Expanding Vision: The Music of Alyssa Morris

by

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ABSTRACT

The compositions of Alyssa Morris represent an important source of modern American music. Over the last decade she has garnered an exemplary reputation among the double reed community, one that has begun to spread to the wider musical scene. This document explores Morris' impact as a composer, focusing on her compositional philosophy/method and her stylistic traits. From there, it examines four specific works by Morris (*Motion, Coastal Kaleidoscope, Brush Strokes,* and *Where Do Children Come From?*), diagnosing the above criteria. Special attention is paid to Morris' use of programmaticism as it is among the more striking elements of her works.

PREFACE

The purpose of this document is to explore and evaluate works by the American composer Alyssa Morris. To this end, the document begins by demonstrating the place Morris occupies in the modern musical landscape and showing the rapid increase of attention her works have received. As part of this demonstration, the author provides a complete annotated bibliography of her compositions, both published and unpublished. No such list exists, and its inclusion shows a breadth and depth to her works that is easily missed just by looking at her or her publisher's websites. The annotated bibliography also shows the rapid swell of compositions and commissions that she has experienced during the last five years.

The author then establishes context to her recent success by outlining her personal compositional process, including her driving philosophy on writing music and the processes she employs from drafting to finishing. Special focus is placed on her use of self-imposed Rules as a guiding principal for her work. The author then justifies the popularity and success of her compositions by exploring the principal stylistic traits her works employ and demonstrating them in analyses of four of her compositions for chamber winds. These include *Motion*, *Brush Strokes*, *Coastal Kaleidoscope*, and *Evolution (or Where do Children come From)*. Analyses will evaluate use of form, tonality, jazz idioms, quotation, and especially programmaticism. The majority of Morris' 30 completed works have strong programmatic elements, and providing a deep look at the program's integration is beneficial for both the listener and the performer.

While preparing this document, I happened upon another dissertation of similar scope by Amy Selkirk through Florida State University. Her writing provides analysis for

three of Morris' compositions, namely *Four Personalities, Up and Away,* and *Chrysalis*, including a discussion of the programmatic elements contained therein. We are lucky to have a wealth of repertoire from Alyssa Morris, all of which is worthy of performance and analysis. Similarly, Morris' use of programmaticism is inextricably tied to each of her compositions, and no exploration of any of her works would be of value without looking at the brilliant ways she introduces the program into the music. As such, I'm happy to further the work started in Selkirk's document by shining an analytical light on more of Morris' works.

Preparing this document has been a great personal pleasure. Alyssa Morris was the Teaching Assistant at Brigham Young University for most of my undergraduate studies, and many of my early lessons came from her, the weekly reed-making classes being particularly memorable. By studying in the same program with her, I was also fortunate enough to hear her coach many people, myself, included, on the performance of her compositions. Throughout all my studies since, I've enjoyed sharing her works with my colleagues and students and seeing their enthusiastic response to hearing her music. I am grateful to be able to return to her music again and am looking forward to following her works for many years to come.

CHAPTER I

THE COMPOSITIONAL PROCESS OF ALYSSA MORRIS

Alyssa Morris is a contemporary American oboist and composer. She holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Brigham Young University and a Doctorate degree from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (all in oboe, with a cognate in composition at CCM). Morris has occupied positions in orchestras across the country, most notably as principal oboe of the Richmond Symphony orchestra. Morris is currently Professor of Oboe and Music Theory at Kansas State University, a position she has held since receiving her Doctorate.

As a composer, Alyssa Morris has grown to demand the attention of American musicians and beyond across the last decade. Beginning with her published works from her undergraduate years, her initial success came from her solo and chamber works featuring the oboe, but she has since seen her reputation extend beyond the double reed world, bringing her witty and sharp idiom to the contrabass flute, the woodwind quintet, and the symphony. As an accomplished oboist in her own right, the main body of her works include the double reeds, and their success can be traced clearly across the programs of the International Double Reed Society conference programs. Her works have seen performances at IDRS conferences in 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019, a claim few other living composers can make. In 2018, her *Four Personalities* was selected as part the repertoire for the Young Artist Oboe competition.

Her works have been recorded by several prominent American oboists. Her most popular work, *Four Personalities*, has been recorded commercially four times by artists

such as Nancy Ambrose King (University of Michigan), Courtney Miller (University of Iowa), Michele Fiala (Ohio University), and Mary Ashley Barret (University of North Carolina at Greensboro). Her commissions are no less impressive. Her first major commission came in 2010 through Arizona State University's *Ocotillo Winds,* resulting in the quartet *Motion.* In the following years, she has received more and more commissions from people and groups such as Brigham Young University's Sundance Trio, Mark Ostoich (Cincinnati Conservatory), the Richmond Symphony Orchestra, the US Air Force woodwind quintet, a consortium of Baylor Alumni in honor of Doris DeLoach, and many other groups and universities across the country. Her output is remarkable, given the busy teaching and playing schedule she maintains, producing three to five works per year.

When starting out on a composition, Morris spends significantly more time planning than drafting. She spends the first few weeks studying the topic of the piece intently, whether it's one of her choosing or selected by the commission. For example, when preparing a piece about a person, she seeks out as much information about their character as she can through interviews. As ideas or thoughts about the piece in question or what musical techniques she'll use to express them come to her, she records them in the moment onto her phone for later development. This process is naturally very time consuming, and Morris does much of it during her frequent commutes to her teaching and orchestral appointments, taking advantage of every spare moment. At this stage, Morris also decides the large scale layout of the piece, i.e. how many movements it will have, what forms she'll use, etc. Morris also designs outlines that organize general

approximations of what images or musical ideas will occur at what point and in which movement.

Once her framework is in mind, she begins developing specific musical themes to improvise at an instrument. These range from piano and oboe (her most frequently used) to whatever she has on hand, including occasionally the marimba. Through her improvisation, just like with the brainstorming process, Morris uses her phone recorder to capture any promising segments in real time. This process is ongoing. For example, if a melody comes to her while driving, she'll sing it to herself and record it in the car. After collecting sufficient musical samples, Morris begins to put her ideas into Finale. This drafting process proceeds quickly, facilitated by her preconstructed formal and thematic framework[1]. For small ensemble works, Morris normally completes the entire brainstorming and drafting process in about three weeks of active work. These periods happen most frequently during breaks in her teaching schedule such as summer or winter breaks. The final edits and/or preparation for publication can take much longer to complete, and Morris spreads out that work across most of the year. The entire duration from receiving a commission to its completion might take as long as a year, however, as Morris typically has six to eight commissions on her waiting list at any given time[2].

Morris' early works were composed more slowly. Her current method and rate of composition became established between 2013 and 2014, coinciding with the dramatic increase in the number of commissions she received. Morris' increased speed of

[1] Alyssa Morris, phone interview by author, January 7, 2020
[2] Ibid

composition comes from increased experience, and she says that the process is now quite fluid for her[3].

This was the approach taken by Morris as she prepared *27-72* (2019: Oboe and piano). Morris didn't know Doris DeLoach (in whose honor the work was commissioned) very well at the time, so she began by looking at the comments and memories posted by DeLoach's students on the Go-Fund-Me page that kickstarted the commission. She searched for stories from their studies with DeLoach at Baylor. These were integral in providing a sense of character and mood for the composition. All these insights came together to create the final form of the work- a musical representation of a day in the life of Doric DeLoach[4].

The insights gained from her research appear immediately. Morris begins to capture the nature of DeLoach by infusing her name into the music itself. DeLoach's students affectionately refer to their teacher as DD, so Morris in turn crafts the piece's first theme around two "D" pitches, called the DD theme. Similarly, the tonal center of the piece moves between "D" and "Db". In the first movement, Morris sets out to reflect the general nature and attitude of DD as remembered by students, but also includes a specific scene: A depiction of a masterclass rapid fire question and answer session. The remainder of the movements cover different aspects of her teaching style. Orchestral excerpts were a staple of DeLoach's curriculum, so Morris threads jazzy renditions of major oboe excepts through the second movement (the impetus for this idea actually came as Morris returned from one of many orchestral auditions and just wanted to do "something different!"). For the final movement, Morris acquired a recording of

[3] Alyssa Morris, phone interview by author, January 7, 2020
[4] Ibid

DeLoach's reed noodles (a brief, habitual musical passage used to test reeds) along with those of members of the consortium. Morris was quite struck by the similarities of the collected reed noodles and used the theme as the melodic basis for the third movement. The final movement combines DD's theme from the first movement with Baylor's school hymn as a tribute to Deloach's contributions to the school[5]. The attention to detail that Morris put into every moment of the work is only possible due to her rigorous research efforts, and it grants her work a strong sense of authenticity and emotion.

Over the last few years, Morris has begun placing greater focus and meaning on the selection of forms in her works. In her early works, Morris' use of form was incidental to the music, occasionally using new forms in part as writing experiments. Recently, however, she has begun tying to the theme of the program directly whenever possible. In her recent work *Changing Faces*, Morris explores the various "faces" that people employ at different parts of their lives, i.e. *Blue in the Face*, *Face Off*. To effectively convey these subtle changings, Morris sets the work as a theme and variations, with each variation evoking a new face. As a side note, the inspiration for the work came to Morris while she was mowing the lawn! In her upcoming cello concerto (a work about a tree), each movement represents a new season and the happenings they bring. Another example comes from her trio *Coping,* a work about the coping mechanisms used when dealing anxiety, depression, or other mental illnesses. In its second movement, *Counting, Breathing*, Morris selects a continuous variation form that, when combined with a repeated counted breathing motive, creates a chord progression that becomes more continually more anxious, unstable, and busy as the piece

[5] Alyssa Morris, phone interview by the author, January 7, 2020.

progresses[6]. The effect is powerful. The audience feels deeply the anxiety that the breathing is struggling to contain, an effect made possible through Morris' carefully chosen form.

As demonstrated by her drafting process, programmaticism is one of the key unifying elements throughout her works. Of her thirty completed compositions, twenty-nine are based on a program of some kind. (The one exception is *Evolution*, a writing exercise where she sets a simple theme in four different chronological idioms, baroque through 20th century.) Equally impressive to her dedication to the style is the variety of programs that she has employed over the last fifteen years.

Her compositions present a rigorous approach to programmaticism, looking at contemporary ideas in creative and demanding ways. Morris draws her compositional inspiration from a wide assortment of concepts. Some are simple ideas such as bike riding, the weather, trinkets, and landscapes. Others represent more complex notions like psychology, math, cryptozoology, and astronomy. Similarly, her approach to presenting the program varies from piece to piece. For example, in *Up and Away* Morris employs a leitmotif representing a balloon throughout the entire work woven through the various musical environments the balloon would find itself. In contrast, each movement of *Brush Strokes* represents a different artist, not by representing the subject material of their works but by sonically emulating their brush work. In every case, Morris' writing reflects commitment to the topic. Whatever theme or idea is placed before her, she informs herself deeply about the subject matter, researching and learning to be able to better express it in music.

[6] Alyssa Morris, phone interview by author, January 7, 2020

Morris' use of programmaticism is closely related to one of her principal compositional philosophies: Using self-imposed rules and restrictions to shape the direction of her writing. By limiting the options available to her, she sharpens and guides her writing. Morris sees musical restrictions as analogous to the rules of a board game: They make it work. Starting with a rule set brings greater inspiration and helps increase composition speed. Morris compares it to asking someone out of the blue what they want to eat right now while vacationing in a city like New York. In such a large place, the immense amount of options available could be paralyzing. In contrast, if they're brought into a specific restaurant and given some recommendations, it becomes much easier to arrive at a choice they're happy with[7]. The primary rule or boundary in most of Morris' music is the program. Morris' first work, *Four Personalities* (2007: Oboe and piano) demonstrates the function of compositional rules. When she began writing the piece, Morris didn't begin with a program in mind, but she knew she wanted to write something to play at her senior recital. When she sat down to start writing, the process was arduous and long. She did eventually come up with some music (that would eventually become the piece's third movement), and, because it used a lot of chord extensions (tall, jazz chords, to use the composers words), Morris titled the movement *Blue* (the piece originally had nothing to do with the Hartman personality test). From here, the ideas began to flow more freely. With one movement called *Blue,* she thought, "What if each movement was based on a color?" This then went to, "what if each color correlated to this personality test I took in high school?" From that point, the piece gained natural boundaries about the number and character of movements the piece should have. These

[7] Alyssa Morris, phone interview by author, January 7, 2020

boundaries made composing the rest of the work a much smoother process, and set the pattern Morris has followed in her continued work.

Boundaries are sometimes set by the commissioner. For her recent work, *Eyes to See and Lips to Tell*, the commissioner dictated many of the composition rules. They determined the work should be educational, about endangered species, for wind quintet, and around 15 minutes. From there, Morris began to add more rules to the work, embarking on personal research into endangered animals, eventually deciding which specific endangered animals she wanted to cover (see appendix A for the full list). Within each movement, Morris began to establish even further rules about how she would represent each animal. These include the use of transcribe whale songs to evoke blue whales, along with water themes quoted from many famous works. Morris reflects the Axolotl's (a type of salamander) Mexican homeland though use of mariachi. When writing about the Queen Alexandria's Wing butterfly from New Guinea, she frequently uses the pentatonic scale found frequently in folk music from the area[8]. Each of these examples represent a guiding rule that serves as the basis for Morris' melodic and harmonic development.

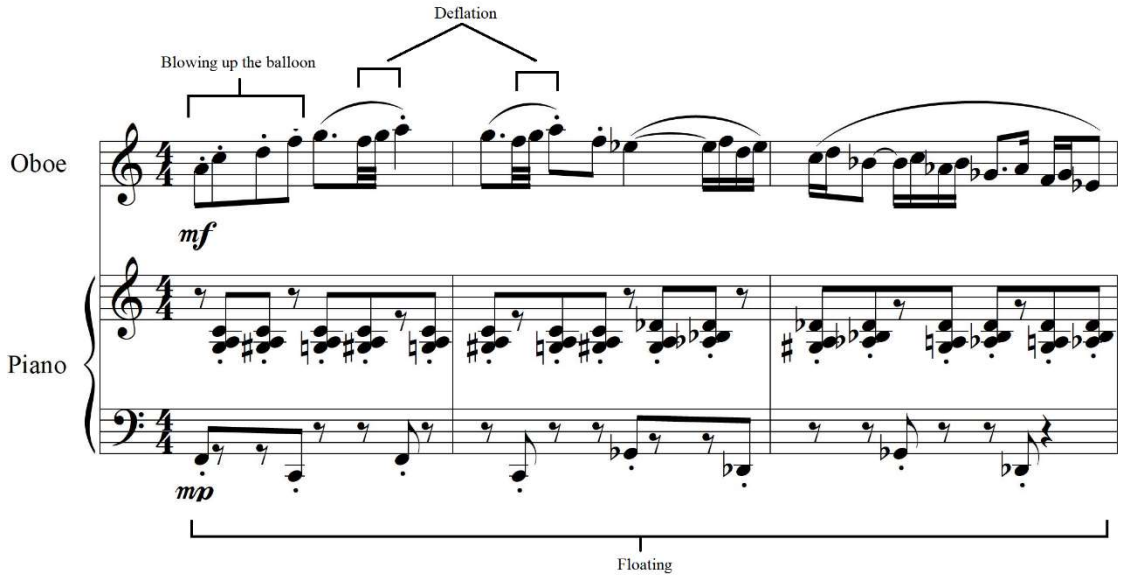
As a performer, it is necessary to dig into the program to bring out the life of her compositions. Morris' program notes tend to be conservative. She generally gives a few sentences about the inspiration and character of the piece, with perhaps one specific example of a technique used. Therefore, the performer should continue their study of the work past the program notes in order to capture the full subtlety, depth, and craftsmanship Morris' programs contain. Every element must be considered to uncover

[8] Alyssa Morris, phone interview by author, January 7, 2020

how to elevate the piece beyond the music: Form, harmony, articulation, rhythm, instrumentation, line, and dynamics. Particular attention should be paid to figuring out what rules Morris was working with when writing the piece. When done from this perspective, preparing to perform one of Morris' works turns into an experience of musical discovery.

An example of this is in *Up and Away*'s (2014: Oboe, bassoon, and piano) first movement, *Inhale/exhale*. Here Morris gives a more detailed program than usual, delineating a "light" motif that occurs across the entire piece and mentioning three balloon actions that the movement will depict: Namely, the blowing up of a balloon, a balloon floating, and an untied balloon shooting through the air. The performer will quickly see several large sections relating to these ideas. These begin with slowly accelerating staccato quarters (passed between the bassoon and oboe in mm. 1-4), evoking the sound of a balloon being blown up. The lines follow the F pentatonic scale, the lack of tendency tones indicating that the breathing is peaceful and even. The second, the floating of a balloon, is found in the lilting, 3/8 melody (emulating the balloon's gentle bobbing) the bassoon and oboe share (mm. 13-26). Finally, the motion of an untied balloon comes from mm. 34-37, where the short and sudden 16^{th} note triplets and 32^{nd} runs depict the explosive acceleration and deceleration of a rapidly deflating balloon.

What the performer may miss, however, is that all three of these programmatic elements are subtly present in the "light" motif itself.



Example 1.1 *Up and Away* "Light" Motif

The theme begins by presenting the blowing up of the balloon idea in diminution (in the theme's opening staccato eighth notes). The floating theme is found both in the piano's hemiola (suggesting 3/8 meter) and the lilting dotted rhythms in the second half of the melody (beat 3 of m. 5 to beat 2 of m. 6). Finally, the deflating balloon idea shows up in the oboe's uneven 16th runs in measures 6 and 7. The "light"-motif's contrast between duple meter in the melody and triple meter in the piano effectively generates some light-hearted Quirk, but could serve to obfuscate the melody's close juxtaposition of thematic elements. Understanding the "light" motif's origin will inform the performers approach to phrasing across the length of the piece and help to bring the program to life in the eyes of the audience.

Morris sets her double reed works apart through her fluent use of jazz idioms. Jazz-influenced movements appear in many of her compositions. These include *Life on a String* (*Up and Away*), *Seals* (*Coastal Kaleidoscope*), *Yellow* (*Four Personalities*), *Caterpillar* (*Chrysalis*) and *Strut* (*Motion*). Perhaps most striking is the movement

Innuendo from her concerto *Dreamscape*. In it Morris strips away the orchestra and brings in a drum set and a piano, turning the movement into a jazz trio. Equally impressive is her command of multiple jazz styles, ranging from swing to funk. The use of jazz serves another, perhaps unintended, purpose. Oboists rarely get to play jazz, and by providing repertoire that approaches the style is a mature and inventive way, Morris' supplements an underserved niche in oboe writing.

