Title of Document: ALMS FOR SOPRANO AND ORCHESTRA
Joel Pierson, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2014

Directed By: Dr. Robert Gibson, School of Music

*Alms* is a song cycle for soprano and orchestra in four movements, using five poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay as text. The poems are *Alms, Afternoon On A Hill, Bluebeard, First Fig, and Second Fig*. Due to the brevity of *First Fig* and *Second Fig*, I set these poems as one movement. The instrumentation is 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass trombone, tuba, 4 percussion (including timpani), harp, piano, and strings.

I have been drawn to the poetry of Millay for many years, and have set a few of her poems in the past. While Millay was not a progressive in terms of poetic structure or meter, her subject matter was groundbreaking, and her works contain an alluring balance between modernism and tradition. This balance runs somewhat in parallel to my music, which maintains some semblance of tonal structure, while also venturing into more contemporary techniques. A product of the Jazz Age, I believe that some of Millay’s artistic perspective has a home in my music, which relies on jazz harmony and shows great appreciation of early twentieth-century popular and art music.

The roots of this particular piece come from a desire to create a large orchestral work which has an underpinning of jazz harmony, but without most of the rhythmic or cultural associations that are attached to composing “jazz”. I employ ninths, elevenths, and thirteenths, so typical of jazz, but not in terms of chord progressions moving by fifths or resolving with a conventional sense of voice leading. Much of the harmony is voiced without regard for the traditional hierarchy of tonal music, despite the fact that the chords and progressions themselves contain almost exclusively “tonal sounding” chords.

The purpose of composing this way is to create textures which are both unpredictable and contemporary, yet approachable by a listener who has little exposure to present-day art music. This is how I interpret the work of Millay - a modern artistic endeavor which still has roots in tradition.
ALMS FOR SOPRANO AND ORCHESTRA

By

Joel Pierson

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts 2014

Advisory Committee:
Professor Robert Gibson, chair
Professor Lawrence Moss
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Professor James Ross
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Instrumentation

Flute 1/2
Oboe 1/2
English Horn
Clarinet 1/2
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon 1/2
Contrabassoon

Horn in F 1/2/3/4
Trumpet in Bb 1/2/3
Trombone 1/2
Bass Trombone
Tuba

Percussion 1 (Suspended cymbal, Finger cymbals, Tam-tam)
Percussion 2 (Tubular bells, Snare drum, Glockenspiel)
Percussion 3 (Vibraphone, Bass drum)
Timpani

Harp
Piano

Soprano

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Bass
**Afternoon On A Hill (3:40)**

I will be the gladdest thing
Under the sun!
I will touch a hundred flowers
And not pick one.

I will look at cliffs and clouds
With quiet eyes,
Watch the wind bow down the grass,
And the grass rise.

And when lights begin to show
Up from the town,
I will mark which must be mine,
And then start down!

---

**Alms (5:40)**

My heart is what it was before,
A house where people come and go;
But it is winter with your love,
The sashed are beset with snow.

I light the lamp and lay the cloth,
I blow the coals to blaze again;
But it is winter with your love,
The frost is thick upon the pane.

I know a winter when it comes:
The leaves are listless on the boughs;
I watched your love a little while,
And brought my plants into the house.

I water them and turn them south,
I snap the dead brown from the stem;
But it is winter with your love,
I only tend and water them.

There was a time I stood and watched
The small, ill-natured sparrows' fray;
I loved the beggar that I fed,
I cared for what he had to say,

I stood and watched him out of sight:
Today I reach around the door
And set a bowl upon the sill;
My heart is what it was before,

But it is winter with your love;
I scatter crumbs upon the sill,
And close the window, - and the birds
My take or leave them, as they will.

---

**Bluebeard (6:30)**

This door you might not open, and you did;
So enter now, and see for what slight thing
You are betrayed... Here is no treasure hid,
No cauldron, no clear crystal mirroring
The sought-for truth, no heads of women slain
For greed like yours, no writhings of distress,
But only what you see... Look yet again -
An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless.
Yet this alone out of my life I kept
Unto myself, cobwebbed and comfortless.
Yet this alone out of my life I kept
Unto myself, lest any know me quite;
And you did so profane me when you crept
Unto the threshold of this room to-night
That I must never more behold your face.
This now is yours. I seek another place.

---

**First Fig / Second Fig (8:00)**

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends -
It gives a lovely light.

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand;
Come and see my shining castle built upon the sand!
Afternoon On A Hill

composed by Joel Persson

text by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Viola

Vibraphone - motor off throughout

Harp

Soprano

Violin

Violin I

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabass
Watch the wind bow down the grass and the grass rise. Here:


Add mutes

mf or "Ooo"

Add mutes
And then start down!
Alms

composed by Joel Pierson

score by Elizabeth Vasey-Hiley


Vibraphone

Violoncello

Pianos

Soprano

Harp

Viola

Viola

Piano

Harp

Viola

Viola

Violone by

Slight Rall.

Slight Rall.

=  

Eng. Hn.

Vib.

Pos.

S.

Vib.

Vl.

Slight Hall.

A tempo

Suspended Cymbal

Suspended Cymbal

set

Slight Hall.

A tempo
A Little Faster >108

- Gradually begin

[Sheet music image]
There was a time I stood and watched The small

"..."
Very Slow

Tempo I, but slower +40

Tempo I, but slower +40

Tempo I, but slower +40
Rolling text...