
My Aunt Gives Me a Clarinet Lesson

(1999)

duration ca. 12 min.

based on a poem by Gregory Djanikian

Mark W. Phillips

(study score — full-size performance score available upon request)



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composed for Rebecca Rischin, Guy Remonko, and Lisa Ford Moulton

... and for all those who have ever attempted to bridge the chasm between their earliest dreams of virtuosity and the pathetic (but often humorous) reality of their first lessons — whether through hard work or flights of fancy.

15 *dolce*
p
ad lib.
 vibes (bowed)
p

"Why not the cello," she said, "why not the drums."

17
 (Percussionist speaks) ... "Zookeeper," ... "game warden,"
 my uncle said, I blew out ostriches ... catbirds ... snow geese.

19 *poco cresc.* *mf* *mf* w/ soft mallets *mf* *mf*

21 *ff* *f* *ff* *fff*
 transfer mallet prepare for ratchet!
 two mallet gliss. ("black & white" notes)
 loud, ugly multiphonic!
 ratchet!

"Silly boy girl," she said, creasing the pages of the lesson book. "Take the gum out of your mouth." "Don't blow so hard."

(slowly and deliberately)

25 *ff* *poco a poco dim...* *f sempre* *mf* *mf* *mp*
 temple blocks (w/ mallets)
f *mf* *mf* *mp*

There were frogs at my feet, ... Boat-tailed grackles perched on the towel rack.

perc. cadenza: *ad lib.* (seated at drum kit) vary the length of each measure; more than 4 measures may be played, but there should be no obvious repetition
 ride cym.
p mp
 ca. 10 -16 notes ca. 10 -16 notes ca. 10 -16 notes ca. 10 -16 notes
 note: suggested instruments for lower part include — temple blocks, bongos, tom-tom (pitch bend?), mounted castanets, muffled brake drum or cow bell, etc. Do NOT reuse any instrument

I could hear my cousins playing Ping-Pong in the cellar ... And there was the tick tick of the oven baking bread,
 And wasn't that Freddy Petrie outside ... Under the maple, swinging easily on a rope and making the branch creak?

31 *mp* temple block (repeat as needed)

(with exaggerated, stylized gesture towards clarinetist, pantomime "snapping" fingers in time with percussionist.)
 How many metronomes there were! "Begin again," my aunt said, "restrain," And snapped her fingers next to my ear.

♩ = 120-128 (Swing!) jazzy style, legato with breath accents

34
4/4
hi-hat
mp

(begin energetic dance sequence)

38
mp *p* *f*
gliss./smear
snare

42
fill...
("jungle drums" — lots of toms)

46
fill...
simile

50
fill...

54
fill...

58
fill...

62

66

70

74

78

82

drum set solo: repeat ad lib.

86

(toms/hi hat/BD: in time)

(percussionist: cue narrator at end of solo)

(begin "winding down" energetic dance sequence)

Two mules, I counted. **Three cows.**

ad. lib -- very freely

gradually break down meter into free-form improvisation

mf poco a poco dim... *p* poco a poco cresc...

Where was Benny Goodman? Dixieland? Which house were all the saints marching in?
Farewell, Carnegie Hall, I thought. Good-bye, Pierson Elementary School Band. So long, Janice Reutlinger who played the tuba.

mf poco a poco cresc... *ff* *f*

mp poco a poco cresc... *f* (improvise) *mf*

p *mf* *p* *mf*

rub (moistened thumb on drum heads) (get brushes) improvise on drum set or vibes: 10" - 15" > use jazz brushes > busy texture, but not too loud (text should be clear)

mf *mp*

There was a yak lowing in the doorway.
"Domesticate," my aunt said, "Refine."