As in all her compositional choices, Morris' use of jazz (and the type of jazz used) is dedicated to serving the program. In the aforementioned *Innuendo*, Morris choice to reduce the orchestration to a jazz trio is brilliant. Jazz carries a sultry connotation, matching the intended mood. The use of a trio instead of a big band furthers the image by instilling a sense of closeness and intimacy among the three musical lines. In *Strut,* as discussed in greater detail later on, the use of *Funk* gives the work an immediate sense of attitude and a rhythmic focus that one can easily strut to. The fluent use of articulation cements the movement's funky aesthetic. *Seals* use a light and moderately paced swing to capture the goofy, awkward, yet endearing movements of seals at play. In *Collision Etudes,* two of Morris' chosen paintings, *Summertime* by Mary Cassatt and *Autumn Leaves* by Georgia O'Keeffe, share their names with jazz standards. Morris developed this connection into the music, making her setting of the Cassatt work a contrafact on Summertime's chord changes. While she doesn't generally provide sections for improvisation, many of her jazz-inspired pieces include written out solos in an improvisatory style.

Morris' works frequently draw on a particular, unique aesthetic. For the purposes of this document, this aesthetic will be referred to as "Quirk". One of the ways Morris

creates a sense of Quirk is by employing disjointed melodies. The clearest example of this comes from the second movement of *Four Personalities*, *White*, where an initially simple melody is presented three times, each with more frequent octave displacements. In the third movement of *Motion*, *Tip Toe,* unexpected dissonances interrupt calm cadences. In *Seurat* from *Brush Strokes* Morris develops disjointed phrases throughout the movement by rotating successive melodic fragments across the trio. Morris also develops Quirk by creating a sense of stutter in her phrases. She does this by breaking of the phrases with unexpected rests and using varied, uneven rhythms. Well-placed grace notes augment the effect, as do unexpected accented melodic dissonances. Quirk is often used to great comedic effect and provides lighthearted respite, particularly in her more serious works.

Morris' harmonic language is largely tonal, but it is frequently broken up by chromatic disruptions and normalized dissonances. Morris also makes liberal use of modality in her works. These free her harmonic palette while letting it remain approachable for all audiences. Examples include the use of Dorian in *Strut* and Lydian in *Waves*. Both choices are conscious. Dorian is an expected scale in funk charts, and its use shows Morris' attention to detail in her jazz writing. The Lydian excursions in *Waves* imbue the harmonic landscape of the movement with an undulating, churning sensation that matches the rapid rhythmic movements of the piano and flute.

Through all of these compositional techniques and stylistic preferences, Morris seeks to convey a personal message about hopefulness. This is especially true in her music that depicts adversity, grief, and pain; the unfortunate things that people experience in life. Her music is meant to provide catharsis and a message of hope and joy to her

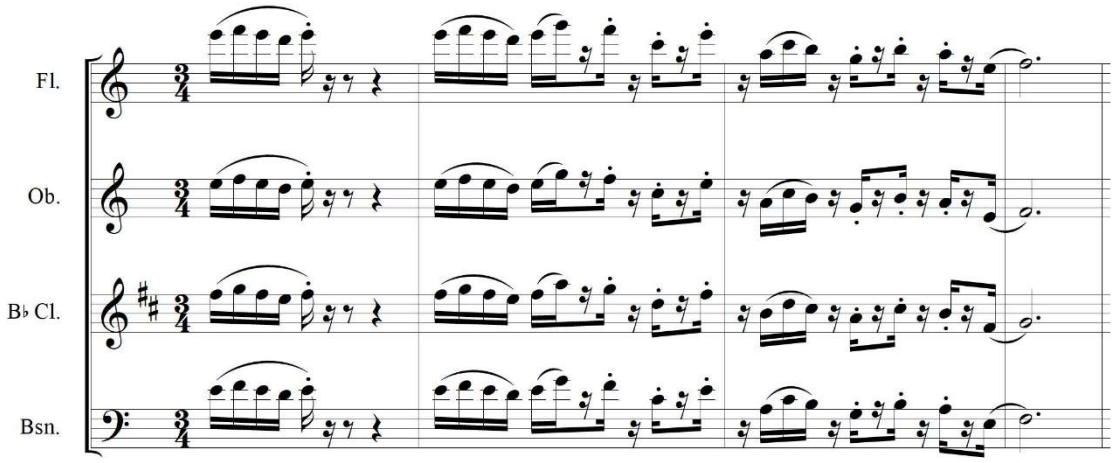
audience. In her works that feature more lighthearted topics, Morris hopes to give people a moment of clarity in which they can have a moving experience through the simple joys of taking a bike ride, visiting the ocean, or going to an art exhibit. The following chapters will explore Morris' compositional style through four of her compositions, focusing particularly on rules and choices she uses to bring life to her programs. For the benefit of performers studying these works, measure numbers are used beyond the included musical examples.

CHAPTER II
MOTION

In *Motion* (2010: Flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon), Morris explores the different way humans move their bodies. Whether that means taking a relaxing bike ride by the beach or tip toeing sneakily to the snack cupboard, each selected motion carries many attributes, and Morris includes carefully chosen emotions, activity levels, and attitudes for each movement.

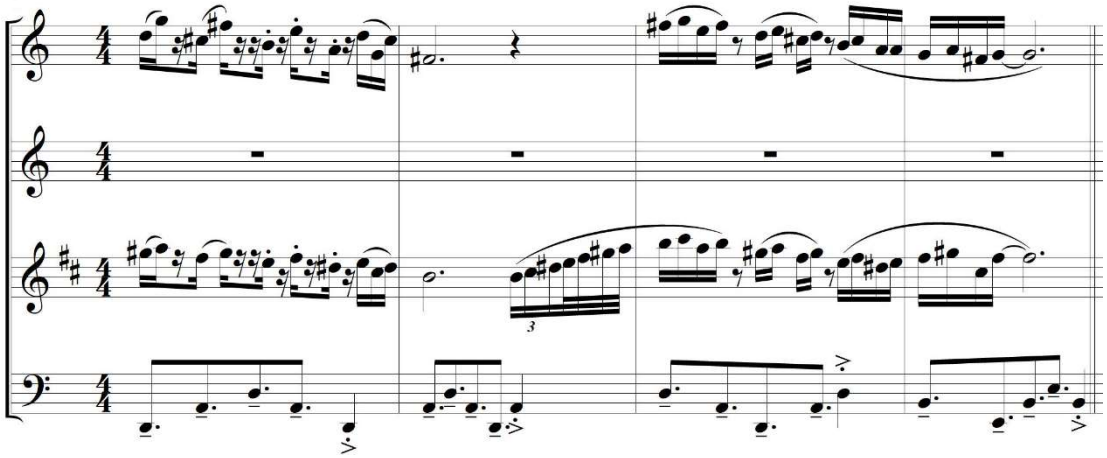
Bike Ride

Morris begins the work energetically, depicting musically the speed and lightness of a bike ride. The mood is active but happy, indicating this particular bike ride is recreational rather than a work out. Written in sonata form, the program begins immediately by presenting a turning 16th motive (example 2.1), suggesting the spinning of a bicycles wheels. This appears in unison in the opening measures, and it returns frequently across the movement, both melodically and harmonically.



Example 2.1 *Motion* mm.1-4

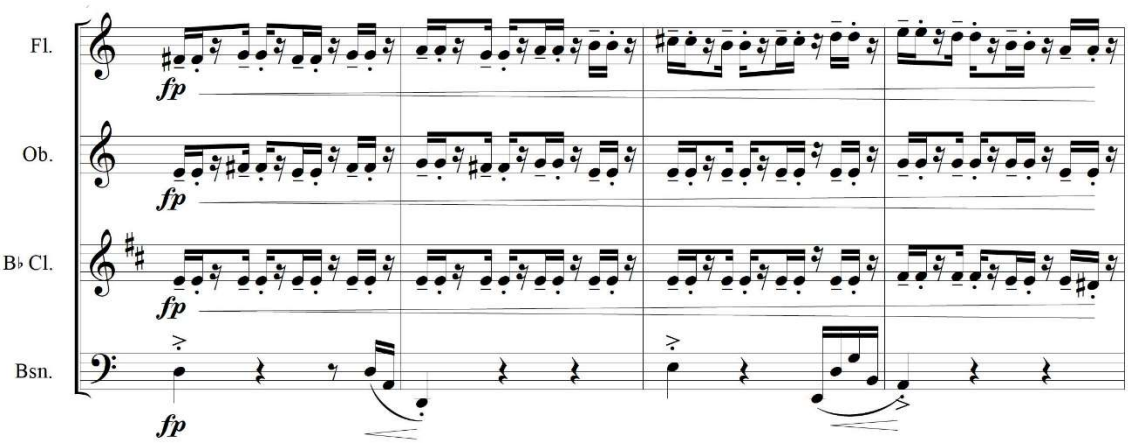
The kinetic energy of the continuous 16th notes grant each section it accompanies with bustling sense of activity. The primary thematic material continues, adding soaring melodic lines in the oboe and flute. These evoke a sense of wind rushing pass the audience's ears. The sense of forward momentum doesn't relent, underpinned by the continuing turning wheel theme (set in the clarinet, against a syncopated groove in the bassoon). This passage stays around F major, resolving the dominant pedal from example 2.1. A brief, syncopated transition moves the piece into the secondary theme in D major. Here Morris brightens the mood by employing melodic and harmonic elements that would feel at home in a Mariachi band (example 2.2). An adapted version of the turning motif shows up here as well, seen in the 16th notes in beats one and four of measure 35.



Example 2.2 *Motion* mm. 33-36

For the development section, Morris depicts the repetitive, articulated sounds that a bike's wheels make when riding down a segmented sidewalk. The bikes wheels hit each crack in quick succession, each making a thumping noise This sound is followed by a brief silence as the bike crosses the new segment, and the pattern repeats, creating a distinctive, kinetic rhythm. Morris recreates this musically by repeatedly setting two

softly articulated 16th notes (initially always at the same pitch level) followed by a 16th rest as seen in example 2.3. The bassoon takes on a sporadic soloistic role that, when combined with the repeated rhythms up the upper voices, creates a four against three hemiola and grants the development a sense complexity. As the figure continues, Morris begins to develop by setting its individual elements in differing voices, keys, and dynamics. These varied episodes are set against contrasting segments that reference material from the exposition.



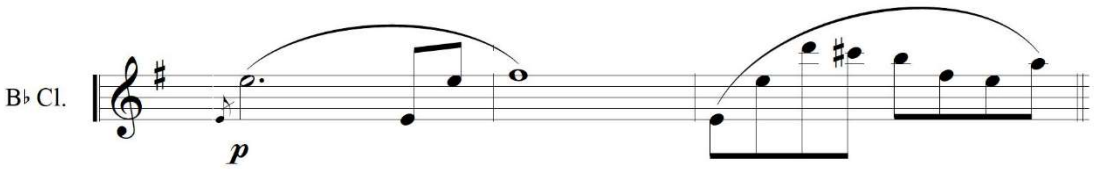
Example 2.3 *Motion* mm. 48-51

These grow in intensity and range (coinciding with a C pedal) to lead back to a truncated recapitulation.

To close the movement, Morris includes a brief coda that revisits much of the material from the exposition and development. She begins by presenting two strong statements of the initial turning motive. These progress from a unison statement (m. 113) to a statement set in planed chords in m. 114. The ostinato figure from the development also returns to drive the piece to its close.

Stretch

The second movement represents an instance of Morris selecting a form for programmatic reasons. Stretch is written in arch form, a choice that reflects the shapes made by the human body while stretching and parallels the rising and falling melodic contours. The movement begins with a plaintive melody in the clarinet, centering around D. The opening melody, similar to many of the themes found in this movement, begins in D minor and uses 7ths and 9ths as its key intervals. Morris uses these large, dissonant intervals to represent musically the act of stretching. In example 2.4, the clarinet reaches up a ninth between beat 4 of measure one and the following downbeat, then up an octave and a seventh in the first two beats of measure 3.

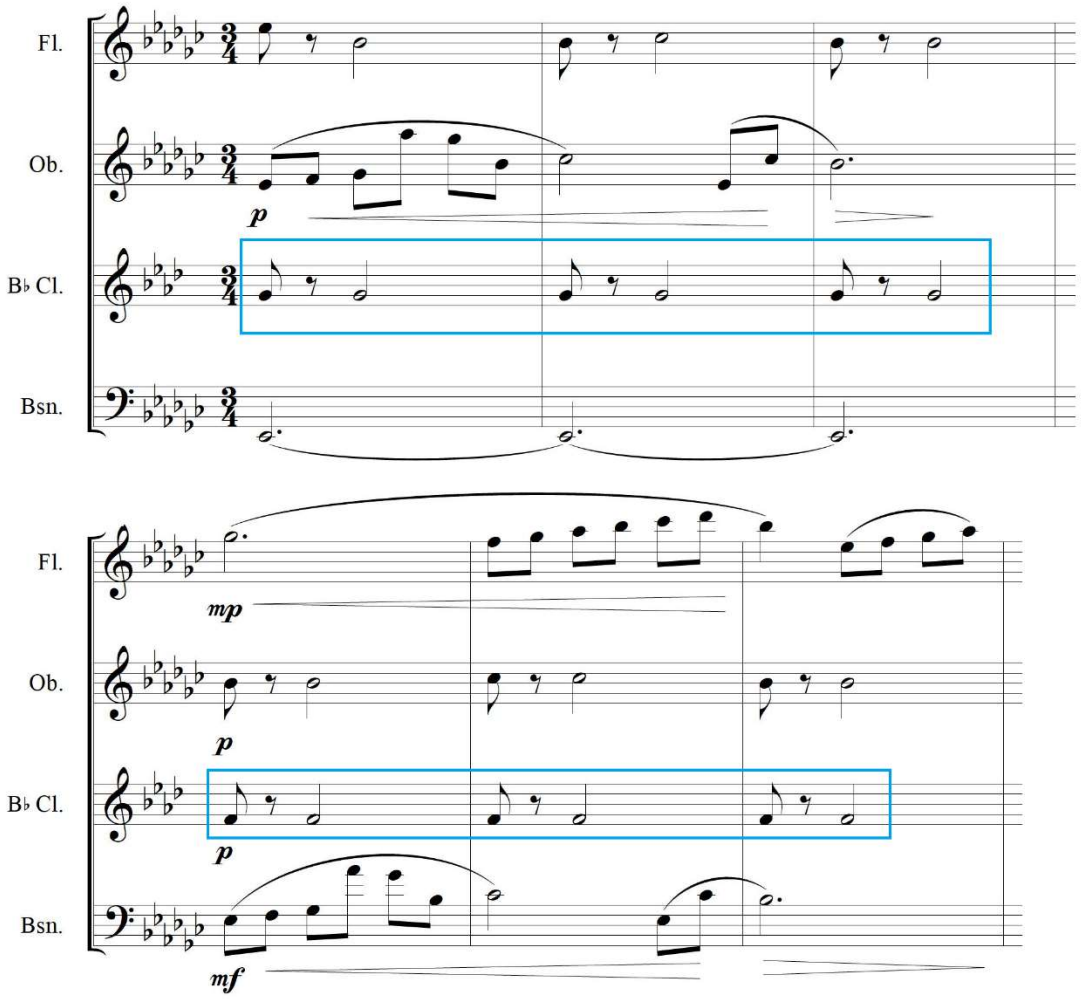


Example 2.4 *Stretch* mm. 1-3

The other instruments slowly join in as the clarinet's theme speeds up, intensifying the stretch. The three upper voices pass quickly through many different key areas before the whole group comes to rest on four long, dissonant chords. These all maintain the enharmonic 3rd and 5th scale degrees of E minor, while dissonances pass painfully towards the arch's second section, now in Eb minor.

Here, the flute and bassoon outline the key, placing emphasis on the second beat, suggesting a *Sarabande*. Notably, the clarinet obstinately plays a dissonant 2nd above the

tonic. The mood is unusually lugubrious for the subject matter. Stretching normally carries a lighthearted, relaxed connotation, but, as most people trying to start stretching over thirty can tell you, it can be an uncomfortable and slow experience. When the melody enters, its pained 7ths and 9ths stand out against the dirge-like rhythms of the accompaniment. Beginning in the oboe in m. 20, the theme takes the shape of a parallel period.



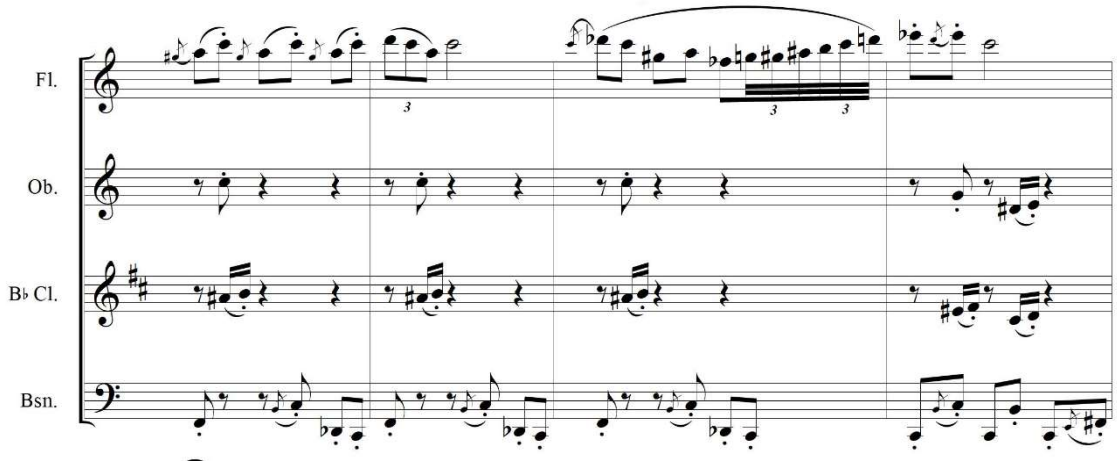
Example 2.5 *Stretch* mm.20-22, 38-40

The two halves of the period are unevenly matched, the antecedent taking up eight bars while the consequent uses just seven. A variation of the B section is repeated starting in bar 38, this time with the melody in the bassoon. There are a few subtle yet important changes that set the repetition apart (see example 2.5). The dissonant F pedal from the first statement is gone, replaced by a tonic pedal in the clarinet. This relieves some of the harmonic tension from the oboe's theme, similar to how stretching becomes easier with repetition. The first stretch is always the hardest.

The dirge slowly exhausts itself as it approaches the peak of the arch. Here Morris subdues the large intervals that characterized the earlier section, using instead stepwise phrases that extend in length across ten measures, going from two repeated stepwise intervals to three, then four. The three treble voices move homorhythmically in parallel motion as the movement slows back down. The trip back through the arch is truncated. Morris just presents one statement of the B theme, taking the second, less dissonant bassoon version.

