

STEVEN OSBORNE
piano

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)

Arabesque Op. 18

(approx. 7 minutes)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

from Children's Corner

The Snow Is Dancing

Jimbo's Lullaby

The Little Shepherd

Serenade of the Doll

(approx. 13 minutes)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918)

Arabesque No. 1 in E major

Arabesque No. 2 in G major

(approx. 8 minutes)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)

Kinderszenen Op. 15

Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

Kuriose Geschichte

Hasche-Mann

Bittendes Kind

Glückes genug

Träumerei

Am Kamin

Ritter vom Steckenpferd

Fast zu ernst

Fürchtenmachen

Kind im Einschlummern

Der Dichter spricht

(approx. 19 minutes)

Intermission

MARION BAUER (1882-1955)
From the New Hampshire Woods Op. 12 No. 1
White Birches
(approx. 3 minutes)

MEREDITH MONK (b. 1942)
Railroad (Travel Song)
(approx. 2 minutes)

FREDERIC RZEWSKI (1938-2021)
from Four North American Ballads for Piano
Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues
(approx. 11 minutes)

STEVEN OSBORNE (b. 1971)
Improvisations

KEITH JARRETT (b. 1945)
My Song (trans. Osborne)

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)
I Loves You, Porgy (trans. Osborne)

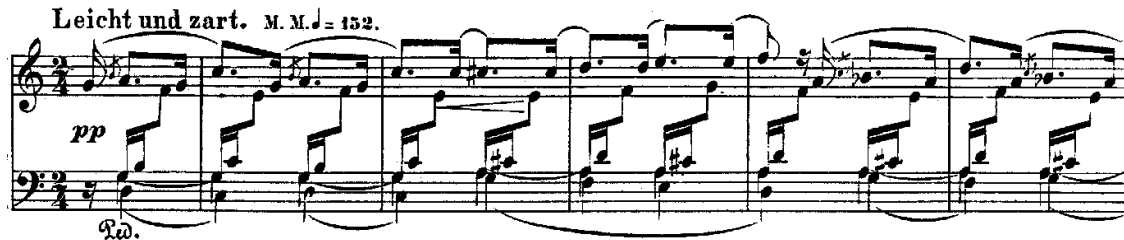
JAMES F. HANLEY (1892-1942)
Indiana (trans. Osborne)

Robert Schumann
Arabesque Op. 18

In the autumn of 1838 Robert Schumann decided to move from his native Leipzig to Vienna to find a publisher and a sympathetic public for his piano compositions. The public he hoped to attract in his year in the Austrian capital was a public of the fair sex, to whom he directed his “little rondo” Op. 18.

In keeping with the kind of gentle ears he was addressing, the title he chose was a term more associated with interior decorating than the taxonomy of musical forms. He called it *Arabesque*, perhaps in reference to the gently swirling curves and flowing, intertwined lines of the piano texture in the work’s opening theme.

Structured in alternating sections of a recurring refrain and contrasting episodes in an A-B-A-C-A pattern, the work begins with a section of whispering small phrase fragments in an utterly pure and chaste C major.



Two episodes of a more serious character in the minor mode offer alternative heart-fodder for the heaving breast, the first filled with longing,



the second a pert little march.



This elegant little miniature concludes with a typically Schumannesque postlude, a wistful daydream that in its final phrase wakes up to remember the delicate motive of the work’s opening bar.