Freddy Petrie was riding a wild donkey
Along the blackberry bushes, waving and smiling.
The maple was becoming dangerous and colorful,

p *mf* *mp*

(get 1 jazz brush + 1 rattan mallet handle) sus. cymbals Improvise on sus. cymbals (not so busy) 5" - 10"

mp *pp-p*

Hippopotami had come.
Soon there'd be phalaropes, merinos.

p poco a poco cresc... *ff* *sfz* *ff*

(get mallets) very loud, high multiphonic temple blocks party noise maker noise maker sus. cymbals *ff* sempre

"Sonority!"

my aunt cried out, "So-nor-i-ty!"

ff *mf* *mp*

get 1 brush & 1 bow sus. cymbals vibes (bowed) sus. cymbals vibes (bowed)

mp *mp* *p* *p*

And ducks. There were lots of ducks.

My Aunt Gives Me A Clarinet Lesson*

by Gregory Djanikian

“Play,” my aunt said, “*pianissimo*.”
I blew out toots and squeaks, filled the kitchen
With caterwauls, monkeys, pigs,
There was a menagerie, there were jungles.
“Why not the cello,” she said, “why not drums.”
“Zookeeper,” my uncle said, “game warden.”

I blew out ostriches, catbirds, snow geese.
“Silly boy,” she said, creasing
The pages of the lesson book,
“Take the gum out of your mouth,
Don’t blow so hard.”

There were frogs at my feet,
Boat-tailed grackles perched on the towel rack.

I could hear my cousins playing Ping-Pong in the cellar,
And there was the *tick tick* of the oven baking bread,
And wasn’t that Freddy Petrie outside
Under the maple, swinging easily on a rope
And making the branch creak?

How many metronomes there were!
“Begin again,” my aunt said, “restrain,”
And snapped her fingers next to my ear.
Two mules, I counted. Three cows.

Where was Benny Goodman? Dixieland?
Which house were all the saints marching in?
Farewell, Carnegie Hall, I thought. Good-bye,
Pierson Elementary School Band. So long,
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Along the blackberry bushes, waving and smiling.
The maple was becoming dangerous and colorful,
Hippopotami had come.
Soon there’d be phalaropes, merinos.

“Sonority!” my aunt cried out, “Sonority!”
And ducks. There were lots of ducks.

*Gregory Djanikian teaches creative writing
at the University of Pennsylvania.*

* from *Falling Deeply into America*
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Percussion Instrument List: (jazz brushes, drum sticks, various mallets, and bass bow required)


jazz drum set having 3 or 4 suspended cymbals of various timbres and a sizzle cymbal plus the normal complement of drums and hi-hat; vibraphone; 4-5 temple blocks; ratchet; [optional instrument choices for ad lib. cadenza (see mm. 27-30) include bongos, castanets, brake drum, or cowbell]; and “party noisemaker”


(*Note: The “party noisemaker” (see m. 98) should allow “hands-free” noisemaking. Suggestions include party horn, whistle, etc.*)

Notes on Notation:

Though courtesy accidentals are used extensively throughout the work, if there is a question, it should be assumed that accidentals apply throughout the measure, but not across octaves.

 means w/o meter or tempo

 means a longer than normal *fermata*


means *accelerando*


means *rallentando*

Performance options:

This work can be performed with a dancer serving in the role of narrator, as in the premiere performance. It could also be performed with those two roles being handled by different performers (e.g. a narrator *and* a dancer). In situations where dance is impossible or impractical, the work may also be performed using just a narrator. Performers are encouraged to add elements of a theatricality (i.e. lighting, staging, props, and costumes) to the extent they are feasible in the performance venue.

One summer, years ago in the days when I still had time for recreational reading, I was browsing through an issue of *American Scholar* left lying around by my editor wife. (By a long shot, this was not my usual summer reading material, so it must have been a *really* slow summer.) A cover story about the “Ph.D. Squid” problem in American academia (!!?) grabbed my attention and pulled me into the volume, where I stumbled across this wonderful poem by Gregory Djanikian. Ever since that first encounter there has been a copy of the poem tacked on my bulletin board and I shared it with anyone who would take the time to read it. Years later when I was asked to write a piece of chamber music for clarinet, the idea to incorporate this poem became irresistible. Happily, Gregory Djanikian and Carnegie-Mellon University Press, graciously granted permission to use his poem. —M.P.