Tip toe

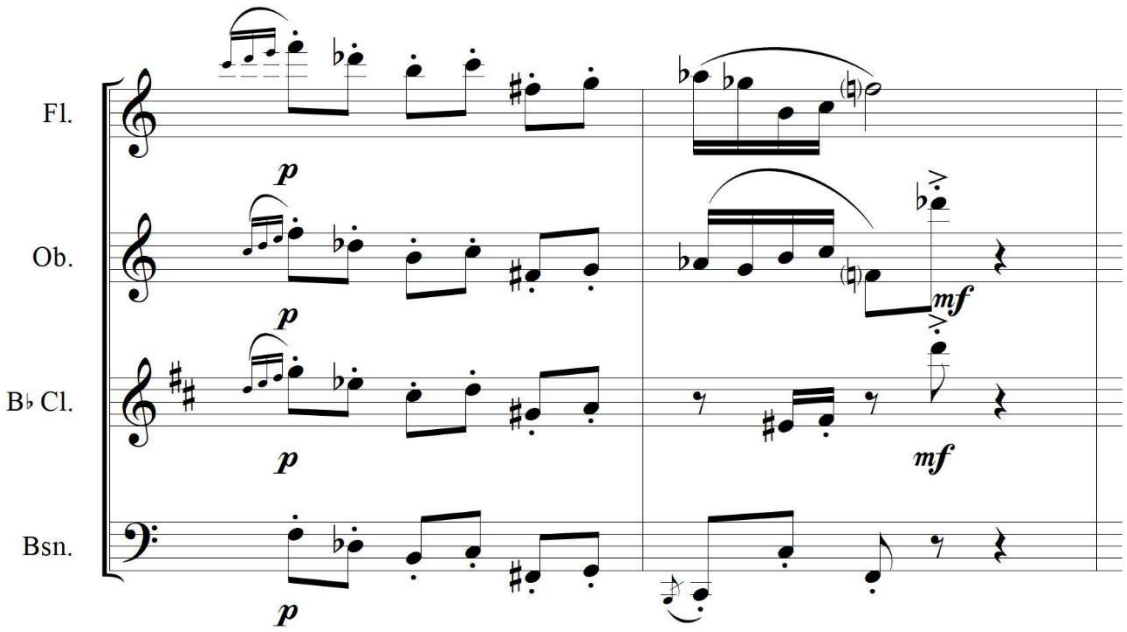
In her third movement, Morris presents a stuttering sense of Quirk to evoke the uneven movements that accompany walking on tiptoe. The three accompanimental voices begin by exchanging short, contrasting rhythmic ideas interspersed by sudden rests, creating an intentionally awkward groove. The melody adds to the aesthetic through its frequent grace notes and repetitive, clunky melody. The grace notes are reminiscent of the clumsy, momentary losses of balance that accompany walking on tip toe, while the faster flourishes evoke a sense of stumbling or falling (see example 2.6).



Example 2.6 *Tip Toe* mm. 5-8

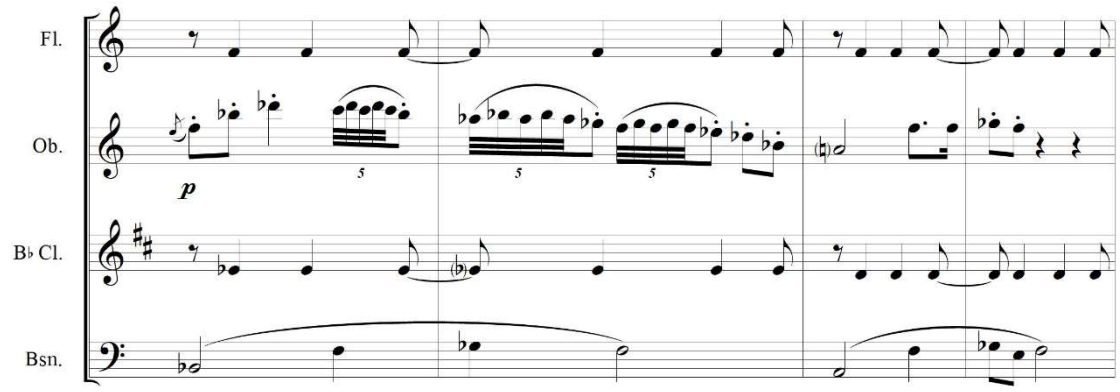
Written in ternary form, the movement maintains a humorous, childlike mood across the A section. Glimpses of ragtime peek through the cheerful activities starting in mm 21-28, found in the raised second harmony in the oboe and the matching accented off-beats in the oboe and flute.

At the end of each phrase, Morris repeats the cadential device from example 2.6. This is one of the key structural elements of the movements, and its musical content is treated with appropriate care. The first measure carries a soft energy as all four voices outline a subtle dominant harmony in detached eighth notes, leading to a cadence in the following measure. This is immediately interrupted by a loud, high, dissonant half-step stinger in the oboe and clarinet (see example 2.7). The two measures tell a clear musical story of a failed sneaking mission, brought down by the clumsiness of its protagonist. It is entirely unexpected, and, when prepared well, is certain to get a laugh from the audience.



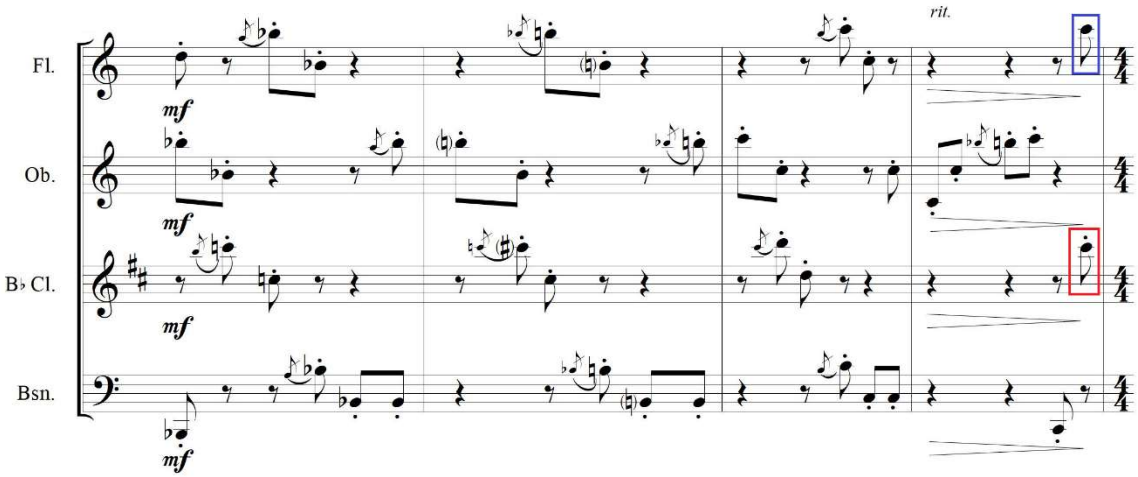
Example 2.7 *Tip Toe* mm.11-12

The B section changes both mood and key: The flute and clarinet play a smooth, syncopated accompaniment in Bb minor. Morris preempts this shift during the final cadence of the A section, which subtly leaves out the final stinger, hinting to the attentive listener that a change is coming. A new melody appears in the bassoon, playing two mournful four bar phrases (m. 37). The first phrase is played without interruption, but the oboe steals the spotlight during the second, interjecting a high and darkly comedic melody (see example 2.8). The somber mood and missing tip toe motives suggest some negative aftermath for the tip-toer, perhaps caught and scolded by a parent. The lesson doesn't seem to stick, however, as Morris begins to add more and more elements from the tip toe motives as the B section continues, culminating in a defiant retransition to the final A section.



Example 2.8 *Tip Toe* mm.41-44

This final modulation (see example 2.9) is particularly charming. Harmonically it's unassuming, made of successive measures of Bbs, Bs, then Cs. But Morris adds excitement to the setting by employing crafty voice exchange across the ensemble. Each instrument plays a descending octave jump motive, dovetailing each other in quick succession. This produces a pictographic spiral in the score that ends on a dominant C pedal. The pedal is brilliantly imperfect. The clarinet, in the last eighth before the return of the A theme, shifts down a half step to play a B natural (the tritone of the coming tonic) that clashes harshly with the flute's C.

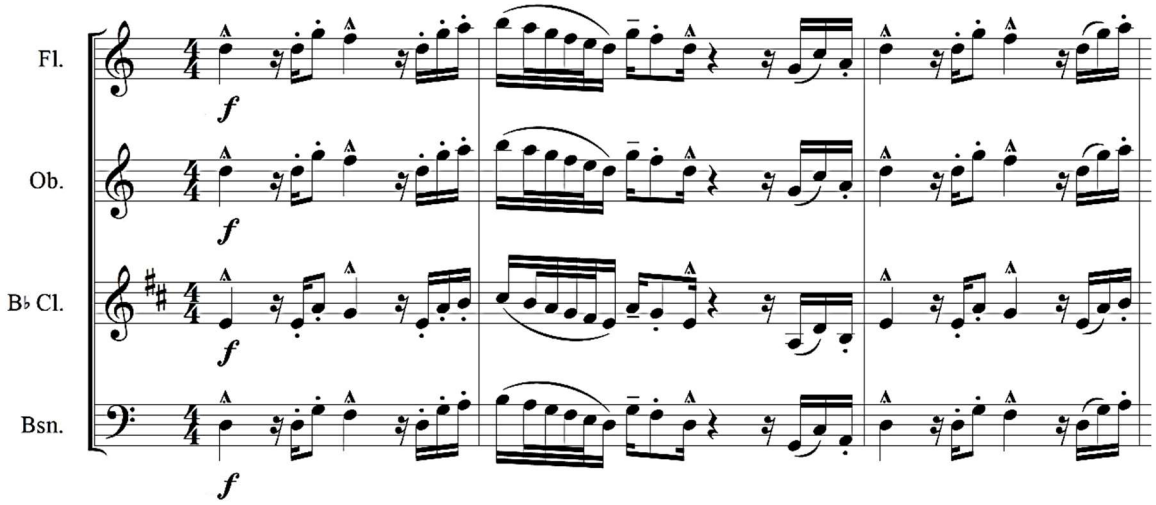


Example 2.9 *Tip Toe* mm.63-66

The dissonance is further emphasized by the registral difference between the stinger and the preceding bassoon note. The tiptoeing resumes in full during the final A section. If anything, the energy of the *Tip Toe* becomes augmented. All the characteristics for the opening are exaggerated. The accompanimental 16th note interjections become 32nds, new 16th and 32nd runs appear in the flute and oboe, and the bassoon's groove adds an extra octave between its opening pitches. All instruments soon join in a slowing, unison run to bring the piece to a halting close.

Strut

The final movement, *Strut,* captures a strong, Funk inspired aesthetic. True to its roots, the movement is written around the D Dorian scale, and vamps predominantly on D, with a few other pitch centers appearing later on. This serves well to capture the attitude of a strut. The word "Strut" as defined by Merriam-Webster means to walk with a pompous and affected air, all characteristics that Morris craftily infuses into the main theme (see example 2.10). In this theme, she captures the regularity of walking by placing strong accents, falling on beats 1 and 3. The placement is important. The movement is not particularly fast (quarter note = 90), and the separated downbeats create a heavy, almost stomping feel.



Example 2.10 *Strut* mm. 1-3

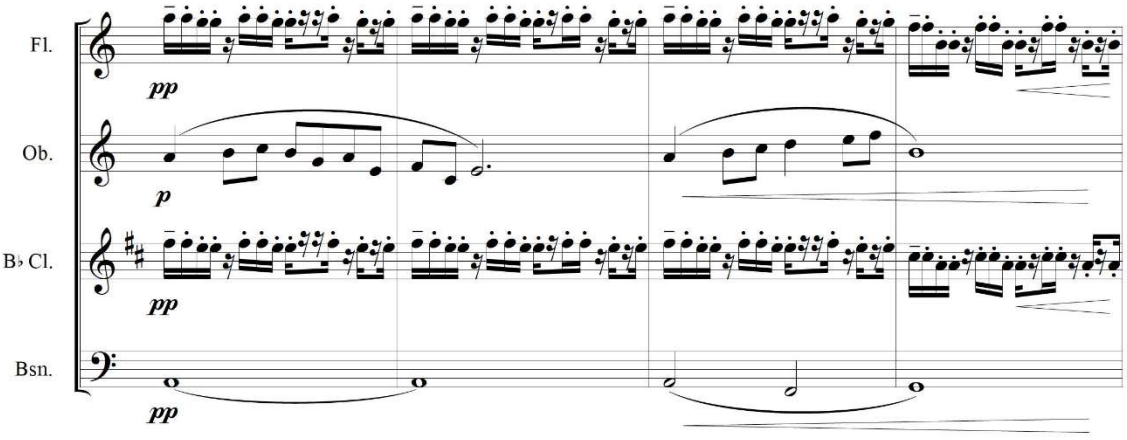
If you tried to walk in time with the accents, it would be difficult to maintain a regular gait. Instead, you would need to pause with each step, placing each one deliberately. In addition, Morris' adds a sense of pompousness by adding funk rhythms in the empty spaces around the deliberate steps. This effect is enhanced by the instrumentation and articulation. The initial statement of the theme is set forte, with all four parts playing proudly in unison. The meticulous use of varied articulations is consistent with the funk inspiration and grants the theme energy and shape. Finally, Morris grants the Strut theme a sense spontaneous affect. She does this in a few ways. Sometimes Morris' displaces the step impetuously by a sixteenth. Other times she inserts a measure of complex meter. Or she might throw in a measure of straight hemiola. The theme is filled with variety and attitude, immediately gripping the audience with its sheer charm.

The piece takes the form of a five part Rondo. The main Strut theme is played in alteration with solo breaks from members of the ensemble (notably the bassoon), comparable to a verse and chorus form. The opening presents three statements of the

Rondo "Strut" theme, separated by two breaks. The first takes the form of a unison hemiola (m. 5), and the second comes in the bassoon and is the first instance of electric-bass-like bassoon writing (see example 2.11).

Example 2.11 *Strut* mm. 15-18

These occur frequently across the movements as lead-ins back to the rondo theme and are meant to imitate a funky bass guitar. In the third repetition of the opening theme, Morris begins to change tonal center in mm. 18- 24 by shifting up the main theme by half steps, moving through G and Ab before landing on A minor the first verse, taken by the oboe (example 2.12).



Example 2.12 *Strut* mm. 25-28

Here Morris employs a change of mood to match the new key. The melody and bass become soft and lyrical, and the accompaniment, set in the flute and clarinet, keeps up the syncopated, staccato feel established in the opening (extremely quietly). The bass funk groove (now in G) soon returns in the bassoon (m. 33). The groove here acts as a

dominant pedal, preparing the listener for the next statement of rondo theme in C. This statement (mm. 37 through 40) sets the strut theme in close imitation in the flute, bassoon and oboe. While the second verse is led initially by the flute, who opens with a soft bebop-like riff, the bassoon takes the spotlight with its bass groove. The bass riff develops through mm. 57- 61, accompanied by big block chords in the treble voices, and drives straight into the final two statements of the Rondo theme. The first of these builds, starting with the clarinet, then adding the oboe and flute two and three measures later respectively. The last statement of the Strut motive sees the three treble voices playing the main theme homorhythmically once again, but set in block chords instead of in octaves. The rejoining of the voices grants the end of the work a strong sense of finality.

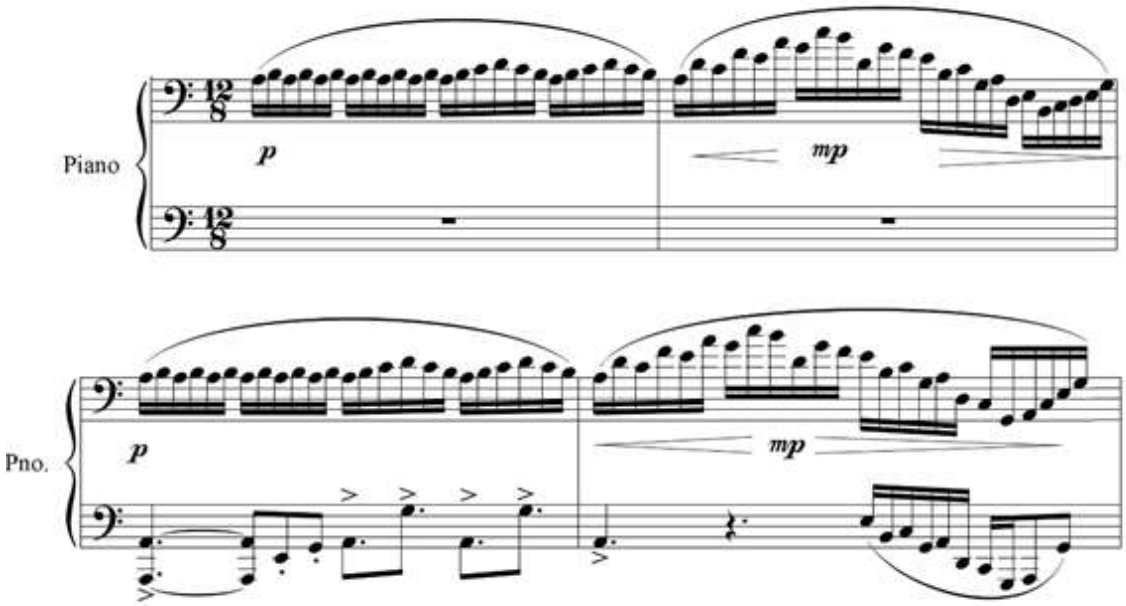
CHAPTER III
COASTAL KALEIDOSCOPE

Coastal Kaleidoscope (2013: Flute, oboe, and piano) is notable for its lack of a given program. The only written notes for the piece come from the composers website stating, "*Coastal Kaleidoscope* is a three-movement work inspired by my own impressions from a vacation to Monterey, California[9]." While the lack of a prescribed program places even more responsibility on the performers to evoke the symbols present in the music, the descriptive movement titles and clear themes provide a solid foundation for understanding the work.

Waves

The first movement is one of arrivals and departures, depicting the steady ebb and flow of the oceans waves across a carefully crafted ternary structure. Water is remarkable for its changeability, something that Morris capitalizes on with her varied settings throughout the different sections. To begin, Morris uses a constant stream of undulating 16th notes to evoke the perpetual, circular nature of oceans waves, as seen in example 3.1.

[9] Alyssa Morris, "Alyssa Morris Compositions," accessed March 9, 2020, http://www.alyssamorrismusic.com/compositions.