Claude Debussy Children's Corner

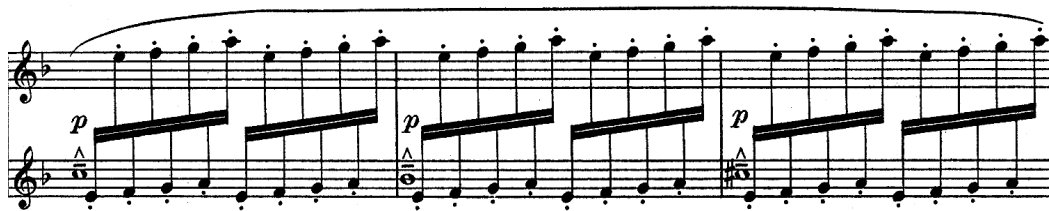
The Snow Is Dancing — Jimbo's Lullaby —
The Little Shepherd — Serenade of the Doll

The six little piano pieces in Debussy's *Coin des enfants* (Children's Corner) evoke the world of small children, and one small child in particular, to whom the work is dedicated: Debussy's own three-year-old daughter Claude-Emma (1905-1919), known in the family by her pet name "Chouchou."

The titles of the pieces are in English, not because Debussy was a mad Anglophile — although he was — but rather because the "setting" of this work is Chouchou's nursery, where her English governess, Miss Gibbs, ruled the roost, and that's what *she* would have called them.

Each piece is in simple A-B-A form and imaginatively depicts, in the picturesque style typical of French music, a real-life object or a scene that forms part of the fantasy world of the young girl. The four selections that Mr. Osborne has chosen to perform are vividly suggestive of a child at play.

In *The Snow Is Dancing* we see Chouchou at the window, watching the wind toy with snowflakes gently falling on the ground outside — at a pace of 16 snowflakes to the bar, it would appear, to judge by the score.



This ostinato of 16th-note tremolo flutter stars in the role of the snowflakes zigzagging in the air while long notes interior to the texture give us an idea of the mood of the wind animating the scene.

Jimbo's Lullaby features Chouchou's stuffed elephant named (with a childish misspelling) after P.T. Barnum's Jumbo the Elephant, a real-life pachyderm that had been housed as a tourist attraction at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.

The toy elephant's lumbering gait is vividly depicted by a naively innocent pentatonic melody presented in the bass register in the opening bars, whimsically responded to by quirky interjections of tone clusters in 2nds.

A musical score for 'Jimbo's Lullaby' by Claude Debussy. It features a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor). The time signature is 2/2. The tempo is marked 'Assez modéré'. The piece is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and the instruction 'doux et un peu gauche'. The bass line features a pentatonic melody with fingerings 2, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The right hand features a quirky interjection of tone clusters in 2nds, marked with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic and an accent (>).

And when this theme emerges to sing out melodically in a higher register, these “smudgy” 2nds, sonic symbols of drowsiness, accompany its entry into “sleepy-land.”

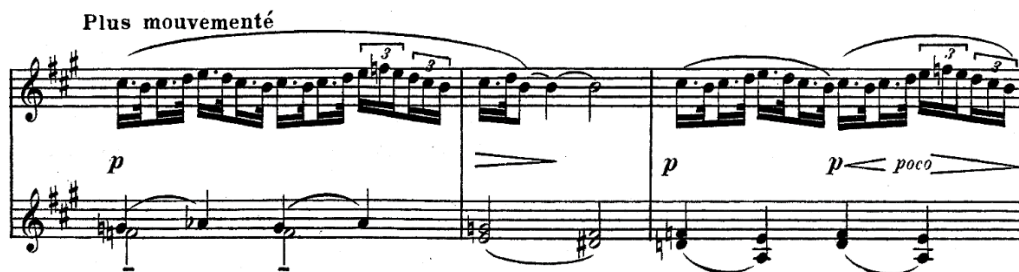


Occupying a narrow dynamic range between *p* and *ppp*, this lullaby is already half-asleep from its opening bars.

The Little Shepherd takes us to the pastoral world of rural life. And like that other Debussyan depiction of a pastoral landscape, *The Afternoon of a Faun*, it begins with a solo melodic line evocative of the shepherd’s pan pipes.



But these plaintive melodies are not the only thing on our little shepherd’s mind. They alternate with merrier impulses when our little shepherd feels the need to dance a little jig.



With its miniature-scale gestures, *Serenade of the Doll* is nothing if not “cute.” It chimes with open 4ths and 5ths like a music box from its opening bars.



