

# Museum Pieces

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**Jon Jeffrey Grier**

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**Songs for Mezzo Soprano, Alto Saxophone,  
and String Quartet (2012)**

**on texts inspired by paintings of  
Helen DuPré Moseley  
by poets of the Emrys Foundation:**

**William Rogers, Marian Willard Blackwell, Jan Bailey,  
Philip Whitley, Gilbert Allen and Claire Bateman**

## **Program Notes**

These songs grew out of the larger initiative to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emrys Foundation, a support group launched in 1982 by writers, for writers, in Greenville, South Carolina. The organization has been a steady pillar of support for artists of many stripes and today continues its vital work as part of the arts community in the Upstate of South Carolina.

Helen Dupré Moseley (1887-1984) had earned a Masters' degree in History and had been a mother, a widow, an insurance businesswoman, and a postmaster when—without training of any sort—she took up painting in 1947 at the age of 60. Her style shows some influence from Salvador Dali, Henri Matisse and Hieronymus Bosch, but ultimately her whimsical and largely untitled works are the products of her fertile and uninhibited imagination. In the words of Tom Styron, Director of the Greenville County Museum of Art, "...Moseley realized her particular genius by distilling essential truths from childlike dreams."

Moseley's family made a generous donation of a large number of her works to the GCMA in 2000. In the summer of 2012, in preparation for the for the April 2013 celebration of Emrys' 30<sup>th</sup>, 16 Emrys poets were invited to compose brief poems on selected works of Moseley's from the GCMA collection. These songs set 6 of those poems. As the paintings in question are untitled, the song titles are my own, derived from the poetry.

**I. No Point to Miss (William Rogers)** This text sets the tone for the rest. Set to an off-kilter circus waltz, it celebrates the free-wheeling exuberance of imagination, with meaning where we find it. Is there a meaning or is it silliness? Either is an occasion for joy—decide for yourself!

**II. Mrs. Snoot's Composure (Marian Willard Blackwell)** I imagine Mrs. Snoot as the quintessential class-conscious English nanny—most worthy of satire. The music makes fun of her obsession with self-control and propriety in its galloping energy and exchanges between her and the strings mocking her pronouncements.

**III. The Magic Serpent (Jan Bailey)** A gentle blend of mystery, imagination and exoticism; altered scales and reggae-like rhythm suggest a scene that is at once alien and inviting. The creatures—all sprung from our imagination—invite us to take up a paintbrush and conjure yet more, losing ourselves in this invented world.

**IV. Quiver & Cringe (Philip Whitley)** Old horror and sci-fi movies are often great fun because they are so sublimely ridiculous. This music—taking its cue from the text—pulls as hard as possible in that direction, using stereotypically creepy and tension-provoking sounds to emphasize that we would be silly to be afraid of any of it.

**V. Who Did This to My Hair???** (Gilbert Allen) The music channels 1960's movie score rock to underscore the preposterous paranoia that someone could mess up your hair (now, there's a crisis) without your being aware of it. This song shares much of the mock-serious attitude of the previous song.

**VI. Where the Wondering Grows (Claire Bateman)** Returning to the beginning theme of the dynamics of imagination itself, this is a rumination on its fertility and mystery, its intrinsic role in our being. The music is much more contemplative, emphasizing that *we* are "...where the wondering grows."

## Interpretive Suggestions

**I. No Point to Miss** Render everything in this with an overstated sense of irony and quirkiness. Do not execute strums in the string parts too quickly. The diamond-headed notes in bar 44 are target pitches; do not re-articulate. Make the kissing sound in bar 57 as in unison and as loud as possible.

**II. Mrs. Snoot's Composure** In strict, fast 6/8 throughout. The vocal presentation will benefit from a touch of haughtiness, and letting the occasional phrase come out in near-speech with a British accent (in addition to places already indicated) is appropriate. All *sul ponticelli* should be as raspy as possible. Saxophone *tacit*.

**III. The Magic Serpent** All rhythms very strict and motoric, like a reggae beat. Melodies above this should be lyrical and rhythmically supple—exotic without being intimidating. Double stops in Violin II and Viola are played with just a slight accent.

**IV. Quiver & Cringe** This will require precise coordination between vocalist and quartet. All rhythms not interrupted by a fermata are strictly in meter. Fermati should be held for only as long as necessary for the vocalist's speeches to complete; the next measure should be cued in as soon as possible. Glissandi in the violins in 14-17, 19-22, and 35-38 should be spread out evenly across the two notes—not completed by the second note. All *sul ponticelli* should be as raspy as possible. All gestures—whether loud or soft—should be melodramatic. Don't hold back! Saxophone *tacit*.

**V. Who Did This to My Hair???** Aggressive, unsubtle rock 'n roll. The vocal should be oozing with anger and paranoia. The sax solo at 37 should sound like messed up hair. The Viola in bars 46-50 should insert erratically spaced "pop" crescendos—sudden and very brief; they need not be in exactly the positions notated.

**VI. Where the Wondering Grows** Slow, steady, lyrical, generally quiet and pensive. This is the only song in a thoroughly serious mood, brooding on the value and mystery of the imagination. Phrase the 9/8 meter without suggesting awkwardness or oddity.