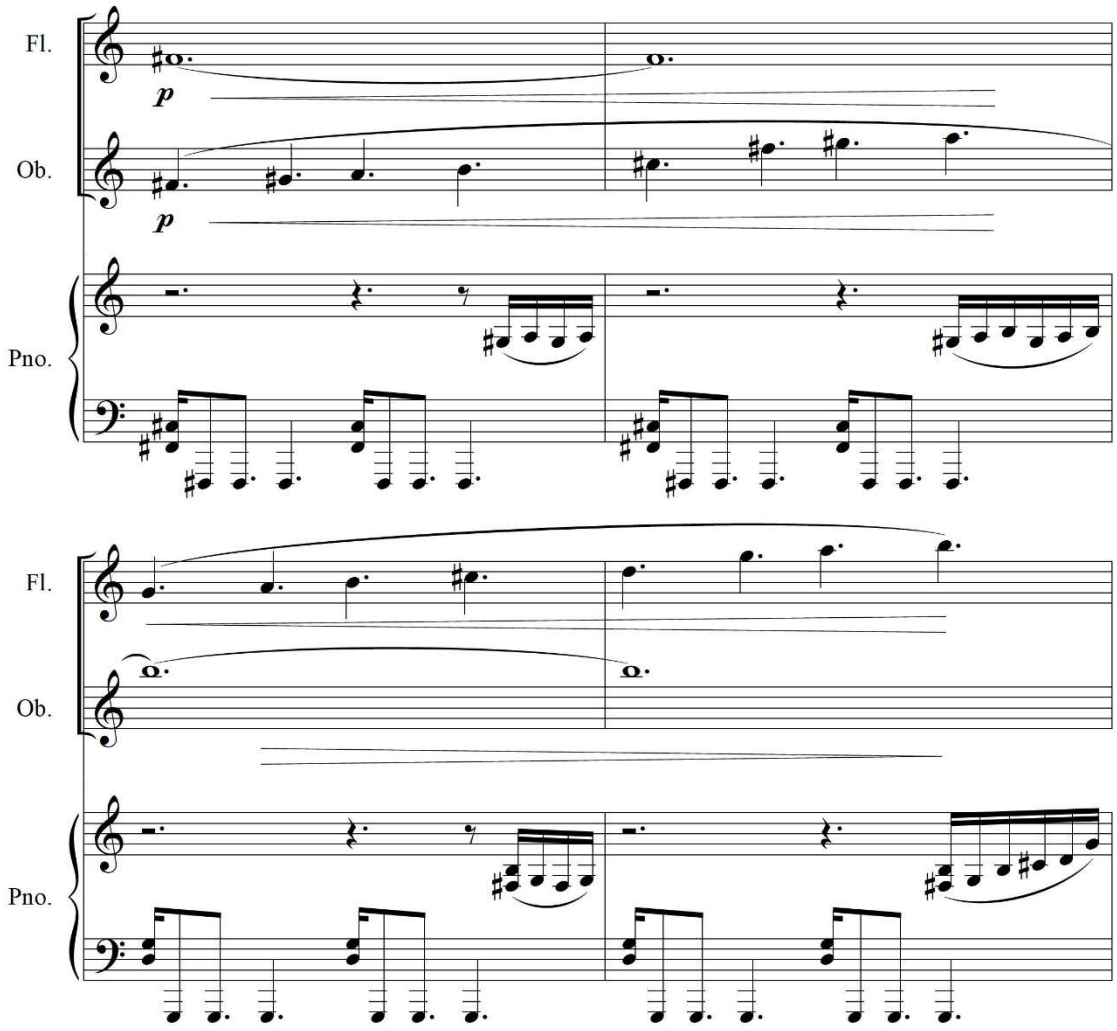
Example 3.1 *Waves* mm.1-4

The motive, first seen in the opening bars in the piano, is reminiscent of the churning spinning wheel in Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, particularly when it appears in the oboe in m. 18. The pattern grants the opening a perpetual stream of subtle activity. This smooth character is frequently broken up by varying degrees of syncopation and hemiola. A two against three pattern (see m. 3 in the piano) is the most common and makes up the majority of the rhythmic variety throughout the A section. These subtle shifts of implied meter capture the regular-irregularity of waves effectively: The swelling triplets in the first half of the bars express the rush of riding up a wave, while the repose of the dotted eighths feels like cresting the wave and coming down the other side.

The ever-changing nature of the ocean is also seen in the movement's harmony. Morris rarely stays in one tonal area for more than a few bars at a time. Mm. 5-16, for example, are constantly shifting between A minor and Ab Lydian. The chromatic tension and release between the two centers is leaned on heavily to create brilliant pockets of

sonic light. The clearest example is in the oboe part between mm. 12 and 13. The chromatic lift between the E-flat in beat four of m. 12 and the e-natural on the downbeat of 13 produces perhaps the most striking color change in the movement. The harmony becomes further obscured through Morris' use of tall chords. The stacks of 9ths and 11ths resemble pandiatonic collections at times (mm. 13-15). The shifting harmonies cast contrasting shades of light upon the musical water, adding depth to Morris' inventive portrayal.

In the B section, Morris takes a step back from the moment to moment activity of the waves and instead presents the ocean's movements through a new, calmer lens. The strong focus on hemiola is gone, replaced by long, even lines in the winds and a soft but insistent ostinato accompaniment in the piano (see the inconsistent 16^{th}, 8^{th}, dotted 8^{th} pattern in the piano in m. 24). Here the waters are mostly still, with slight hints at motion from the piano. The changing harmonies remain, however, as the oboe and flute's melodies (made up of slowly ascending scales) alternate every two bars between F# minor and G Lydian (see example 3.2).

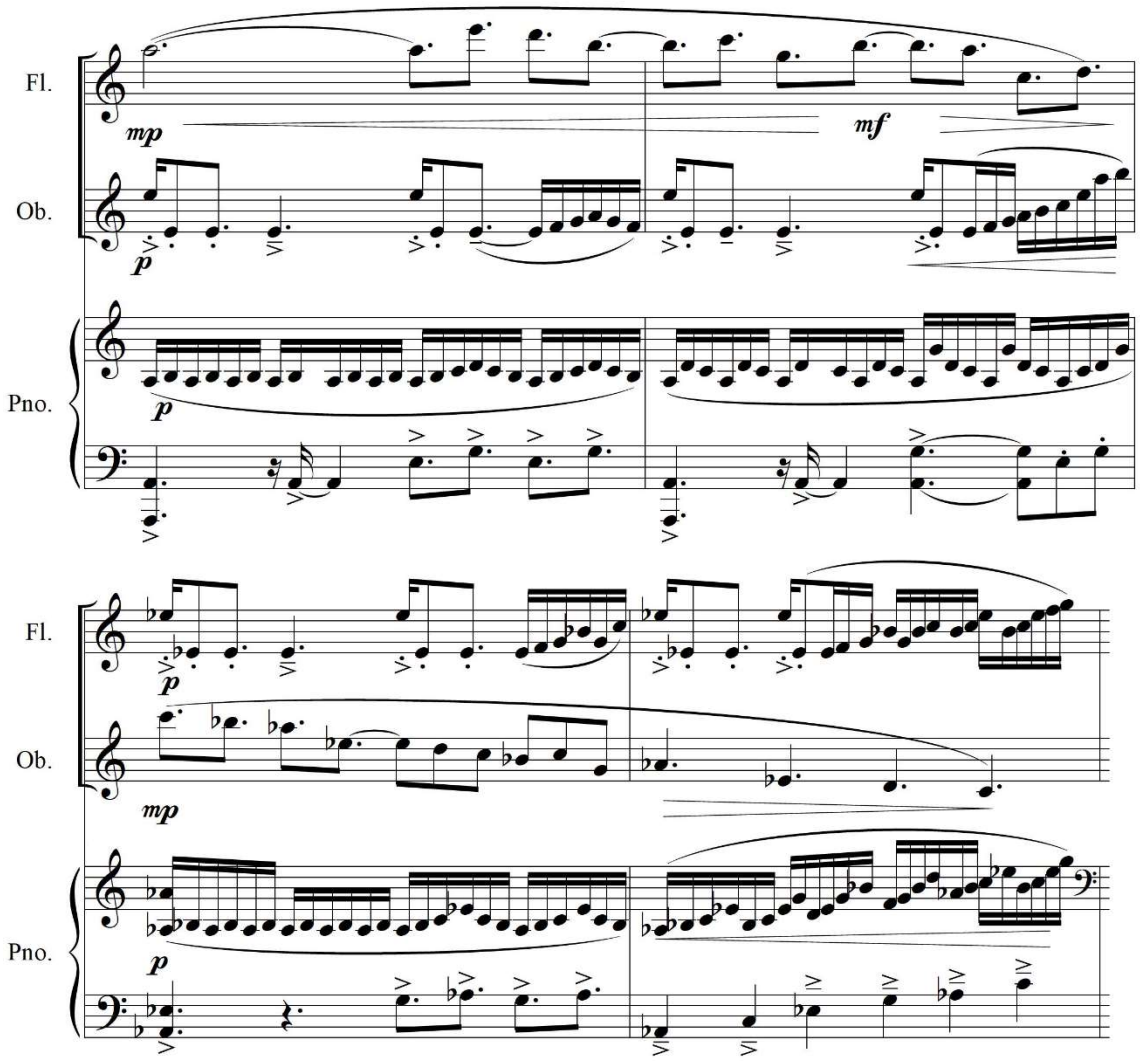


Example 3.2 *Waves* mm. 24-27

The slow lines and subtle harmonic rhythm are reminiscent a day/night time-lapse of calm ocean waters. A shift in harmony brings change to the waters in measure 33. Morris lowers by whole step from G Lydian to F major in m. 33 as the waves increase in activity, signaled by the uneven 16th runs in the winds. These swell together, increasing the waves' height,before breaking in m. 37. She then writes three large waves of melodic and harmonic activity between mm. 47 through 59, each lasting four bars. The first two increase in rhythmic activity and are climax of the movement. The final wave (mm. 55-58) begins to lose momentum, returning stillness to the waters. The oboe and flute play

simple scales ascending together in F major across the first two bars before splitting directions in the second two. Here the oboe and flute move in contrary motion (in G Lydian), lessening in volume before landing on an open fifth with the piano, returning quietly to the final A section (back in A minor).

With the return of the A section Morris brings together the themes from both the A and B sections, adding an element of chaos the waves (example 3.3).

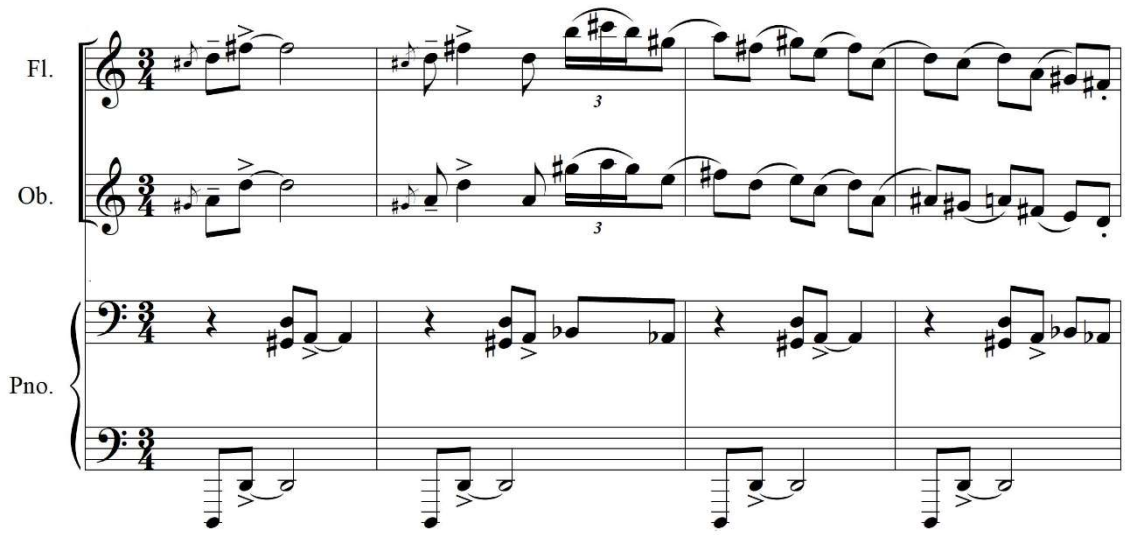


Example 3.3 *Waves* mm. 63-66

The undulating sixteenths return in the piano, as does the melodic hemiola in the winds, but with an addition. In mm. 63 through 69, the oboe and the flute take turns (once again alternating every two bars) quoting the piano's ostinato accompaniment material from the beginning of the B section. The interweaving of these distinct musical ideas grants the texture a third layer of rhythmic activity and imbues the finale of the movement with a subtle sense of wholeness. A brief coda sees one final wave raise up in mm. 77 and 78, which, as it subsides, brings the movement to a solemn close.

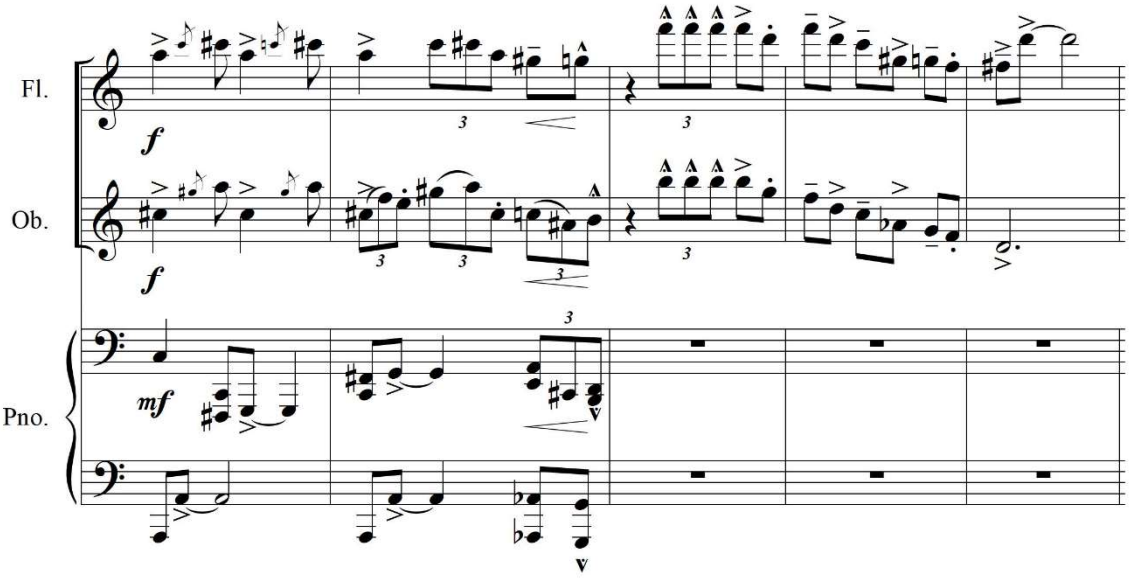
Seals

Coastal Kaleidoscope's second movement moves away from the water itself to the creatures that live in it, specifically seals. Seals are a fairly common sight in Monterey, California, playing along the piers and beaches. To capture this playful mood, Morris sets the movement in a Quirky, swing feel. She sets the movement in an expanded AABA form, commonly used in jazz songs. Morris extends each section of the form by granting them a sub form made of three eight bar phrases, aab (See figures 3.4 and 3.5. Incidentally, very similar to blues, another major jazz form). The movement opens with a short, clunky ostinato in the piano, reminiscent of the awkward way seals move when on land. In the flute and oboe, intricate graces and triplets emulate the playful side of the seal's character.



Example 3.4 *Seals* mm. 5-8 (subphrase a)

The melody is shared between the winds, and, as it progresses, the voice exchange and thematic imitation feel like seals passing a ball back and forth. The combined lines create a strong forward drive, sparkling with cross-rhythms. Across the movement, this main

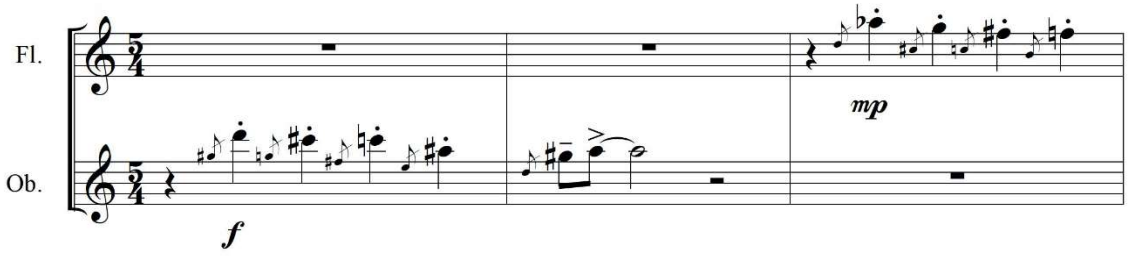


Example 3.5 *Seals* mm. 21-25 (subphrase b)

theme is presented six times, but, true to its jazz influence, each iteration varies and ornaments the tail of the theme. In the second A section, for example, Morris varies

slightly each subphrase, inserting extra flashes of imitation towards the beginning of the themes and increasing the speed of the ornamental figures. These changes along with the continual melodic variation keeps the material exciting for both the audience and the performers.

The B section breaks the piano ostinato, while the winds trade off what are unmistakably seal calls (see example 3.6). Morris crafts these by setting descending quarter notes, each preceded by a grace note set a tritone below.

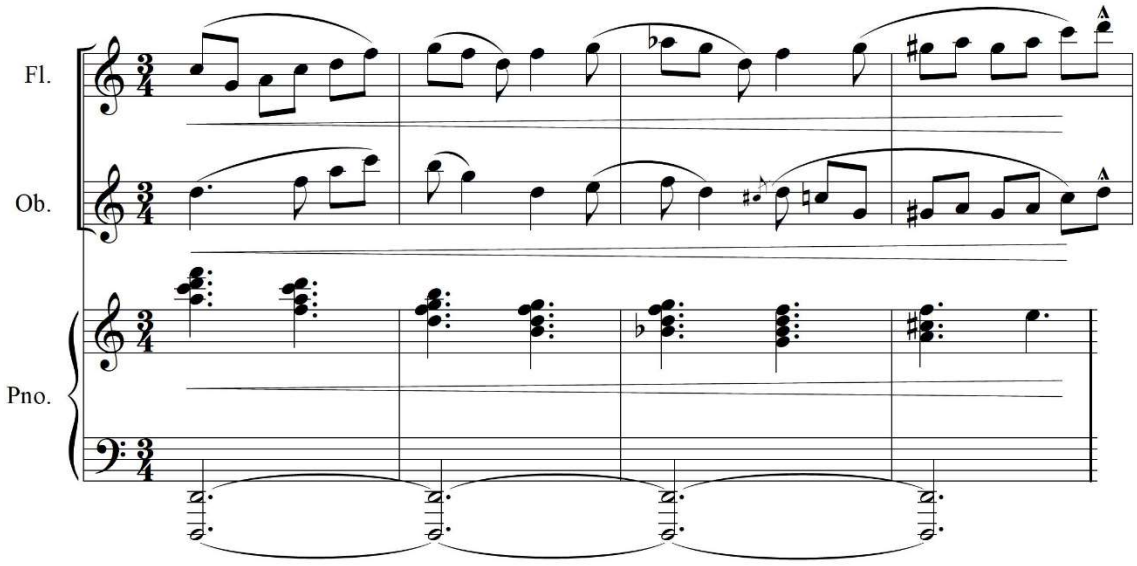


Example 3.6 *Seals* mm. 53-55

The hard articulation mixed with the dissonant horizontal harmony evokes effectively the seal's gruff barking noises. The final A section both breaks and continues the improvisatory progression of the movement. In it Morris reorganizes her earlier material, building the final aab subgroup from the first phrase from the opening A section with the second phrase from the second A section. This choice cleverly keeps up the effect of variation while also revisiting the iterative path the movement has taken. We do not get to see which version Morris would have selected for the final statement of b as it is cut off after two bars by the brief but explosive coda. Morris expands on the tail of the phrase, sequencing it higher and higher and culminating the movement with unison big band riff.