But it is certainly not devoid of charming melodies, frequently accompanied by the strumming of an imagined mandolin or guitar



because this little doll is being “serenaded” after all.

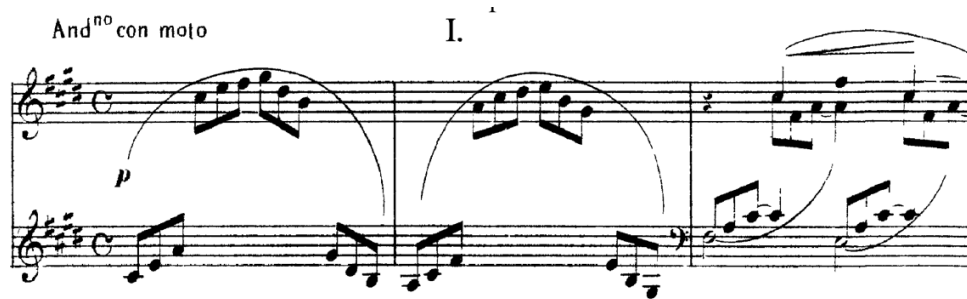
Claude Debussy

Arabesque No. 1 in E major

Arabesque No. 2 in G major

Debussy’s *Deux Arabesques* (1888–1891) count amongst the composer’s earliest pieces for solo piano. Appealing to France’s growing fascination with exotic foreign cultures in the years following the 1889 World Fair in Paris, they take as their inspiration the idea of the “arabesque” in art and architecture, a non-representational, intensely decorative style of artistic expression, full of winding curlicues, curving spirals and labyrinthine patterns of vegetation.

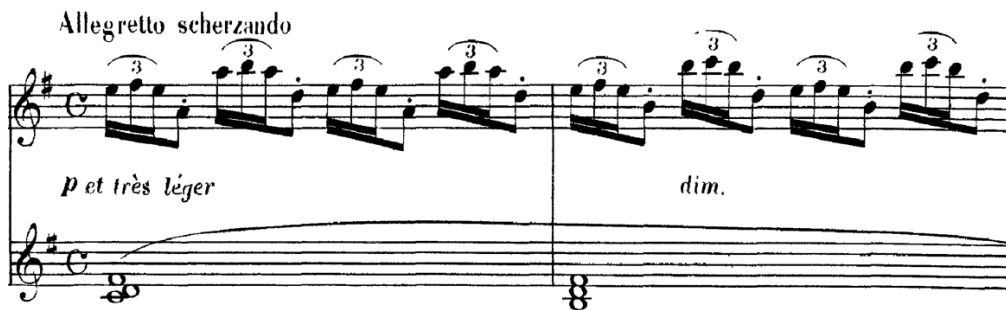
This decorative style is particularly evident in the construction of Debussy’s melodies in these two pieces. The *Arabesque No. 1 in E major* is a gently swirling succession of triplet figures that lead the ear in circles from the very first bar.



And the principal “theme” of the piece is little more than a rippling “whisper” outlining an E-major chord over a stable harmony.



The *Arabesque No. 2 in G major* is a more sprightly affair, more “frilly” in its decorative impulse, using 16th-note triplets to create an animated sonic surface for its leaping melodic line.



Both pieces have a contrasting middle section that expands the scope of these curvilinear melodies into more colourful harmonic territory while still maintaining the aim of creating a “decorative” musical pattern.

Robert Schumann Kinderszenen Op. 15

The *character piece*, a short work expressing a single mood or illustrating an idea suggested by its title, was a typical product of the Romantic era, and Robert Schumann was a major contributor to the genre. In 1838 he composed 30 such works, publishing 13 of them in a collection that he picturesquely called *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood).