## **About the Composer**

Jon Jeffrey Grier holds a B.A. from Kalamazoo College, where he studied composition with Lawrence Rackley, an M.M. in Composition from Western Michigan University, studying with Ramon Zupko, and an M.M. in Theory and a D.M.A. in Composition from the University of South Carolina, where he studied with Jerry Curry, Dick Goodwin and Sam Douglas. Jon has taught Advanced Placement Music Theory and Music History at the Greenville Fine Arts Center, a magnet school of the arts in Greenville, SC, since 1988. He composes frequently for student and faculty ensembles at the FAC, usually when he really should be grading papers. Jon has also been a writer/keyboardist with various jazz-fusion ensembles since 1984. He lives in Greenville with wife Marion and manic mongrels Roxanne and Gracie Jean.

## **About Emrys**

From the Emrys Foundation website ([www.emrys.com](http://www.emrys.com)): Founded in 1983, Emrys (a Welsh word meaning “Child of Light”) has sponsored music competitions, concerts, art exhibitions, conferences, creative writing awards, poetry workshops, and lectures. The Emrys Journal, the group’s signature literary publication, has appeared annually since 1984. Emrys Press, launched in 1995, publishes primarily poets of outstanding merit. The Reading Room has brought writers and audiences together since 1990; the Writing Room has provided professional instruction for writers at all stages of their craft since 2006. Begun in 2011, the Open Mic has provided a venue for writers of all skill levels to present their work to an enthusiastic and supportive audience.

Based in Upstate South Carolina, the Emrys Foundation was awarded the Elizabeth O’Neill Verner Governor’s Award for the Arts in 2004 in recognition of outstanding contributions to the arts in South Carolina. Emrys seeks to

- nurture creativity among emerging and established writers
- expand the impact of the literary arts
- collaborate across a broad variety of art forms to give voice to the written word.

## The Poems

The original images and poems are untitled; titles are the composer's. The page numbers refer to the pages on which the images appear in the Greenville County Museum of Art publication *Helen Dupré Moseley*, (2001, ISBN 0-9603246-6-6), edited by Linda A. Julian. Used by permission.

### No Point to Miss (William Rogers, p.45)

If you are creative (you are, I suppose?),  
Imagine a man with a gribulous nose,  
Whose head is as round as an egg, and as bare,  
Except for a ribble of bluish-green hair.  
Imagine a bottle turned into a duck,  
By some piece of magic or some bit of luck,  
With second-hand snood and with strippery sides,  
Who skates down the table and wambles and glides.  
The man's in pajamas—it's early, I think.  
Imagine the duck asks the man for a drink.  
Or maybe she's shutting her eyes for a kiss.  
The delightfulest thing is there's no point to miss—  
Or if there's a moral, then I have no clue.  
If you are creative, explain it to you.

### Mrs. Snoot's Composure (Marian Blackwell, p.43)

Compose yourself! *says Mrs. Snoot.*  
One never knows whom one may meet.  
Messy hair will never do. So  
Ppractice keeping each curl neat.  
Of all things, you must hold your head  
Straight up, like a queen. No matter how  
Upset you are by what is said,  
Refrain from talk; just raise one brow.  
Esteem yourself a lady now.

### The Magic Serpent (Jan Bailey, p.17)

Oh, my dears, what have we here?  
A magic serpent rising  
Through a plume of gauzy air,  
I do not think to frighten.  
  
Behind it charming creatures stir,  
All quite imaginary,  
Beavers, dragons, otters, birds,  
Odd, but not contrary.  
  
Canvas! Brush! It's time to paint.  
Our serpent willing mentor,  
Fantasy with no constraint,  
Enticing us to enter.

### Quiver & Cringe (Philip Whitley, p.53)

Extra-terrestrials loom like green Cheshire cats,  
cryptic flowers abloom in the dark, creatures that peer,  
a pair of aliens fed on glowworm diets.

The eerie figments electrify the lightless night,  
vampires, or eat-your-brain zombies that smirk  
in a mint-frozen mini-frieze of sinister delight.  
Manimal menace ripples up your spine, you shiver  
at the gawking freaks, reptilian, with pointy beaks—  
FEAR THE FORCE OF THE JELLY-BLUE BALL!

Where you lie—hope to die—unblinking eyes shimmer  
in sour-apple skin, strange fruit named Quiver and Cringe.  
They hang like St. Elmo's fire ablaze in a seabedabbbled sky.  
Scrunch down in bed, pull up your sheet, scream  
wild dreams wide awake—*pretend to sleep!*

### Who Did This to My Hair??? (Gilbert Allen, p.35)

Who did this to my hair?  
Somebody knows!  
Didn't your mother teach you not to stare?  
Who did this to my hair  
While I was sleeping in the barber's chair?  
My eyebrows feel like hiding up my nose!  
Who did this to my hair?  
Somebody knows!

### Where the Wondering Grows (Claire Bateman, p.47)

Here we perch behind our faces  
in these weedy greenful spaces  
where the wondering grows.  
The gorse springs up, the sky wafts down,  
the clouds wend wonderingly around  
in hyperborean flow.  
Deep in our dreams no rule may fathom,  
we wait for what we can't imagine—  
see how our silence glows!  
for we are friends behind our faces  
brooding in these greenful spaces  
where the wondering grows.