Spring Tide

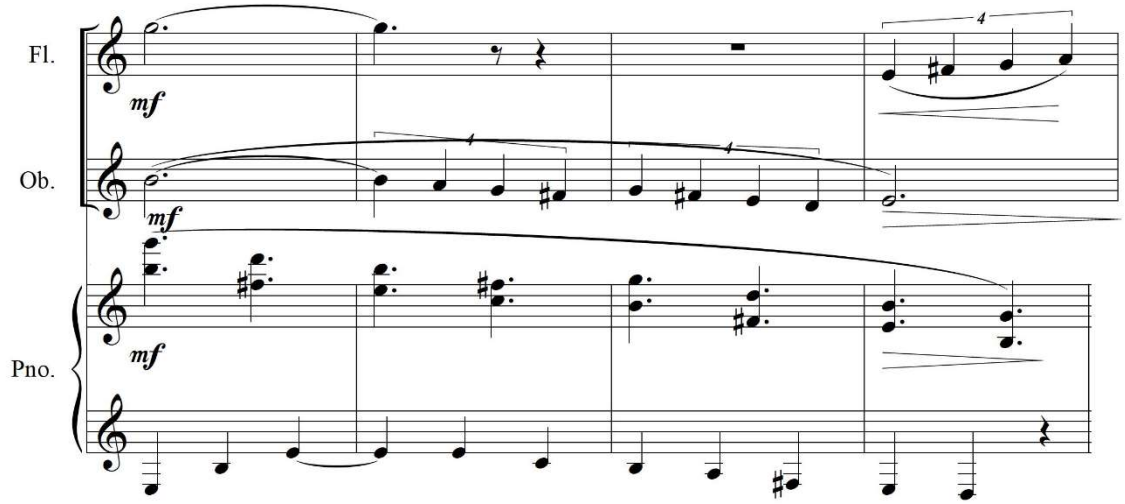
Written in D Dorian, the *coastal Kaleidoscope's* final movement is appropriately marked by strong thematic contrasts. Spring tides have nothing to do with the spring season (as many might assume) but instead refer to the time of the month when the difference between high and low tide is the greatest. Spring in this case refers to how the tides seem to "spring" dramatically back and forth. As such, the movement is marked by extremes. These begin immediately as the movement opens with a surging, energetic theme in the oboe and flute (example 3.7), marked by sharp changes in direction and syncopation. The melody is presented in imitation at the unison, beginning in the oboe and followed by the flute. Across the winds and piano, strong focus is placed on the interval of the major second, which appears constantly in the piano and between the oboe and flute.



Example 3.7 *Spring Tide* mm. 13-16

Some full cluster chords even appear in the piano in m. 27. The secundal harmony mixes with the energetic, contrapuntal motion of the melody to create a compact, hectic aesthetic.

The B section eschews the driving motion and energetic rhythms of the opening in favor of calm hemiola and cross rhythms. Across the section, each 3/4 bar employs a group of one to four possible subdivisions (dotted half notes, dotted quarter notes, quarter notes, and quadruplets). These four rhythms are mixed and stacked on top of each other in varying combinations, including all four at once in m. 60 (example 3.8), but the subtle articulation and conjunct melodic motion prevent the section from feeling frantic.

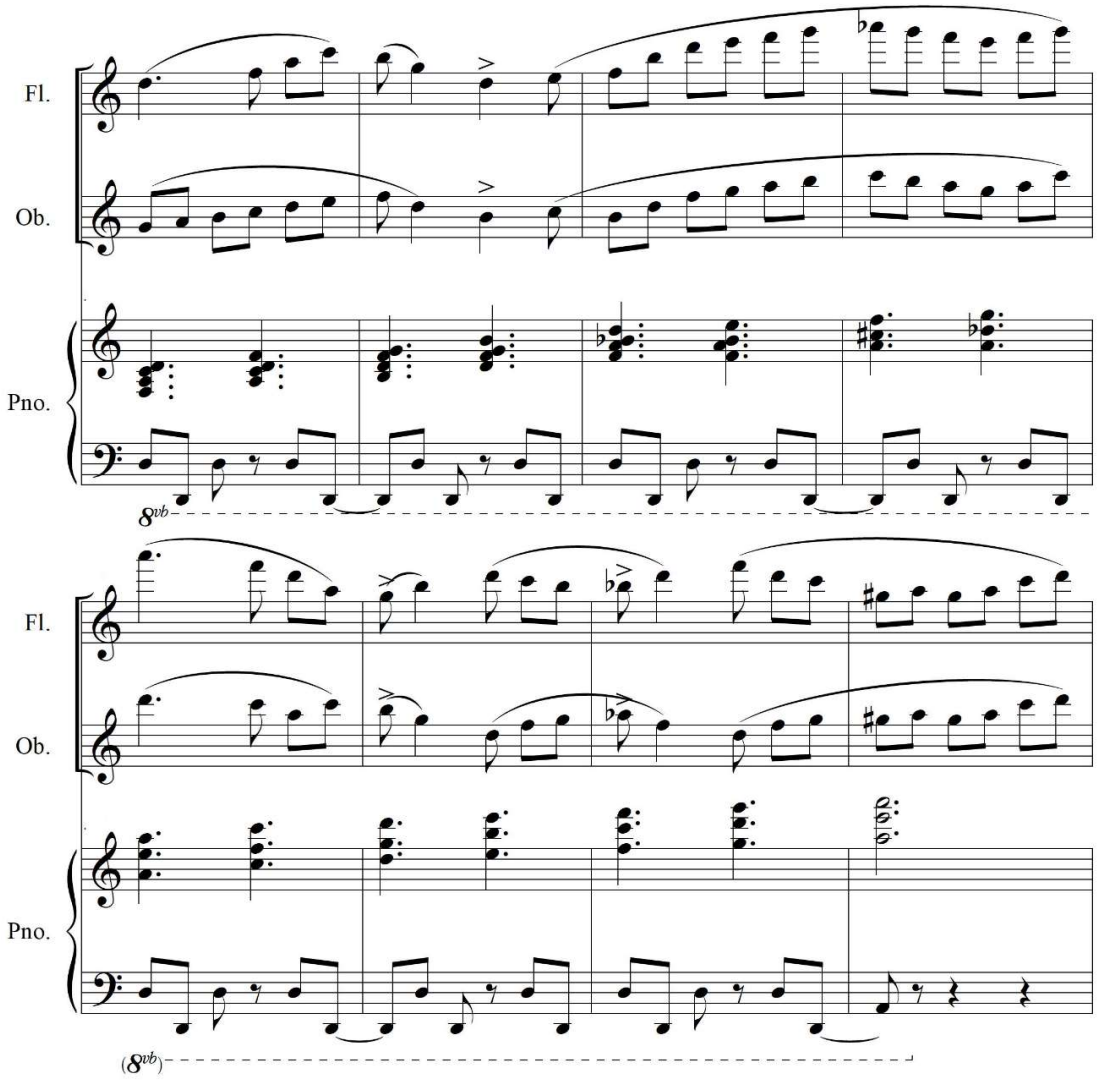


Example 3.8 *Spring Tide* mm. 57-60

The predominant interval also changes to feature the 5th (and its inversion the 4th). These begin appearing as early as the start of the transition to the B section (mm.17-22), and only become more frequent as the B section progresses (see the extended passage of parallel 5ths between the oboe and flute in measures 113-116 and the opening piano accompaniment beginning at m. 41). The contrasts between seconds and fifths seems intentional as they are the farthest separated intervals (not counting inversions) and

provide a brilliant sonic representation of the difference between high and low tide. The image of the tides swaying in and out is enhanced by employing slowly ascending and descending scales across the ensemble, similar to the large waves found in the first movement.

This relationship between the interval types becomes more pronounced as the piece approaches its conclusion. The clearest example of this (example 3.9) comes from the piano part



Example 3.9 *Spring Tide* mm. 171-179

between mm. 163 and 178 in which the piano plays a long sequence of dotted quarter note chords. These begin in closed spacing, including a major second in nearly every chord, but begin to shift to more open spacing in m. 174 using Copland-esque stacks of fourths and fifths. As the piece moves to its close, the alternation between the conjunct and the open, the smooth and the aggressive, captures the kaleidoscopic nature of the ever-changing ocean.

CHAPTER IV
BRUSH STROKES

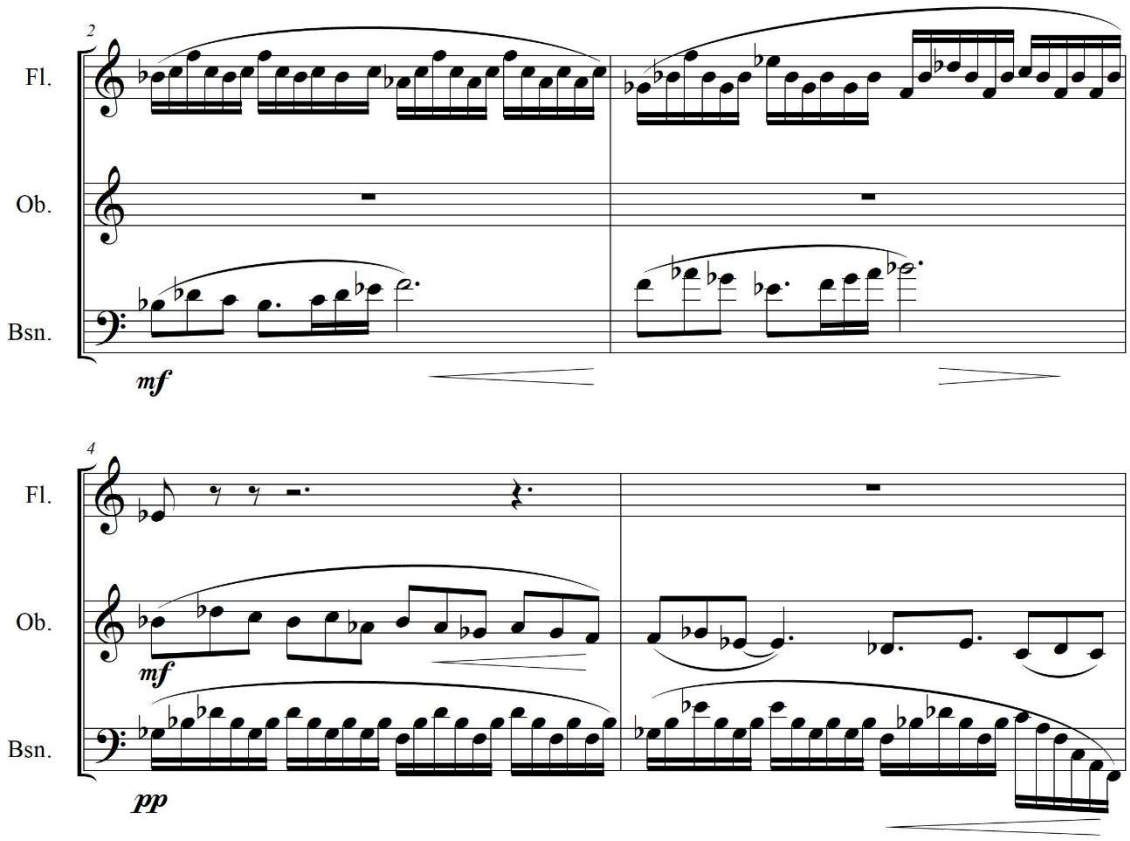
In *Brush Strokes* (2014: Flute, oboe, and bassoon), Morris presents four vignettes encapsulating the painting styles of four famous artists. The musical representation is varied. Some movements seek to evoke the kinds of motions the painter would make while working, such as *Pollock* and *Seurat*. Others reflect the artist's obsession with certain subjects (*Monet*). Another attempts more to capture the personal struggle of the author than the specifics of his artistic vision (*Van Gogh*). All treat their subjects with well-researched care, deftly capturing each's essence.

Monet

Morris opens up her work by looking at the work of Claude Monet. Monet, one of the founders of Impressionism, is known for his focus on the effect of light on objects. To represent the artist, Morris focuses on Monet's treatment of water in his several hundred paintings of water lilies. Across these many paintings, Monet's fascination with light manifests in subtle yet meaningful variation in setting and color. Morris treats her musical setting in a similar way. One four-bar theme makes up almost all of the melodic material across the movement (seen between the oboe and bassoon in example 4.1). The constant use of this musical theme is analogous to the Monet's focus on water lilies, so for the purposes of this analysis it will be called the lily theme.

Morris presents the lily theme six times across the movements, always in groups of two. These coincide neatly with the three shifts in tone Morris employs, each representing a different form of water. Within each section, she continues to subtly vary

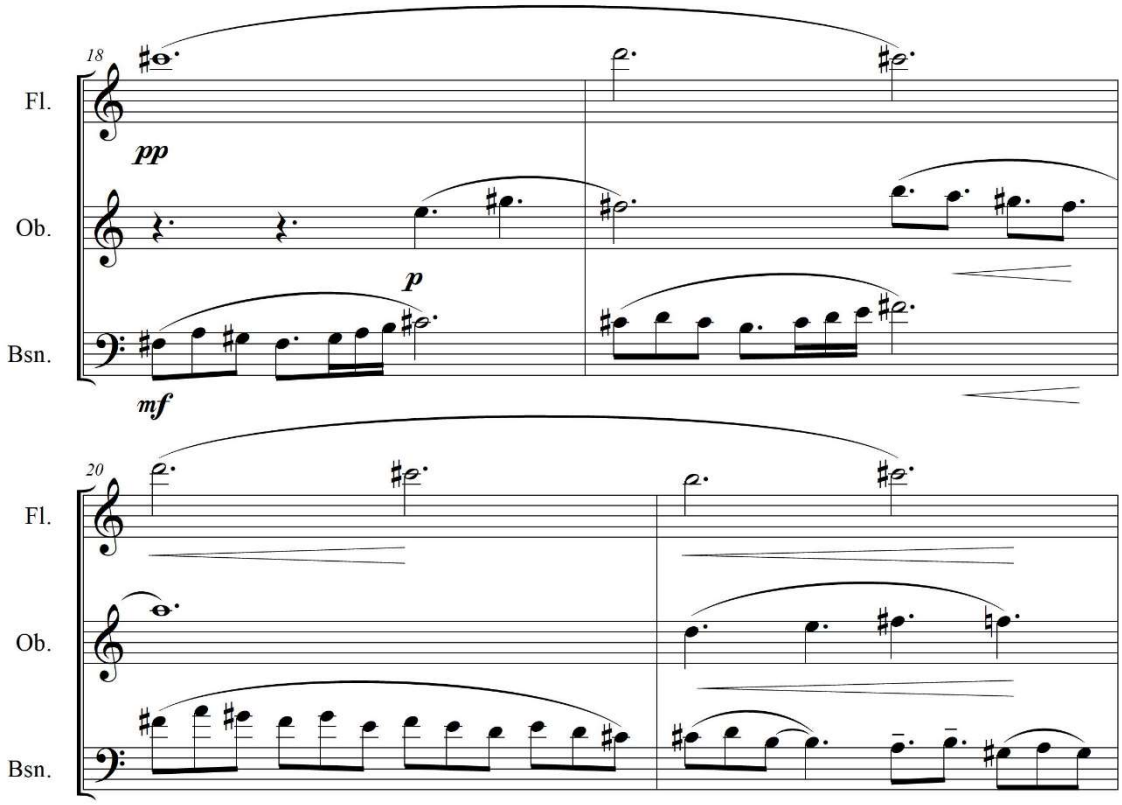
the theme by re-orchestrating it across the ensemble. These instrumentation shifts suggest different lighting and/or shades of lily and keep the modest melodic material sounding fresh.



Example 4.1 *Monet* mm. 2-5

The first two statements of the theme, both in Bb minor, are surrounded by a gently undulating 16th note accompaniment. Much of this accompanimental "water" material is reminiscent of Morris' writing in *Coastal Kaleidoscope*. This thematic consistency strengthens her tone across her works. Following the opening statements, Morris fragments the lily theme, developing its first beat leading into the second section. Labeled "Reflection on the Water," the next two statements of the lily (now in F# minor) slow the tempo appreciable and remove the churning 16th accompaniment. In its place,

Morris sets soft, long pitches in the flute. The oboe encapsulates the idea of reflection, moving only when the bassoon's melody is holding a long note (see mm. 18 and 19 in example 4.2).



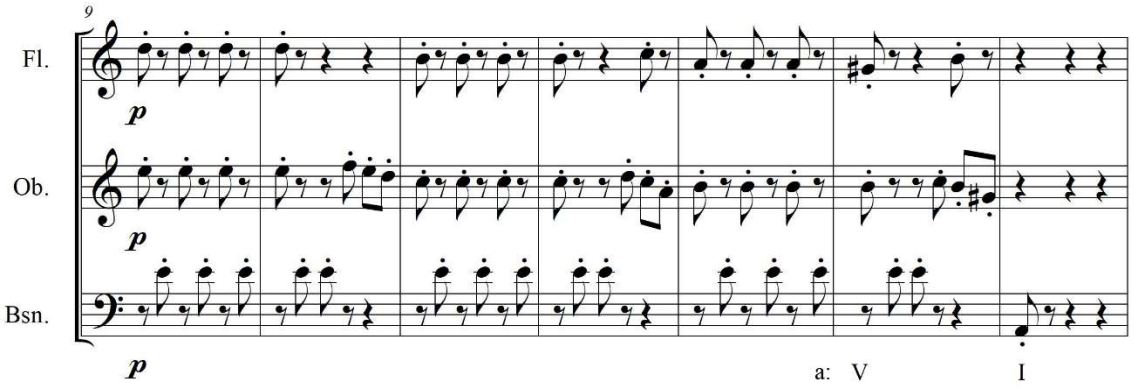
Example 4.2 *Monet* mm. 18-21

The final setting, River Rapids, is much more aggressive. The lily theme (now in B minor) is set with strong accents, filling in the held pitches with sweeping gestures in the oboe. Together these effectively evoke the jolting rise and fall of rapids and bring the movement to a dramatic close.