Explaining the title in a letter to his future wife Clara, he wrote:

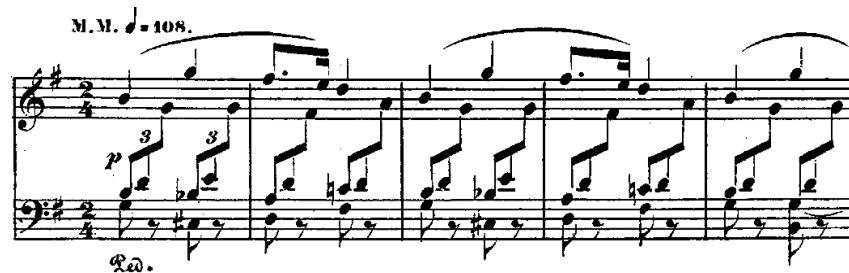
Perhaps it was an echo of what you once said to me, that “Sometimes I seemed like a child” ... You will enjoy them — though you will have to forget you are a virtuoso.

And indeed, the childlike simplicity and artlessness of these pieces is their most alluring feature. Schumann’s *Kinderszenen* were not written for children, but rather *for* adults *about* children. They are imbued with a nostalgia for a time of life that in many ways represents the Romantic imagination itself, with its wide-eyed sense of wonder, its lack of preconceptions and its openness to new experiences, as well as its intuitive affinity with an inborn Human Nature lying beneath the acquired behaviours of “civilized” adult life.

Here we find the poetic spirit of Schumann’s compositional style in its purest unmediated form, without the framing artifice of literary devices such as the masked balls of the *Papillons*, Op. 2, and *Carnaval*, Op. 9, or the fictional League of David in the *Dauidsbündlertänze*, Op. 6. Schumann here is speaking through the voice of the universal childhood of every listener — which perhaps may explain why this was the first of his keyboard cycles to enjoy popular success.

Most of the pieces in this collection are in A-B-A form. Their melodies sit in the mid-range of the keyboard — the range of the human voice — and very few rise above a dynamic level of *piano*, giving them a special kind of intimacy.

Anyone who has entertained the pleasant thought of getting on a plane and travelling somewhere far away will identify with the daydreaming mood of *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen* (Of Foreign Lands and Peoples).



The melodic profile of its opening notes, a rising 6th and a four-note falling figure (B-G-F#-E-D) appears in several subsequent pieces as well, acting as a unifying motive for the cycle as a whole. Schumann’s rippling arpeggiations in the mid-register and wide chord spacings in the left-hand accompaniment create an understated but quietly sonorous backdrop for this piece’s carefree and eminently hummable melody.

In the perky dotted rhythms of *Curiose Gedichte* (A Curious Story) we hear Schumann’s eternal fascination with turning every stirring emotion into some kind of a march.

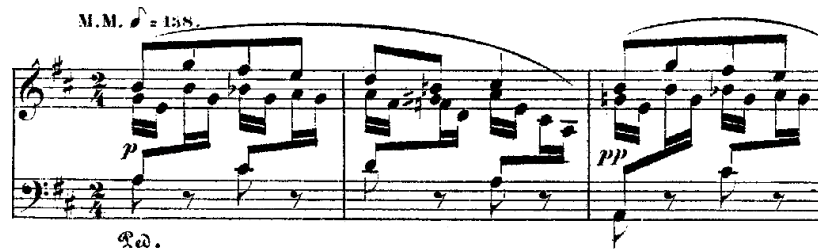


But into the bargain we also get pleasing little snatches of imitation and a multi-layered texture with many moving parts, especially active in the middle and lower voices.

Hasche-Mann (Catch Me If You Can) is as pictorial as keyboard music gets, with children musically portrayed as racing around in a game of Blind Man’s Bluff, each “tag” being indicated by a sudden *sforzando* on the keyboard.

