premiere with a professional orchestra, it had been originally conceived as a work to involve the whole of the School of Music. “A school of our size could fall too easily into watertight departmental thinking on the part of both faculty and students,” Bolcom wrote. “What a shame not to get to know and collaborate with other kinds of musicians, or actors, or dancers, in one’s learning years! In the chorus of a St. Matthew Passion performance when a student in Seattle, I experienced a deep feeling of oneness with the whole community of musicians onstage that permeated my soul; we were singers and instrumentalists, each from dif
different disciplines, brought spiritually together by Bach’s music. I vowed some day to write something that could afford such an experience to students after me ... the hope is that the greater understanding of ourselves that Blake leads us toward in this cycle will thus be experienced here communally, on and off stage.”

Leonard Slatkin, Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra and longtime friend of Bolcom’s, was one of the first to see the score when it was finished in 1982. And it was Slatkin who was brought in to conduct the massive work. “The recording of Bolcom’s epic was a labor of love for all who participated,” Slatkin said. “The fact that the members of the Academy chose to honor this performance attests to the work’s strength and power. It took 20 years for Bill to write the work and another 20 for us to record it.”

Once the performance had been scheduled, Bradley Bloom, Associate Dean at the School of Music, teamed up with Michael Kondziolka, Director of Programming for UMS, to arrange to have the work recorded. Their mutual choice for the job was Naxos Records, the respected classical music label. While Michael consulted with Bolcom on the choice of soloists, Bloom oversaw the complex logistics of coordinating the School of Music ensembles involved in the performance and the complicated contract negotiations with Naxos, whose home office is in Hong Kong. But in the end, “I was thrilled to be part of it,” Bloom told The Ann Arbor News. “I can look back on my career and say, ‘I helped make this happen.’”

“It’s our best-selling single composer record of 2004-05,” Mark Berry, national publicist for Naxos told The Ann Arbor News. “It really just went gangbusters, a real success for us. The day after the Grammys were announced it went from being not on the charts at all to being the sixth best-selling classical recording on Amazon.com.”

David Lau, owner of Brookwood Studio in Ann Arbor, recorded the dress rehearsal, the live performance, and two days of post-performance sessions. It took some six months to work out the technical aspects for the recording at Hill, an endeavor that included strategic placement of some 30+ microphones. Brookwood mixed what came out of the performances, rehearsals, and extra sessions, and sent the tape to Tim Handley in London who did the final editing, teasing out the best version from all of the takes.

“This is cause for great celebration,” said Christopher Kendall, Dean of the School of Music. “It’s wonderful to see the extraordinary quality of the work of our students and faculty being recognized in this way ... truly a triumph for the many people whose artistry and organizational skills contributed to this project.”

The Players
Leonard Slatkin, conductor
University Symphony Orchestra, Kenneth Kiesler, conductor
Contemporary Directions Ensemble, Jonathan Shames, conductor
UMS Choral Union/U-M Chamber Choir, Jerry Blackstone, conductor
U-M University Choir, Christopher Kiver, conductor
U-M Orpheus Singers, Carole Ott, William Hammer,
Jason Harris, conductors
MSU Children’s Choir, Mary Alice Stollak, music director
Soloists: Christine Brewer, soprano; Measha Brueggergosman, soprano; Ilana Davidson, soprano; Nmon Ford, baritone; Nathan Lee Graham, speaker/vocals; Linda Hohenfeld, soprano; Tommy Morgan, harmonica; Joan Morris, mezzo-soprano; Carmen Pelton, soprano; Peter “Madcat” Ruth, harmonica and vocals; Marietta Simpson, contralto; Thomas Young, tenor; Jeremy Kittel, fiddle