Seurat

Georges Seurat was a Post-Impressionist artist best known for his pointillistic paintings. The majority of his works are made entirely out of single dots of paint. Up

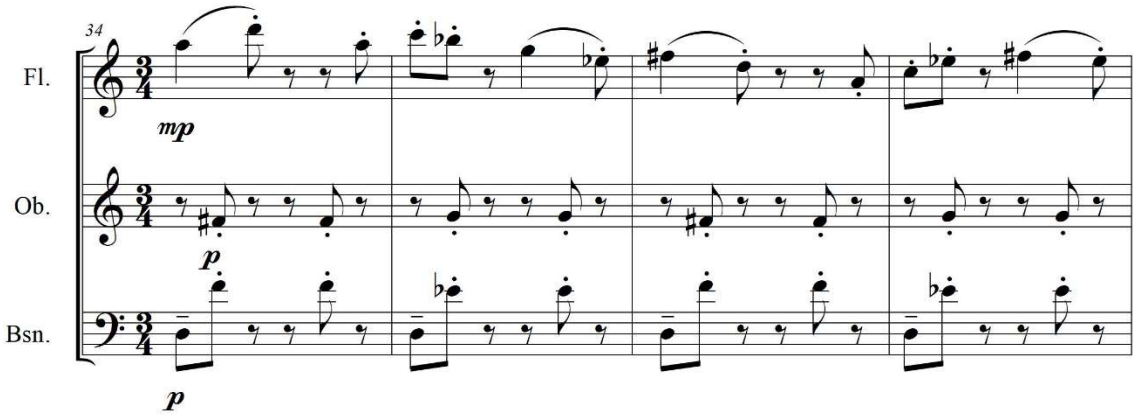
close, the subjects are unrecognizable, but when seen from a distance the dots blend together revealing the painting's subject. Morris' musical interpretation of Seurat is ternary and made up of a few simple fragmental melodies, separated by amelodic interludes. The primary thematic idea (seen in example 4.3) features repeated dissonant seconds played the oboe and flute, alternating with the bassoon playing a pedal E on the off beats. This pattern is repeated three times per phrase. Initially, the sparse notes don't imply any strong harmonic idea, but as the pattern continues the suggestion of a cadence slowly emerges (see the dominant E major harmony in m. 14 moving to A minor in the following bar).



Example 4.3 *Seurat* mm. 9-15

The comparison to Seurat's work is clear. No dotted note on the score is sufficient to create a clear musical shape, but each additional added dot provides steadily increasing context to the ones that came before and revealing the phrase. The mood of the music remains lighthearted in spite of the sparse, rigorously implemented presentation, reflecting the subject matter of Morris' chosen paintings, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grand Jatte* and *The Circus.*

The second of these paintings, *The Circus*, sets the tone for the B section. Here Morris sets up a Quirky, stuttering dance. The bassoon and oboe create a twisted circus waltz by playing clashing minor seconds that emphasize beats one and three (see example 4.4).



Example 4.4 *Seurat* mm. 34-37

In the transition back to the final A section, Morris shifts her harmonic language suddenly, focusing on the whole tone scale. This is the scale's only appearance in the movement, and it represents a new approach to musical pointillism. The lack of half steps remove any leading tone relationships and relative dissonances, leaving context and repetition as the primary way to organize the sounds in the listener's ear.

One of the key features across the movement is the strategic metric displacement that occurs in the interludes of the A section. Morris uses these to cloud the pulse of the transitions by metrically shifting one or more voices forward by an 8th note in each subsequent iteration (compare the opening ostinato to mm. 15 and 16).

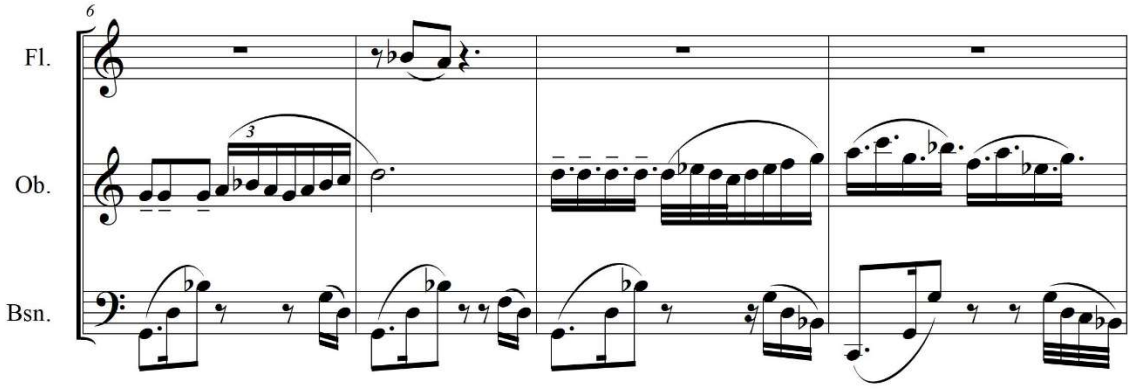
Van Gogh

For *Van Gogh,* Morris takes a different approach to her characterization, focusing on the character of the artist rather than the content of his paintings. The movement carries the direction "Longing for the Infinite", and the movement focuses to the constant mental struggles Van Gogh dealt with across his tragically truncated life. Specifically, Morris looks at Van Gogh's circumstances surrounding his self-internment in Saint Remy's Asylum. At this time, though he had experienced disillusion with organized religion, he still felt a pull towards some form of spiritualism. This yearning accompanied him during his work on *Starry Night*.

To create this sense of longing, Morris begins by employing a repeating bass figure in the bassoon. The figure begins with a large, ascending dotted eighth sixteenth motive that spans over an octave before cutting off abruptly into silence. This creates at once a sense of expansiveness (through the wide intervals) and unattained aspirations (through the sudden silences). The rests are notable in that they constantly change in length, sometimes short, sometimes long (depending the rhythmic figure that leads to the subsequent bar). The constantly changing pauses leave the audience unable to settle into a pattern throughout the entire opening A section. The melody continues the passionate uncertainty set by the bass by taking a simple idea (a repeated note(s) followed by a written out minor turn) and presenting it in various permutations, frequently employing hemiola.

Each time the figure appears, it occurs twice in a consistent pattern. The first time the turn leads into a stable held note, but the second time the melodic activity continues

past the turn, sometimes for several measures (see example 4.5). This removes any sense of resolution from the melody and creates a tired, trudging affect.

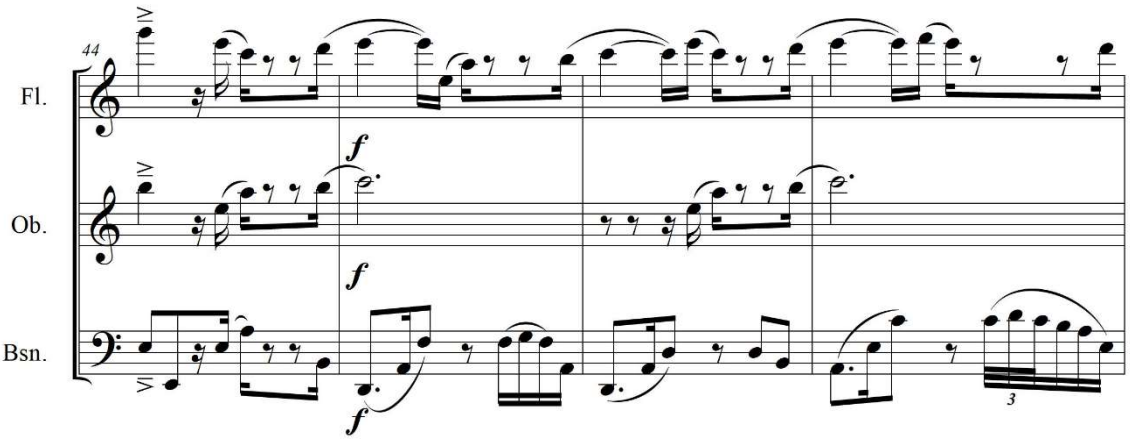


Example 4.5 *Van Gogh* mm. 6-9

Additionally, the constant turns, appearing with multiple rhythmic variations, effectively suggest the varied curving lines of Van Gogh's brush strokes.

The B section shifts the turning melody to the bassoon and sets a new accompanimental figure in the oboe and flute. The new figure brings an acute sense of pain by placing a striking dissonance (major second) that resolves to a minor third. The rhythm is key- dissonances fall on beats two and five, resolving on three and six. Beats one and three are silent. The constant interrupted resolutions across the opening seven bars takes away any sense of reprieve that such harmonic resolutions normally provide.

In the final A section, Morris employs masterful use of silence. The turning melody disappears, and in its place, the flute and oboe play a series of long notes that cut off suddenly, leaping to disjointed and sudden 16ths. The effect is poignant and painful. The melody stumbles forward, trying over and over to find some sense of resolution or peace, but fails at the end of each attempt (see example 4.6).



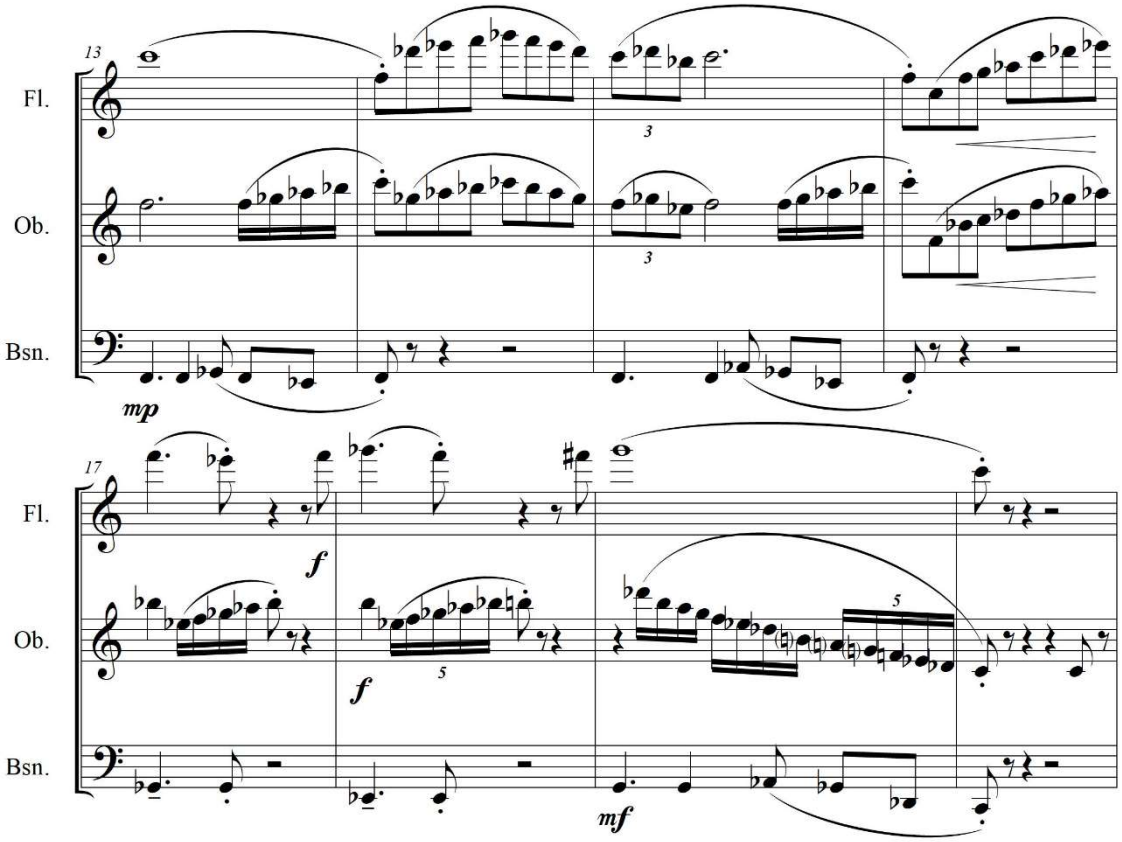
Example 4.6 *Van Gogh* mm. 44-47

Morris' here captures the musical direction "Longing for the infinite" in a deeply emotional way. At the end, the accompaniment cuts away and each instrument presents a brief, cadenza-like solo. The first two (in the oboe and flute) lead into dissonant, soft chords, while the final (in the bassoon) drives upwards in volume and emotion until it cuts off suddenly at the height of the bassoons range. A measure of silence follows, allowing the final, unfulfilled reach for the infinite to settle in the audience's mind before the final, soft chords bring the movement to a resigned and sad close.

Pollock

American painter Jackson Pollock was a pioneer of action painting, a technique in which the artist places a canvas across the ground and flings, drips, or pours paint across it. One of the more remarkable aspects of Pollock's work was the amount of control he retained as he flung paint across the canvas. The lines and splashes across the canvas range from thick to thin according to his vision. Pollock's *One* was a particularly important work for Morris. The work is somber. Blacks, browns, whites, and greys set the immediate emotional response to the work. It evokes a sense of melancholy that contrasts surprisingly with the clearly visible energy and action of the lines in the

painting. In spite of its chromatic melancholy, the name *One* comes from Pollock's sense of being one with the world and nature after having dropped all substance abuse for a time[10]. The regular chaos of his painting is reminiscent of the beautiful disorder found in nature. Morris' depiction of Pollock's work employs many short and varied rhythmic figures that she overlaps and juxtaposes across the length of the movement (see figure 4.7).

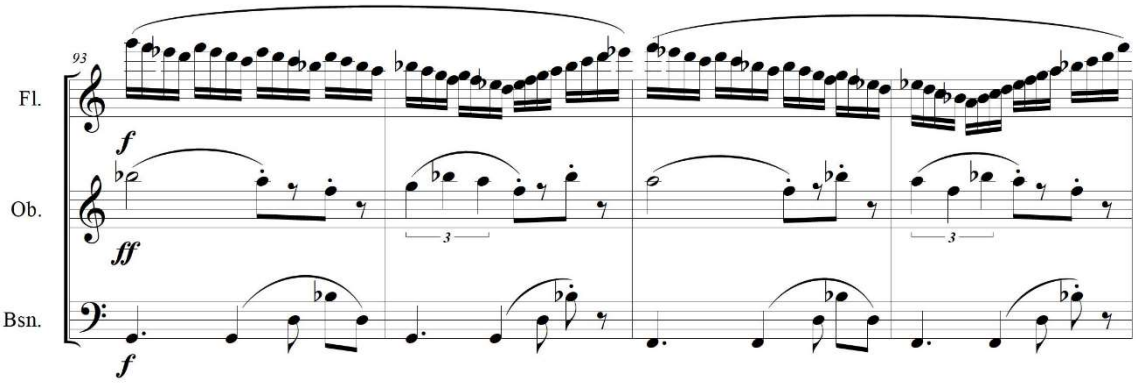


Example 4.7 *Pollock* mm. 13-20

These intertwining rhythmic ideas represent the various strokes of Pollock's painting. Fast flings are found in the swift and brief sixteenth note runs, see the oboe line in

[10] Ben Heller, "Audio from the Playlist Collection," accessed March 2, 2020, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78386.

example 4.7. Slower motions, drips and pours, are found in longer note values as seen in the flute.



Example 4.8 *Pollock* mm. 93-96

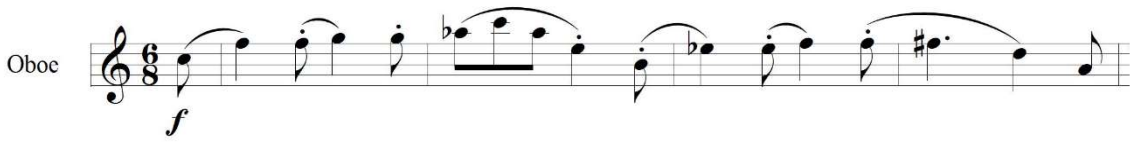
F minor and G minor set the somber color palette for the movement. Much of the melodic material is repetitive and sequential, emulating the repeated strokes the painter would take across the length of the canvas.

CHAPTER V
WHERE DO CHILDREN COME FROM

In *Where Do Children Come From* (2014: Oboe and piano), Morris' explores the experience of raising children through four lenses. Children bring many complicated and distinct emotions, allowing for great variation within the work. Similarly, childhood has its own well-developed soundscape, found in the many children's songs, lullabies, and musical games that color a child's life. Morris draws on this repertoire by quoting several different children's across the work. This adds to the work a feeling of earnestness, and the manipulation of the quoted themes allows Morris an effective way to add shades of meaning to her themes.

Circus

Written in ternary form, Morris' first lens for understanding childhood is the circus. Within this idea, she explores three different perspectives: First, children as clowns, second, parents as lion tamers, and third, parenting as an acrobatic show. To help with these characterization, Morris' employs three different quotations that recur across the movement. The first, *Pop Goes the Weasel*, is closely associated with childhood. The tune comes from a 19th century children's singing game. The oboe opens the movement by playing repeatedly the first two lines of the song, with a significant alterations (see example 5.1)

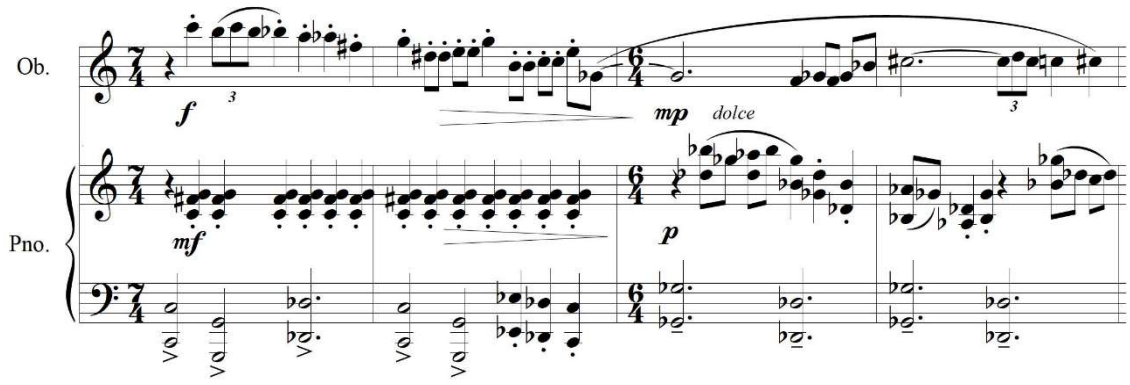


Example 5.1 *The Circus* mm. 1-4

No two consecutive bars stay in the same key, instead modulating down procedurally by half steps (an exception being between bars 6 and 7 in which it modulates by a whole step). A few things to note about the setting. Primarily, a singing child has no concern for maintaining a pitch centers. They sing whatever comes to their heart without knowing to worry about precision. They are also disinclined to retain the form of the work. A child is happy to repeat the same sung line over and over, occasionally to the chagrin of others nearby. Thus, the oboe's repetition of the same line while incessantly modulating is entirely in character with a child's nature.