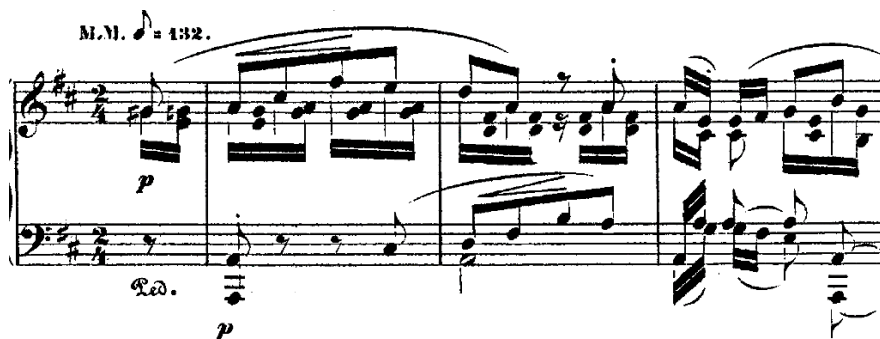


Bittendes Kind (The Pleading Child) is full of coy questions and many a phrase that ends with a rising, questioning intonation.



But are the questions answered? The last chord, a dominant 7th, with the 7th on top, leaves the issue hanging in the air.

Glückes genug (Happy Enough) is a charming duet between left- and right-hand voices in close imitation



making the point that “chumminess” is indistinguishable from happiness for a young child.

More march-like dotted rhythms greet us in *Wichtige Begebenheit* (An Important Event).



But the repetition of the same phrase over and over again in various transpositions evokes the naïveté of a mock-serious parade of toddler soldiers with wooden swords and moustaches painted on with Magic Marker.

Träumerei (Reverie) is arguably Schumann's best-known composition, made justly famous as an encore piece by pianist Vladimir Horowitz and even sung in a choral version at the annual May 9 Victory Day commemoration of Russia's war dead.



Its sequence of introspective moments is carried forward from thought to daydreaming thought by repeated re-harmonizations of the opening melodic phrase that never seem to tire in the ear.

Biedermeier coziness defines the mood of *Am Camin* (At the Fireplace),



conveyed by its unpretentious melody and the gentle, cushiony off-beat pulses of its accompaniment.

The accenting of the last beat of every bar in the *Ritter von Steckenpferd* (Hobbyhorse Knight)



marks the hoof-fall and play-gallop of a young would-be warrior charging about his playroom.

The title of the following piece, *Fast zu ernst* (Almost Too Serious) is curiously vague.



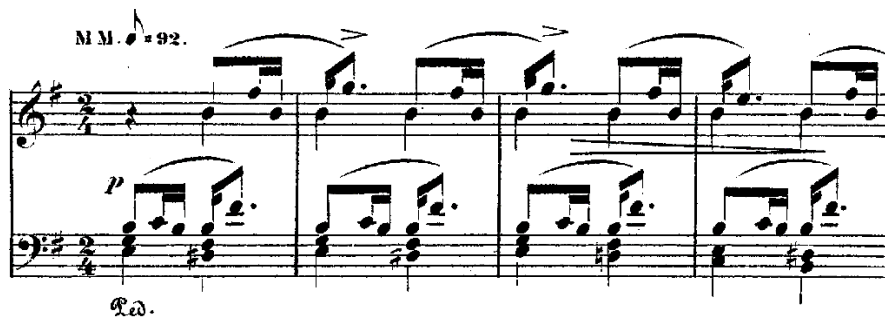
Every note of its serene right-hand melody, from start to finish, sings out on the off-beats, a 16th note out of phase with a metrically regular left-hand accompaniment of widely-spaced chordal arpeggiations.

Fürchtenmachen (Catching a Fright) alternates passages of innocent thoughtfulness with episodes of frenetic panic and confused anxiety,



a cautionary warning to the wandering child in us all that “if you go out in the woods at night, you’re in for a big surprise.”

After all this excitement, it starts getting towards nap-time for our *Kind im Einschlummern* (Child Falling Asleep) lulled into slumber by the hypnotic drowsy-making repetition of the same small motive, over and over.



In a brilliant poetic touch, Schumann allows us to witness the moment that deep sleep finally arrives, when this piece in E minor ends on an A minor chord, without a final cadence.

Finally, we withdraw from the poetic world of childhood to enter the adult mind of the poet who has been imagining it for us.



Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks) is a soliloquy of tender reflections offered up in broken phrases and plaintive recitative, an elegy reminding us, as did Wordsworth, that “the child is father of the man.”

Marion Bauer
From the New Hampshire Woods Op. 12 No. 1
White Birches

Marion Bauer was the first American composer to study with Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), a towering figure in twentieth-century music pedagogy. Having completed her studies in Paris, Bauer returned to the United States where she became an influential composition teacher at both NYU and Juilliard and was a tireless supporter of contemporary composers.

Bauer spent many of her happiest moments at her cottage close to the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, an artist retreat set up by composer Edward MacDowell’s wife Marian after his death in 1908. Bauer’s piano suite *From the New Hampshire Woods* (1920) pays tribute to the idyllic landscape she enjoyed in this rural setting.

Each of the three pieces in the suite is preceded by a quotation about the mystical allure of Nature by her fellow Colony member, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet William Rose Benét (1886-1950).

White Birches is prefaced with the lines

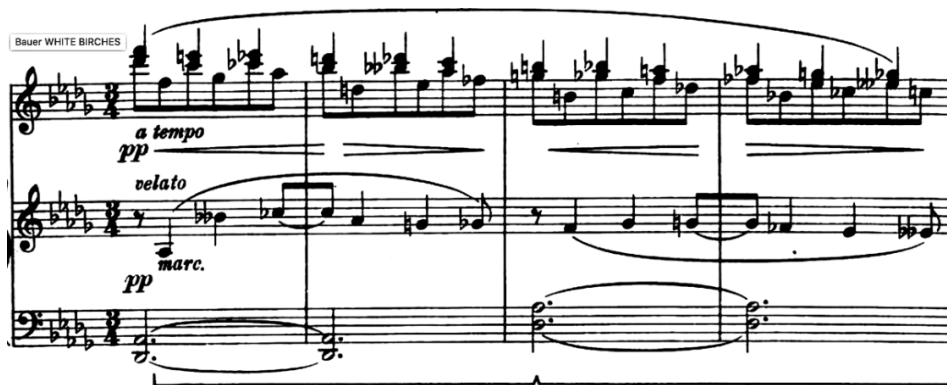
What is the meaning of their secret gleaming,
What language is in their leaves, that glitter and whisper
Where the ghostly birches glimmer under the moon?

Understandably, this piece is said to offer a “portrait of rustling leaves and palely glowing bark, dappled with moonlight and mysterious shade.”

Her musical style is essentially tonal, but the element of mysticism is conveyed through her use of extended chords in 3rds as well as quartal and quintal harmonies using 4ths and 5ths – a harmonic palette that gives off a distinctly “Scriabinesque” vibe.



Another trademark feature of her style is her fondness for descending chromatic lines, evident in the middle section of this piece.



Despite the hazy, “floating” harmonies of this piece, Bauer’s focus remains on melody, firmly grounded in steady periodic rhythm.

Meredith Monk

Railroad (Travel Song)

Meredith Monk has long been associated with the American “experimental” music scene and with multimedia art in general, such that her work is often written about as much by critics of theatre, dance and performance art as by music critics. She is especially well known for her extended vocal techniques.

Like much of the “minimalist” music of Steve Reich (b. 1936), Monk’s works often use ostinato patterns, as does *Railroad (Travel Song)*, which was originally part of her opera *Specimen Days* (1981) and was later published in her collection of pieces entitled *Piano Album*.

The piece was inspired by *Notes of a Pianist*, the travel diary of American virtuoso pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869), who recounts his experiences touring and concertizing during the American Civil War.

A simple left-hand pattern repeats throughout the piece in various articulations to give us the steady “chug-chug” rhythm of a steam locomotive

Grounded; $\text{♩} = 100-112$

Piano

ppp

mf

poco ped.

4

while the right hand gives us the occasional toot on the engineer’s horn, all whizzing by us in a striking imitation of the Doppler Effect, an acoustic phenomenon experienced when a speeding train passes by.

Frederic Rzewski Four North American Ballads for Piano Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues

Pianist-composer Frederic Rzewski was known for incorporating his left-leaning political views and commitment to social causes into his art.

A clear example is his *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* (1979) from a collection of pieces entitled *North American Ballads*.

Based on a protest song of the same name, which is believed to have been sung in the aftermath of the 1934 General Strike, it describes, in the composer’s words:

... working conditions in the textile mills of North Carolina, probably not too different today than they were then.

The dull, mechanical sound of those mills is heard in the opening ostinato, which dominates the first section of the work:

$\text{♩} = 88/92$ **Expressionless, machinelike**
marcato, non legato, con grande precisione ritmica, e con intensità costante

The middle section reveals, in its bluesy swagger, the more human, more “worker” side of this scene set in a cotton mill.

(Ped.) ———
Un poco meno mosso ($\text{♩} = 54/56$)
p tranquillo, espressivo *poco*

But this is only a coffee break for the exploited labourers, it would appear, and the menacing, dehumanizing sound of the infernal machines returns in the closing section, arriving at this monstrous climax

before the work-shift ends and the mill’s machines return to silence as they are turned off.

Keith Jarrett
My Song (trans. Osborne)

American pianist-composer Keith Jarrett has worked with some of the greatest figures in modern jazz, including Miles Davis and Chick Corea. He is perhaps best known to audience members “of a certain age” for his 1973 LP of improvisations at concerts in Lausanne and Bremen and another concert of improvisations in Köln in 1975.

My Song comes from a studio album of the same name that Jarrett recorded with Norwegian jazz saxophonist Jan Garbarek (b. 1947) and the European Quartet in 1977.



There is a simplicity and relaxed lyricism in this piece that reminds one of Bill Evans. Quite appropriate for a composer who described his work as “universal folk music.”

George Gershwin
I Loves You, Porgy (trans. Osborne)

I Loves You, Porgy is from the touching duet scene between the title characters in Act II of George Gershwin’s 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*.

In this scene Porgy declares that he will take care of Bess and she doesn’t need to go back to her abusive lover Crown any more.



Dominated by the interval of the 3rd, this duet rocks back and forth in musical space in melodic gestures emblematic of the see-saw ups and downs of Bess’ messy love life.

James F. Hanley, with lyrics by Ballard MacDonald
Indiana (trans. Osborne)

(Back Home Again in) Indiana by songwriter James F. Hanley (1892–1942), with lyrics by Ballard MacDonald (1882–1935), began its long and distinguished career in the annals of Americana as a Tin Pan Alley pop song in 1917.

I have always been a wand'rer over land and sea
Yet a moonbeam on the water casts a spell o'er me
A vision fair I see again I seem to be
Back home again in Indiana ... [chorus]

With its patriotic echoes of a military homecoming, it gradually wormed its way into the hearts of all Hoosiers and since 1946 has been sung every year in the pre-race ceremonies of the Indianapolis 500 motor race.

The image shows a musical score for the first line of the song. It consists of three staves: a vocal line in treble clef, a piano accompaniment in treble clef, and a bass line in bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The piano part starts with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) and includes a crescendo hairpin. The lyrics are: "I have al - ways been a wand - 'rer, O - ver land and Fan - cy paints on mem - 'ry's can - vas _____ Scenes that we hold".

The singer tasked with belting out the tune from 1972 until his “retirement” at the age of 84 was Jim Nabors (1930–2017), famous for his role in *The Andy Griffith Show* and its later spin-off *Gomer Pyle – USMC*.

Donald G. Gíslason 2025