A short piano transition moves into the body of the movement, emphasizing two widely spaced cluster chords. These are repeated aggressively, evoking the kinds of sounds a child would make while banging at the piano keys. The next two quotations happen in quick succession and are both associated with the circus. *Entry of the Gladiators* was originally a Czech military march that, after coming across the Atlantic and being retitled *Thunder and Blazes*, came to be used as a screamer march in circuses[11] (James Latten). The third, *Sobre las Olas* by Juventino Rosas, is associated with high acrobatics and trapeze artists[12]. In Morris' adaptation, the two pieces alternate in quick succession, interrupting each other every two bars (see example 5.2). The harmony adds to the frantic feeling. Entry of the Gladiators is written in C, but Sobre las Olas centers in Gb, a tritone away. Morris' mitigates this jarring modulation slightly by including a nonharmonic F# in Gladiators (at the same time destabilizing the C feel).

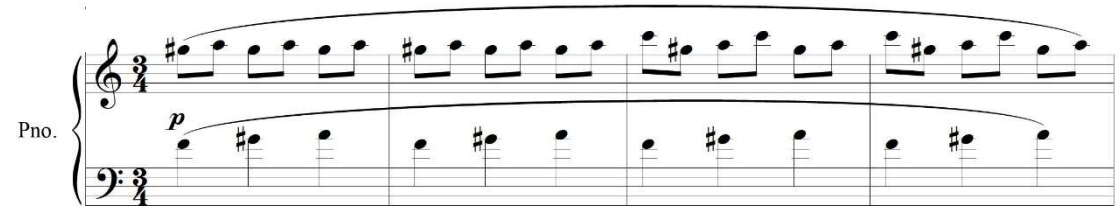
[11] James Latten, "Teaching Music through Performing Marches," Music Educators Journal 91, no. 1 (September 2004): 62–63.
[12] Helmut Brenner, "Juventino Rosas: His Life, His Work, His Time," Detroit Monographs in Musicology/Studies in Music Vol.32, J. Bunker Clark Ed., Warren, Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 2000.



Example 5.2 *The Circus* mm. 21-24

The piano and the oboe play the parts of parent and child, with the piano trying to accompany and help the melody. The oboe doesn't make this particularly easy, and it often preempts the accompaniment, shifting between the two quotes suddenly and off beat (see mm. 22 to 23). All these elements combine to create a great sense of chaos. It feels like an accident moments away from happening, like a waiter carrying plate filled fine china, incessantly wobbling and threatening to fall.

The first half of the B section carries on the movement's focus on chromatic motion and tritone relationships. The chromatic melody presented first in the piano's right hand and later in the oboe is reminiscent of ragtime (see example 5.3), particularly



Example 5.3 *The Circus* mm. 48-51

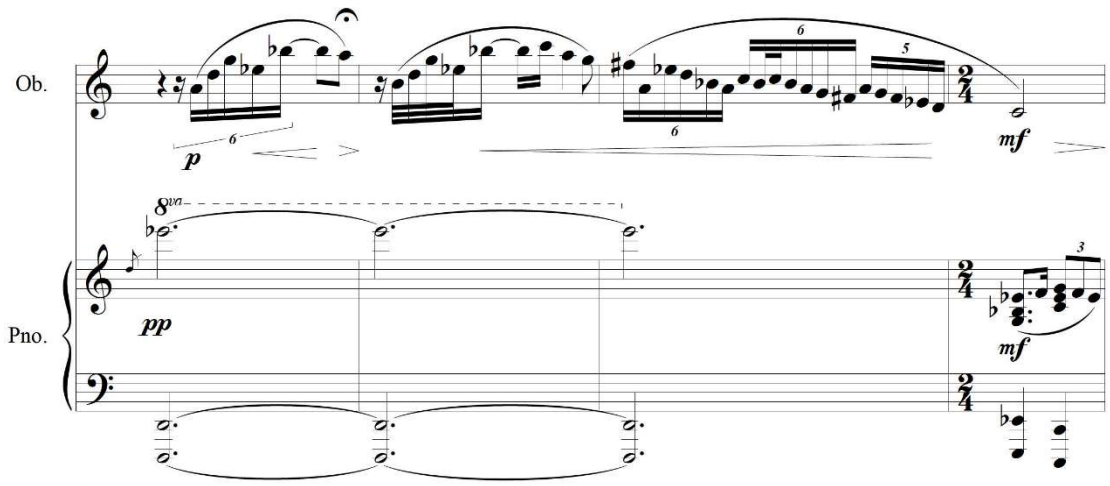
in its use of hemiola. The constant half step rhythms and shifting meter evoke a sense of tired dizziness, a feeling well-known to anyone who has watched young children.

Following the repetition of the A section, Morris closes the movement with a fiery coda. This develops the *Gladiator* quote, accelerating and crescendoing to a fever pitch, terminating with two exasperated chords in the piano.

Outer Space

Morris next presents children through an alien lens. Young children are unable to communicate, unable to move well, and unable to understand the world they've been thrust into. To represent this, Morris infuses the movement with a constant sense of otherness. To this she adds the frustration that children feel at their own inability to affect their world. As such, this becomes a tantrum movement, and the performers, as Morris states in her program notes, yell and scream, an effect brought about by measured use of extended techniques.

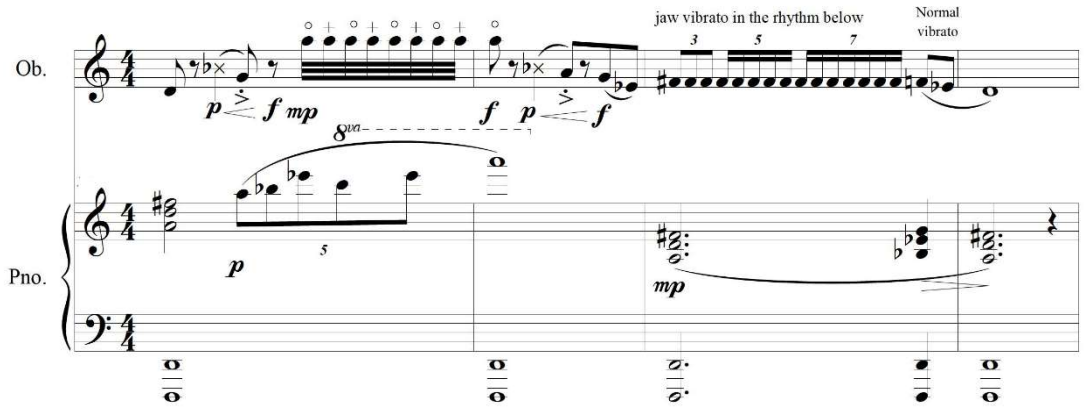
From the movement's first notes, Morris creates an immediate sense of otherworldliness by setting a soft, extremely dissonant half step pedal between the Eb in the right hand and the octave Ds in the left. Though the interval itself is dissonant, the clashing pitches are placed five full octaves apart, diminishing their impact. It leaves a subtle sense of unease in the listeners mind and creates an alien soundscape for the oboes initial entrance. The oboe's melody is rhapsodic, moving dramatically through cadenza-like figures. It exclusively draws from a pitch collection similar to the G harmonic minor scale in measures 1-7, but its use is unorthodox, centering around A instead of G, without resolving tendency tones in expected ways (example 5.4).



Example 5.4 *Outer Space* mm. 1-4

An alternative interpretation is that the pitch collection represents both D and Eb major superimposed upon one another. While closely spaced on the keyboard, they're distantly related harmonically, and could represent the nearness and otherness of a young child. In either case, this "misunderstood" scale reinforces the movement's motif of the mysterious and the foreign.

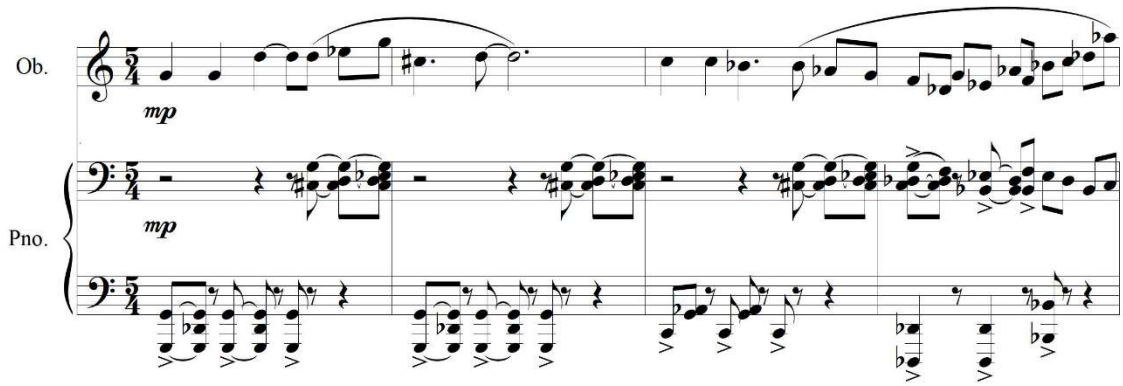
The music doubles down on this aesthetic in the continuation of the oboe melody. Morris introduces the first instance of extended technique in m. 9: The oboe starts a quiet multiphonic that crescendos rapidly as it resolves to a regular pitch. The next beat uses a moaning multiphonic trill that grows in a similar manner. The trend continues in the next bar, where the oboe uses metered jaw vibrato in its cadence (see example 5.5).



Example 5.5 *Outer Space* mm. 9-12

These closely spaced techniques emulate the babbling, bubbling, and slobbery way children vocalize without abandoning the mysterious mood of the opening.

The slow introduction depicts the child's initial attempt at communication. The child's efforts in vain, a sudden tantrum kicks off the body of the movement, signaled by the angry, repeated dissonances from the piano (m. 15). Set in an uneven 5/4 pattern, Morris here introduces the movement's quote. *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* appears in the oboe's melody in mm. 20-22, but she does so in a subtle, easily missed manner (example 5.6).

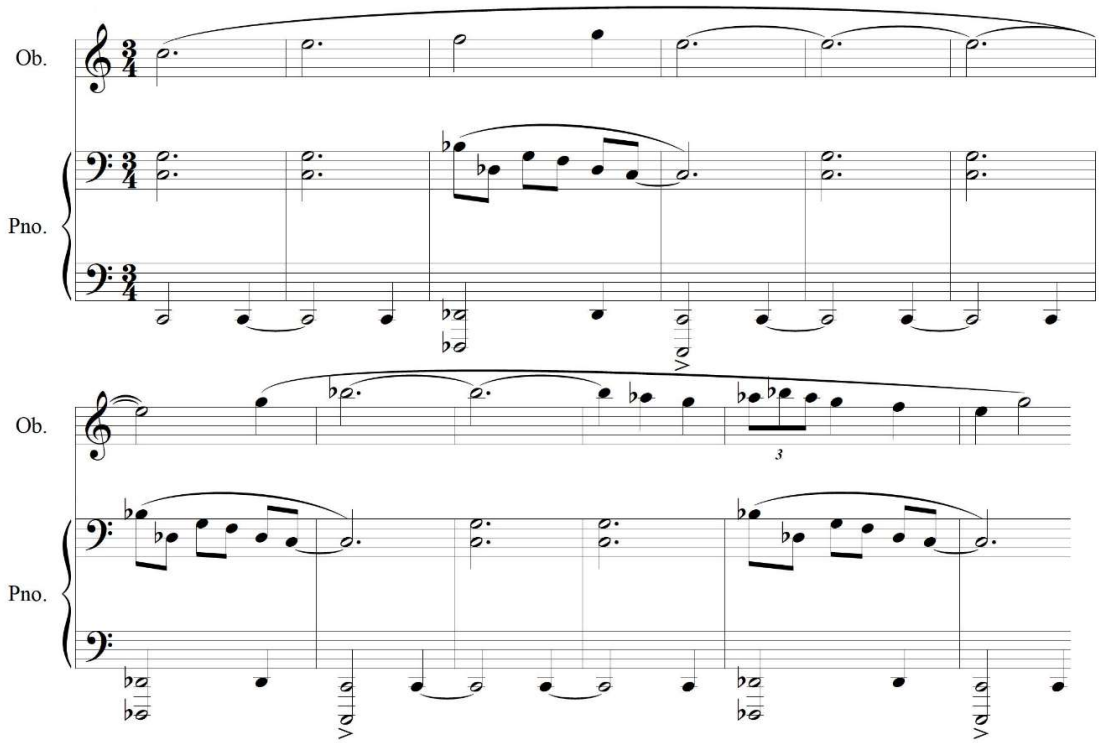


Example 5.6 *Outer Space* mm. 20-23

She ornaments the melody significantly (the most recognizable portion is the first three beats of measure 20, matching the original melody perfectly) and sets it in an unexpected mode, G Phrygian. The disguised theme fits the movement's focus on misunderstanding and otherness.

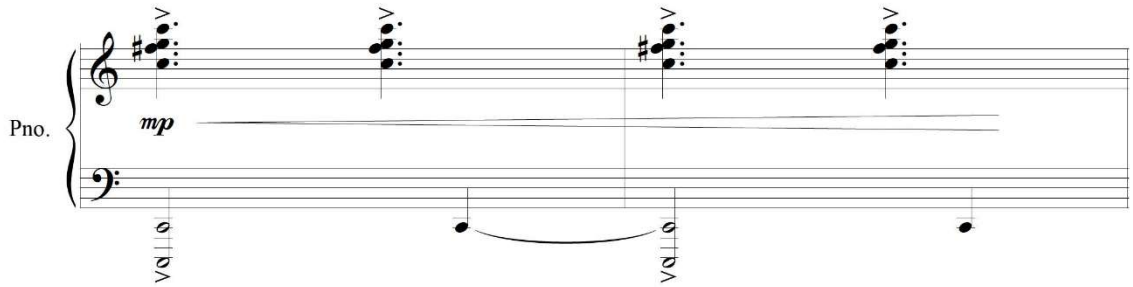
The mood continues as Morris brings back the extended techniques from the opening, now urgent and upset (see the harmonic trill in mm. 29 and 30 and the extended multiphonic passage in mm. 41-43). Rapid, angular runs dominate the melody, punctuated sharply by high pitched interjections. The lines fluctuate in length and figuration, replicating the uneven moaning of a child. Theses screams slowly subside as the movement transitions to the B section.

Here the syncopated piano ostinato becomes regular and lilting (emphasizing beats one and three) and the oboe melody loses its angularity (example 5.7).



Example 5.7 *Outer Space* mm. 60-71

The piece is harmonically unstable, alternating between C major and C Phrygian every few bars. The vacillation between major and Phrygian harmony shows the instability of the child's repose, one that at any moment could collapse back into screams. This is fortified by the oboe's writing that passes between calm triadic motion and glimpses of rapid activity. Things turn irreparably back towards a tantrum in measure 88 with the return of the dissonant piano chords from the start of the fast section (example 5.8).

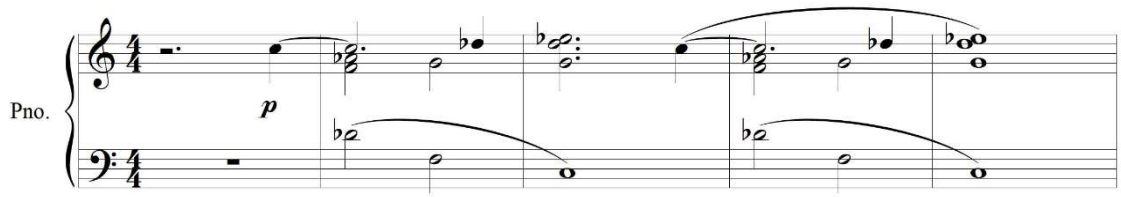


Example 5.8 *Outer Space* mm. 88-89

The oboe increases in speed and activity, matching the intensity of the piano as they drive together to the return of the A section.

A Higher Place

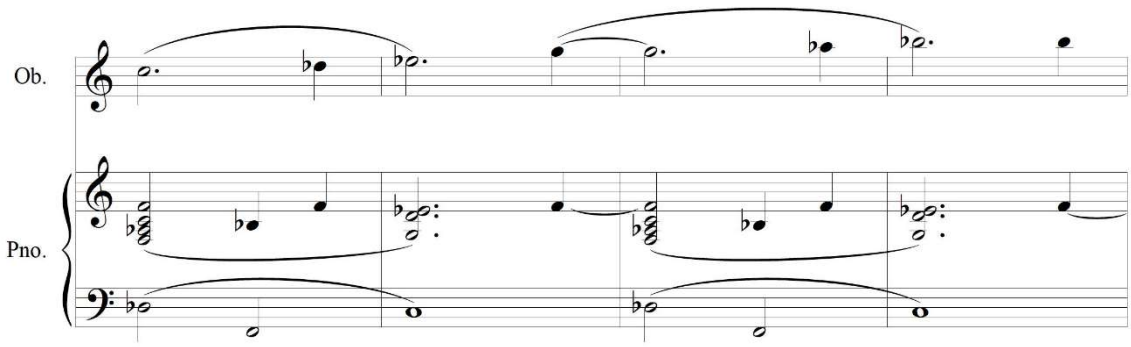
The third movement is a response to the tragedy of having a child pass away. In the movement, Morris employs no quotes- no peace or orientation is given through a connection to the familiar. The movement is through-composed; it is difficult to provide structure to losses of that magnitude. Set between C and F minor, Morris depicts intense grief though the frequent use of added note harmony. Morris opens by repeating a two bar harmonic pattern across the first 12 bars (example 5.9). At the most basic level, the harmony moves from an F minor tonic down to a minor dominant chord and back to the F minor tonic.



Example 5.9 *A Higher Place* mm. 1-4

To this already somber progression Morris adds a significant note- Db. The pitch Db is present in almost every beat across the progression, and, while part of the F minor collection, the pitch clashes with each chord, particularly with them C minor triad (being a half-step from C and a whole step from Eb). The constancy of the dissonant Db effectively deprives the progression of its normal tonic to dominant sense of resolution. This sharp dissonance combined with the quiet, even voice leading leaves the listener feeling a sense of desperate exhaustion.

The pattern returns at the end of the movement (example 5.10)) with a few subtle yet important changes. First, the anticipation note leading into the tonic chord changes from a C in the opening to an F at the close. This small change strengthens slightly the sense of tonic, implying that the griever is closer to resolution, though the continued presence of the Db indicates that it has not yet fully arrived. This idea is complimented by the second change. The bass' leap between F and C reverses its direction from the opening to become an upward lift, granting another hint at the coming resolution.



Example 5.10 *A Higher Place* mm.53-56

The final chord in the piano is pianissimo and struck a full bar before the oboe's final figure (a dominant ornamentation). By the time the oboe concludes, the piano voice has essentially disappeared, leaving the connotation of the oboe's C and the audiences affect ambiguous and insecure.

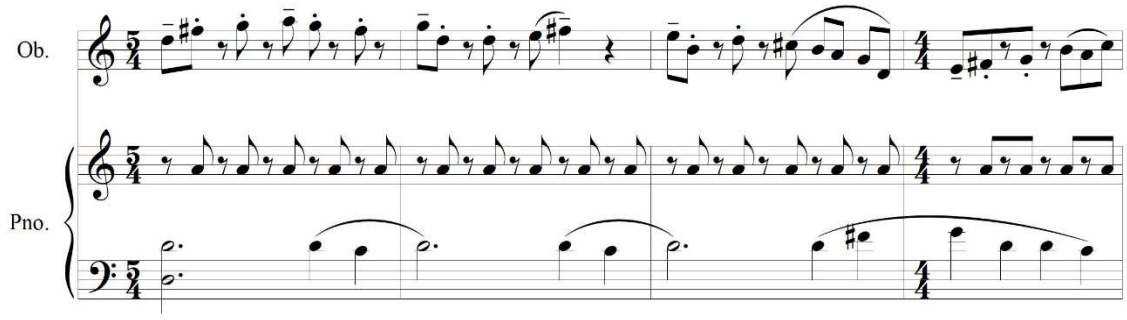
Morris' writing in this movement is among the most sublime of her entire opus. She evokes an immense sense of pain without it ever feeling manufactured or forced, and the tragic beauty of the oboe's lines, along with the piano's passionate statements, brings the listener through grief and leaves them at the door of healing.

Grace

The final movement comes from Morris' deeply held conviction that through Grace received from Jesus Christ, death of a child is only a temporary separation[13]. It is a movement about the hope of a future reunion with loved ones. This is a difficult emotion to capture in music. It is not a shallow feeling of happiness: the belief of being reunited with one's family in Heaven does not completely remove the pain of being separated now. Morris captures the complexity of this feeling by recontextualizing many of the

[13] See the composer's program notes for *Grace*

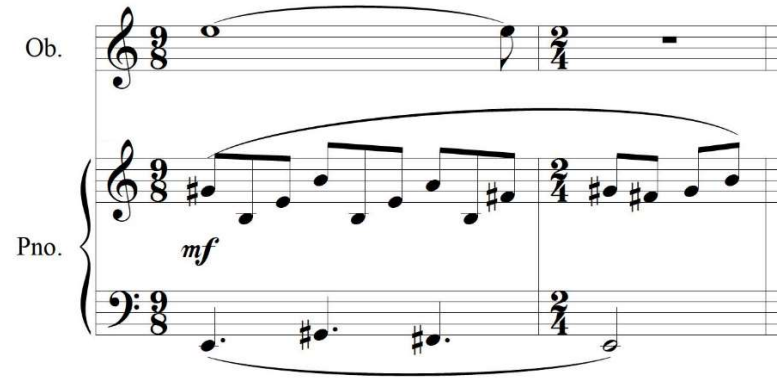
techniques used in *A Higher Place* and by employing a carefully chosen quotation. Written in ternary form, the A section opens with a minimalistic piano ostinato in D Mixolydian (the lowered seventh helping to temper the "happy" major feel). The opening oboe melody that joins the piano is at first unremarkable (see example 5.11).



Example 5.11 *Grace* mm. 9-12

Lilting and separated, the 5/4 line moves freely from consonance to dissonance against the piano, but because Morris stays within the Mixolydian collection, the dissonances are never jarring or unpleasant.

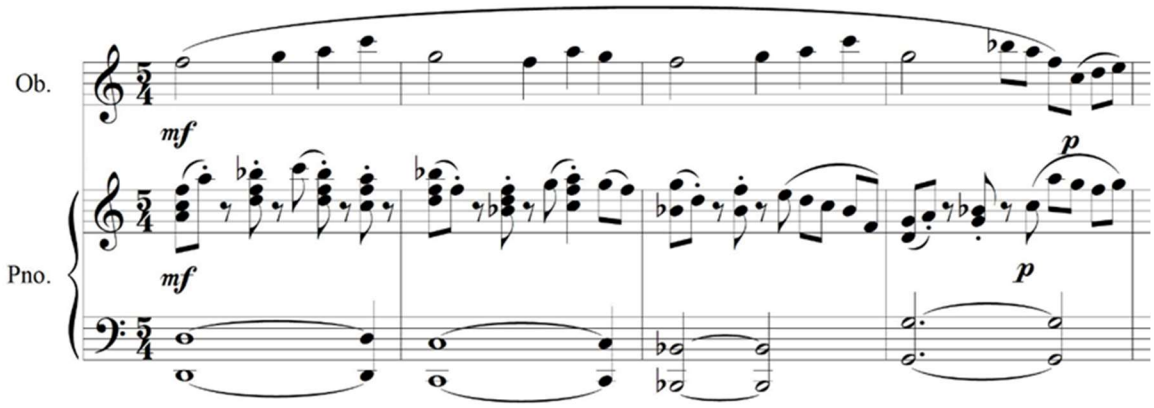
The B section raises the tonal center up to E Mixolydian. The performers here alternate between compound and simple meters every bar (see example 5.12), giving the compound bars a surging, full quality. The harmony in this section holds back the leading



Example 5.12 *Grace* mm. 27-28

tone, see the dominant-tonic harmony in example 5.12. Again, Morris is weakening easily recognized tonal conventions to hold back a sense of completeness.

Everything comes together with the return of the final A section. The tonal center again moves up again to F, but Morris employs F major instead of F Mixolydian. She also begins to employ the leading tone in her harmonic writing (see mm. 53 to 54). At the same time, Morris recontextualizes the Grief harmony from *A Higher Place*. Morris sets non-harmonic pedal tones in the left hand of the piano, most notably D set in the first measure of each repetition of the melody. The harmony is a direct parallel to the opening chords from the previous movement, just set in a different mode. Additionally, The D pedal set under the F major right hand makes the harmony ambiguous, mixing major and minor aesthetics (example 5.13).



Example 5.13 *Grace* mm. 54-57

The melody from the opening also returns, now set in the piano (m. 50), or so it initially seems. After one repetition of the opening tune, the oboe enters with the true melody (m. 54) for the first time in the movement: A variation of the Welsh lullaby, "Sleep My Baby." This accomplishes two things. First, it reveals that the opening theme is a counter melody to the quotation. The choice to present the melody after the

countermelody is significant, carrying religious parallels. Second, quoted material has deep connections to the theme of the movement. The Welsh poem discusses rest as an escape from pain and fear, with references to Angels guarding the resting child. The coda, beginning in m. 74, presents the quote one more time, now in its original rhythm and tempo, before bringing the piece to a jubilant close.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Morris' works represent an important source of American music, one that began with her writing for the double reeds but has started, and will continue, to extend across other mediums. At the core of her writing lies her ability to clearly evoke a musical program. As has been demonstrated through the analysis of her works, these programs are widely varied and deeply thought out. The performer setting out to prepare one of her works will gain great insight through their meticulous study of her scores. Morris' ability to characterize this wide array of programs is enabled by her mastery of many musical styles and trends, from baroque counter point to swing.

Through these fluent representations, Morris accomplishes her primary goal as a composer: To bring people a moment of happiness and peace. Whether writing about the process of losing a child or about watching the spring tide, Morris captures the audience's imagination and brings them to the emotion she is communicating. From there, she leads the audience to catharsis, cheer, or beauty. As seen in the preceding chapters, by understanding and considering each chosen element, the performer becomes a better intermediary between composer and listener.

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APPENDIX A

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY ALYSSA MORIS

- *Notes provide additional information when appropriate, movement titles are listed when known*

Four Personalities
Date of Composition: 2007
Commissioner: NA
Premiere: 2007 by Alyssa Morris
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe piano
Movement Titles: Yellow
White
Blue
Red
Notes: Morris' first performed work. It was written for her own use at her senior recital, and became an important connection to her future publisher. It has been recorded commercially at least four times.

Evolution
Date of Composition: 2008
Commissioner: NA
Premiere: NA
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano
Movements: I. Baroque
II. Classical: A Tribute to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
III. Romantic: Nocturne
IV. 20th Century: Minimalism
Notes: The work "evolves" a single theme, presenting it in a new style in each movment

Forecast
Date of Composition: 2009
Commissioner: Caryn Creamer
Premiere: 2010 by Caryn Creamer, Matthew Hand, Matt Coleman, Joe Millea, Yi-Chia Chen, and Eric Melley.
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe and 4 Percussionists
Movements: Clouds Descending
Rain Dance
Whirlwind
Tempest and Resolution

Notes: Commissioned for Creamer's doctoral degree, also from Arizona State University (see *Motion)*

Wormhole
Date of Composition: 2009
Commissioner: NA
Premiere: No formal premiere
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Concert Band
Movements:
Notes: No formal premiere as of January 2020. Written as an experimental piece while taking composition lessons between Morris' undergraduate and graduate studies. Later during her masters studies, Morris' reworked the piece for orchestra as an exercise.

Motion
Date of Composition: 2010
Commissioner: Ocotillo Winds (Arizona State University)
Premiere: 2010
Publication: TevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon
Movements: Bike Ride
Stretch
Tip toe
Strut
Notes: See chapter II. Along with *Forecast*, one of her first major commissions.

Simple Gifts
Date of Composition: 2010
Commissioner: Timpanogos High School
Premiere: 2010 by Timpanogos High School
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Orchestra and Choir
Movements: Written in one movement
Notes: Written for Timpanogos High School's graduation ceremony.

War and Peace
Date of Composition: 2010
Commissioner: Timpanogos High School
Premiere: 2010 by the Timpanogos High School Marching Band
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Marching Band
Movements: Written in one movement
Notes: A medley of contrasting well known melodies closely associated with the theme of the title, including Bach's famous Toccata, Holst's Mars, and the hymn Be Still My Soul.

OperaTuney
Date of Composition: 2011
Commissioner: Timpanogos High School
Premiere: 2011 by the Timpanogos High School Marching Band
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Marching Band
Movements: Written in one movement
Notes: A medley of Opera melodies set in a cartoonish style.

Dreamscape
Date of Composition: 2012
Commissioner: Timpanogos High School
Premiere: 2012 by the Timpanogos High School Marching Band
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Marching Band
Movements: Written in one movement
Notes: While the work shares a title with her later concerto for oboe and orchestra by the same name, the two compositions share no musical material. This piece instead adapts Brahms melodies for marching band.

Brokenvention
Date of Composition: 2011
Commissioner: NA
Premiere: 2011
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe, English Horn, and Piano
Oboe, Alto Sax, and Piano
Movements: Written in one movement
Notes: Written for the composers' use in a studio recital. Performed by Morris and her brother.

Where Do Children Come From
Date of Composition: 2012
Commissioner: Aryn Day Sweeny
Premiere: 2012 by Aryn Day Sweeny
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe and Piano
Movements: The Circus
Outer Space
A Higher Place
Grace
Notes: Recorded by composer.

Mathematics
Date of Composition: 2012
Commissioner: A Consortium of Colleagues, Friends, and Patrons (through TrevCo Music Publishing)
Premiere: 2012 by Eric Varner
Publication: Trevco Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Bassoon and Piano
Movements: Geometry
Trigonometry
Integral Calculus
Notes:

Coastal Kaleidoscope
Date of Composition: 2013
Commissioner: Elizabeth Young Rennick
Premiere: 2014 by Elizabeth Young Rennick
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Flute, Oboe, and Piano
Movements: Waves
Seals
Spring Tide
Notes: Recorded by the composer.

Cryptids
Date of Composition: 2014
Commissioner: NA
Premiere: 2014 by the Brigham Young University Symphonic Band
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Concert Band
Movements: Bigfoot
Loch Ness
The Abominable Snow Monster
Notes: Recorded by the Brigham Young University Symphonic Band.

Dreamscape
Date of Composition: 2014
Commissioner: William D. and Lois W. Johnson
Premiere: 2014 by Jeralee Johnson
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe and Orchestra
Movements: Falling Asleep and Chase
What?
Innuendo
Nightmare and Awakening
Notes: Performed and recorded by Nancy Ambrose King.

Up and Away
Date of Composition: 2014, 2019
Commissioner: Brigham Young University for The Sundance Trio
Reorchestration by Joshua and Stephanie Gardner
Premiere: 2014 by the Sundance Trio
2019 by Joshua and Stephanie Gardner
Publication: 2014 TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe, Bassoon, and Piano
and
Clarinet, Bassoon, and Piano (2019)
Movements: Inhale/Exhale
Life on a String
Letting Go
Notes: The clarinet/bass clarinet reorchestration will become commercially available after the Gardner's exclusivity period ends, likely by the end of 2020.

Brush Strokes
Date of Composition: 2014
Commissioner: Athenia Chamber Ensemble
Premiere: 2014 by the Athenia Chamber Ensemble
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Flute, Oboe, and Bassoon
Movements: Monet
Seurat
Van Gogh
Pollock
Notes: See chapter IV.

Chrysalis
Date of Composition: 2015
Commissioner: Carolyn Hove
Premiere: 2015 by Carolyn Hove
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: English Horn and Piano
Movements: Caterpillar
Within the Chrysalis
Butterfly
Notes: Recorded by Carolyn Hove.

Unbridled Spirits
Date of Composition: 2015
Commissioner: Kirt Saville and the Brigham Young University Symphonic Band
Premiere: 2016 by the Brigham Young University Symphonic Band
Publication: Unpublished
Instrumentation: Wind Band
Movements: Spirit of Serenity
Spirit of Joy
Notes:

Parable of a Stormy Sea
Date of Composition: 2016
Commissioner: Mark Ostoich
Premiere: 2016 by Alyssa Morris, Mark Ostoich, and Patrea Warneck
Publication: Unpublished as of January 2020
Instrumentation: Two Oboes and English Horn
Movements: Allegro
Adagio
Presto
Notes: The piece will be commercially available through Trevco, likely by the end of 2020.

Collision Etudes
Date of Composition: 2017
Commissioner: NA
Premiere: Unknown
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Solo Oboe
Movements: Summertime- Mary Cassatt
City Landscapes- Joan Mitchell
Jimson Weed- Georgia O'Keeffe
Rainbow- Alma Thomas
Autumn Leaves- Georgia O'Keeffe
My World is Not Flat- Margarete Bagshaw
Notes: Written for the composer's use. Written as part of her composition lessons during her Doctoral studies, Morris' used the piece as part of her final project. Recorded by the composer as well as Nancy Ambrose King

Nik Nak
Date of Composition: 2017
Commissioner: River Oaks Chamber Orchestra
Premiere: 2017 by the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe (English Horn), Clarinet, and Bassoon. With supplementary percussion.
Movements: Wood
Glass
Metal
Notes: The title is an acronym for the names of the commissioners.

Duo Displasia
Date of Composition: 2017
Commissioner: Northwestern State University and the Three Reeds Duo
Premiere: 2017 by the Three Reeds Duo
Publication: TrevCo Music Publishing
Instrumentation: Oboe and Alto Sax
Movements: Prelude
Courante
Loure
Gigue
Notes: Recorded by the Three Reeds Duo

Where the Colors Fall
Date of Composition: 2017
Commissioner: Brigham Young University Idaho
Premiere: 2018
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Woodwind dectet
Notes:

Eyes to See and Lips to Tell
Date of Composition: 2018
Commissioner: The Paradise Winds and the Arizona Wind Symphony
Premiere: 2018 by the Paradise Winds
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Reed quintet (oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, saxophone, bassoon)
Movements: I. Bright and Beautiful (Malayan Tiger)
II. Creatures Great (Blue Whale)
III. Creatures Small (Axolotl)
IV. Glowing Colors, Tiny Wings (Queen Alexandria's Wing)
V. The Lone Wolf 's Hunting Call (Mexican Wolf)
Notes: The title comes from the children's song, All things bright and beautiful.

Changing Faces
Date of Composition: 2018
Commissioner: The Richmond Symphony Orchestra (Richmond Indiana)
Premiere: 2019 by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Symphony Orchestra
Movements: I. Fresh Faced
II. Faceless
III. Blue in the Face
IV. Face the Music
V. Face Off
Notes: Morris was principal oboe for the Richmond Symphony Orchestra. When she left, the conductor approached her about a commission. This piece represents the many faces each person wears at any given time.

Dumbarton Oaks
Date of Composition: 2019
Commissioner: The US Airforce Woodwind Quintet
Premiere: 2019 by the US Airforce Woodwind Quintet
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Woodwind quintet
Movements:
Notes: Named after the park in Washington DC.

Coping
Date of Composition: 2017
Commissioner: Celeste Johnson
Premiere: 2018 by Celeste Johnson
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Recording: 2019 by Michael Gordon, Celeste Johnson, and Sean Chen through Equilibrium Records
Instrumentation: Flute, Oboe, and Piano
Movements: I. Counting, Breathing
II. Praying
III. Running
Notes: Recorded by Celeste Johnson

Melting Pot
Date of Composition: 2018
Commissioner: The Pacific Sound Woodwind quintet
Reorchestration by The Ladies' Quintessential Quintet
Premiere: 2019 by the Pacific Sound Woodwind Quintet
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Doubling wind quintet
2019 wind quintet
Notes:

27-72 A Tribute to Doris Deloach
Date of Composition: 2019
Commissioner: A consortium of Baylor University Alumni in honor of Doris Deloach
Premiere: 2019 by Euridice Alvarez
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Oboe and piano
Movements: I. A Day in the Life
II. Inside the Box, Outside the Box
III. Blood, Sweat, and Tears (Reed Making)
Notes: See pages 3-4

Cloud Songs
Date of Composition: 2019
Commissioner: Courtney Miller and the University of Iowa
Premiere: Future
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Oboe, Bass, and Piano
Notes:

Lost and Found
Date of Composition: 2019
Commissioner: Burning River Winds
Premiere: Future
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: English horn, bassoon, and piano
Notes:

Jerusalem Fantasy
Date of Composition: 2019
Commissioner: Glenn Harmon
Premiere: Future
Publication:
Instrumentation: Two pianos
Notes: Based on the hymn O Jerusalem

The Voices Within
Date of Composition: 2019
Commissioner: Karen Large
Premiere: March 2020
Publication: Unpublished as of February 2020
Instrumentation: Contrabass Flute
Notes: