

William Grosvenor Neil

# **A Feather in a Shell**

*Four Songs for Soprano, Saxophone, and Guitar  
(2025)*



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### Amish Sarabande

Like the slow and steady tick of a pocket watch,  
held neatly in the vest pocket,  
the blades of the plough silently pierce the black earth.

And with each measured pace of the horses gait,  
the soil is sliced, drawn up and then gently laid down in a dark  
wake of terra sea.

And from this distance, the harnessed team, plough, and  
ploughman float serenely in perfect harmony with horizon and meadow.

### Ode to an Orb Weaver

Great baby-ball belly,  
a melon of roundness,  
gently rises and falls at each breath.

Gigantic girth cradles the womb,  
fertile as the darkest amazonian earth.

A silken thread is extracted through the navel,  
as the music of Bach plays on silver cords of an orb weaver's web.

The spider watches from the corner of the garden.

In the shadow of sleep,  
each breath is a single note in the minor key of acquiescence.

The rhythm of a drum is felt from deep within me.

While I sleep, you swim in a torrential sea that moves beneath us.

The ocean fills the bathtub and  
on a moonless night, I rise from the water  
chanting spiritus asper, chanting spiritus lenis,  
until voice and breath are one.

The music, dark and dreadful, suddenly changes to a major key and  
at dawn a cargo of sunshine arrives at my bedside.

The rain has washed the garden clean.  
My breasts, firm like unripened grapes,  
soften in the sun and are filled with sweet nectar.

Our fingers touch where the spider has rebuilt his web.

### Heaven's Feast

In heaven, love is a feast that lasts all day and into the night.  
We make do on earth,  
wrapping up our unfulfilled desires in the chambers of our dreams.

I'm in a room brightly lit by sunshine.  
When you pluck the strings of a guitar,  
The notes become the bright and delicious blooms of flowers.

I mold my hands around the warm faces of my children,  
They turn into delicate pieces of terra cotta that I will fire in the kiln of my womb.

We share a bowl of raspberries and milk from the sheep and goats  
that graze in the distant meadow.

The bees fly through the grass, dressed in the silk of corn,  
They steal through the open window and drink from the bowl we have left.

They suck the drops of blood-red juice from our finger tips,  
and before they dart out the window and journey to the sun,  
they visit each petal of the flowering notes hanging in the air.

### A Feather in a Shell

The dead rise before us floating on the swollen air.  
Their voices, frozen in mid air, are now mute behind closed doors.

Their eyes are lost gazing into smoky mirrors that capture  
The last flicker of sun as it winds through old dusty rooms and out the back door.

Exhausted from their rigorous farm days, they delight in their evening meals,  
the conversation into the night,  
the surrender to lamplit beds.

Black and white photos  
slip from the back of old books.

Their souls ask to be carried from where they fell to the edge of town.

Let us guide them to where the wind tears the black clouds above the trees.  
They will float to the highest branch of the oldest tree on the darkest night,  
the darkest night of the year,  
and disappear.

We knew all along that the music had reached its rallentando,  
the slowing dancers, now locked in time,  
were taken by a stiffness that diminished them to stillness.

Now a quiet settles in our ears like a feather in a shell.

## Instrumentation:

Soprano  
Soprano Saxophone in Bb  
Guitar

## Program Notes:

The poems in this cycle of songs were written over the course of 5 years and each poem is a reflection on my experience of living in the country with my family for 20 years in the Driftless region of Wisconsin. **Amish Sarabande** is a surreal description of the annual ploughing ritual that my Amish neighbor undertook each spring after long and severe winters. **Heaven's Feast** was inspired by the halcyon days of summer in full bloom on our 30 acre homestead. **Ode to an Orb Weaver** pays homage to the sacred connection between mother and child and the persistent cycle of life. Finally, **A Feather in a Shell**, was written after learning that a friend had died, the first death of someone other than family that I had experienced. WGN

Duration: ca. 20 minutes

Score transposed

Commissioned by Robert Nathanson

# Amish Sarabande

text and music by William Grosvenor Neil

$\text{♩} = 60$

$\text{♩} = 60$

*p*

*p*

4

6

Like the slow and stea-dy tick of a poc-ket watch, held

8

8

neat-ly in the vest pock-ket, the

*f* *p*

*f*

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for measures 8 and 9. It consists of three staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It contains the lyrics 'neat-ly in the vest pock-ket, the'. The second staff also has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. It features a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) and a *p* (piano) marking. The third staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. It features a dynamic marking of *f* (forte).

10

blades of the plough si-lent-ly pierce the black earth.

*p* *f* *similie*

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for measures 10, 11, and 12. It consists of three staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It contains the lyrics 'blades of the plough si-lent-ly pierce the black earth.' and features a dynamic marking of *p* (piano). The second staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. The third staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. It features a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) and the word 'similie'.

13

*p*

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for measures 13, 14, and 15. It consists of three staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The second staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. The third staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. It features a dynamic marking of *p* (piano).

16 **A**

*f*

And with each mea - sured pace

**A**

18 **B**

of the hor - ses gait,

*ritard*

*f*

**B**

*ritard*

*f*

21 *ad lib*

the soil is sliced, drawn up and then gent-ly laid down

*p*

**A tempo**

in a dark wake of ter-ra sea.

*p*

**A tempo**

10

C

*poco rit. a tempo*

25 *f*

*f* *pp*

30

*p* *ppp*

33

*p*

And from this dis - tance, the har - nessed team, plough

35 *mp* *f* 11 *rallentando*

and plough-man float se-ren-ly in per-fect har - mo - ny with ho-ri zon

*mp* *f*

39 *a tempo*

and mea -

(muted)

③ ④ ① ②

*p*

41

dow.

*pp*

*ppp*

♩ = ♪ sempre

43 *mf*

In

♩ = ♪ sempre

48

hea - ven, love is a feast that lasts all day and in-to the night.

*p* *mf*

*p* *mf*

54

We make do on earth, wrap-ping up our un - ful - filled de - si - res

*p*

*p*

59 *f*

in the cham-bers of our dreams.

**A** 64 *mf*

I'm in a room bright - ly lit by

**A** *mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mf* *p*

70 *f*

sun - shine.

*mf* *p* *mf*

73 *mp*

Meno mosso

75 **B** ♩ = 70 *p*

When you pluck the strings of a gui - tar\_\_\_\_\_ the

Meno mosso **B** ♩ = 70

*p* *p* *mf* *p*

78

notes be - come the bright and de - li-cious blooms\_\_\_\_\_ of

*mf* *p* *mf* *p*

81

flow-ers. the de-li-cioius blooms - - of flow-ers. 15

*f*

*mf*

*f*

**A tempo primo**

♩ = 129

85

*pp*

**C** *mp*

I mold my hands

*f* *mp* *mf* *p* *mf*

**C** **A tempo primo**

♩ = 129

90

ar - round the warm fa - ces

*p* *mf* *p*

93

of my chil - dren.

*mf* *p* *mf*

96

Meno mosso  
♩ = 70

**D**

*pausa* *p*

They turn in-to del-i-cate pie-ces of ter-ra cot-ta that I will fi - re

*p*

Meno mosso  
♩ = 70

**D**

*p*

99

*mf*

in the kiln of my womb.

103

*mf*

17

We share a bowl of rasp-ber-ries and

109

milk from the sheep and goats that graze in the dis - tant mea -

115

*ritardano*

dow.

A tempo

18

121

**E**

The bees fly through the grass, dressed in the

*mf* *p* *mf* *p* *mf*

A tempo

126

silk of corn. They steal through the o - pen win-dow and

*p* *mf* *mf* *p*

$\text{♩} = 40$   
Meno mosso

**F**

131

drink from the bowl we have left.

5

$\text{♩} = 40$   
Meno mosso

**F**

3 *p*

137

*mp*

They suck the drops of blood-red juice from our fin-ger tips,

*pp*

*p*

*f*

*molto vibrato*

*ord.*

*ord.*

*p*

140

and be-fore they dart out the win-dow

*pp*

*f*

*molto vibrato*

*ord.*

*ord.*

*p*

142

and jour-ney to the sun,

*mf*

*mp*

*ad lib*

*a tempo*

*f*

*pp*

*pp*

*p*

*f*

*p*

*ff*

*ff*

*molto vibrato*

*ord.*

*ord.*

*f*

146 *p*

they\_ vi - sit\_ each pe - tal of the flo - - wer-ing

*p* *pp*

149 *pp* *ppp*

notes hang-ing in\_ the\_ air.

*pp* *ppp*

*p* *mf*

157 *mp*

Great ba - by-ball bel - ly, a mel - on of

*p*

163

round - ness, gent - ly

*p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *simile*

168 *f*

ris - es and falls at each breath.

172 *p* **A**

Gi-gan-tic

177

girth cra-dl-ing the womb, fer-tile as the dark - est a-ma

182

zo - ni - an earth. \_ A sil - ken thread is ex -

*f* *p* *mf*

③ ④

Detailed description: This block contains measures 182 through 185. Measure 182 features a vocal line with the lyrics 'zo - ni - an earth.' and a piano accompaniment. Measures 183 and 184 show a piano solo with dynamic markings *f*, *p*, and *mf*, and fingerings ③ and ④. Measure 185 continues the vocal line with the lyrics 'A sil - ken thread is ex -'.

186

trac-ted through the na-vel as the mu-sic of Bach - - -

**B** *f*

*p* **B** *p*

3

Detailed description: This block contains measures 186 through 188. Measure 186 has the lyrics 'trac-ted through the na-vel as the mu-sic of' and a piano accompaniment. Measure 187 features a vocal line with the lyrics 'Bach - - -' and a piano accompaniment. Measure 188 continues the piano accompaniment. Dynamic markings *f*, *p*, and *mf* are present. A section marker **B** is shown in a box. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3'.

189

- plays on sil - ver

*mf*

Detailed description: This block contains measures 189 through 191. Measure 189 has the lyrics '- plays on sil - ver' and a piano accompaniment. Measure 190 continues the piano accompaniment. Measure 191 continues the piano accompaniment. A dynamic marking *mf* is present.

191

cords of an orb wea - ver's

193

web. The spi-der wat ches

*f*

*f*

196

from the cor-ner of the gar - den.

*p*

*pp*

*p*

*pp*

**C** Più mosso  $\text{♩} = 54$

201 *mf*

In the sha dow of sleep, each breath is a sin - gle note

*mp*

**C** Più mosso  $\text{♩} = 54$

*mf*

*mp*

205 *f*

in the mi - nor key of a - cqui - es - scence.

*p* *f* *p*

①  
②  
③  
④  
⑤  
⑥

*f* *mf*

**D**

209 *f* *mf* *f*

The rhy - thm of a drum is felt from deep with - in

*mf*

**D** *mf*

*f*

26

213

*mf*

me. While I sleep, you swim in a tor-ten-tial sea

*mf* *f*

217

that moves \_\_\_\_\_ be - neath us.

*mp* *f* *ff* *p*

221

Più mosso

**E** ♩=60

*f* *ff* *p* *f*

Più mosso **E** ♩=60

*ff* *f*

225 *mp* *mf* 27

The o - cean fills the bath - tub and on a

*similie*

230 *f* *ff*

moon-less night I rise from the wa - ter

*mf* *f* *ff*

*similie*

235 *f* *ff*

chant-ing spir-i-tus a - sper - - - chant-ing

*f* *ff*

*similie*

240

spir-i-tus le - nis un - til

*p* *f* *ff* *pp*

244

voice and breath are one.

*ff* *mf* *f*

A tempo primo

248

The mu - sic

*p* *pp* *f*

**F**  $\text{♩} = 50$  *p*

A tempo primo *p*

**F**  $\text{♩} = 50$  *similie*

253

dark and dread-ful sud-den-ly chan - ges

*p* *p* *p* *p* *mf*

259

to a ma-jor key and at dawn

*mf* *mp* *f* *mf*

266

a car-go of sun - shine ar - rives at my bed -

*mf* *mp* *mf* *f* *rit.*

30 *mf* **G**  $\text{♩} = 60$  Più mosso

side.

*p* *f* *p* *mf*

XII ②  
VII ④  
VII ⑤ *f*

**G**  $\text{♩} = 60$  Più mosso

276 *mf*

The rain— has washed the gar - den

*f* *mf*

280 **H** *mp*

clean. My

**H** *mp* *f* *mp*

284

breasts, firm like un - ri - pend grapes, sof - ten in the sun and are

289

filled with sweet\_ nec - tar. sweet\_ nec - tar.

*p*

*pp*

**I A tempo primo**

295 ♩ = 50

*sotto voce*

Our fing - ers touch

(subtone)

*pp*

**I A tempo primo**

*muted*

*simile*

*pp*

300

where the spi-der has re - built his web

*ppp*

304

*ppp*

*ppp*

*XII*  
②

*p* niente

*f*

# A Feather in a Shell

33

$\text{♩} = 40$

*mp*

The dead rise — be-fore us float - ing on the swol - len

*p*

$\text{♩} = 40$

(with the flesh of the thumb)

*p*

*simile*

*ord.*

4

air. — Their voi - ces, fro - zen — in mid air,

*f*

*p*

*XII*

*XII*

⑤ ④ ② ③

(with the flesh of the thumb)

7

*pp*

*p*

are now — mute be-hind closed doors. Their eyes are

*pp*

*simile*

*ord.*

*f*

*VII*

*A VII*

⑤ ④ ② ③

lost                    ga-zing in -            to            smo-ky   mir-ors            that            cap-ture the last            fli-cker   of

sun            as it winds through       old dus-ty rooms                          and out the back door.

Ex - haus - ted from their ri - gor - ous farm days,

**doppo Più mosso**

21

they de - light in - their ev' - ning meals, the con - ver - sa - tion

25

in - to the night, the sur-ren - der to lamp - lit beds.

*mp*

*f*

32

Black and white pho-tos slip from the back of old books.

*mp*

*p*

*pp*

*p*

*pp*

## Meno mosso

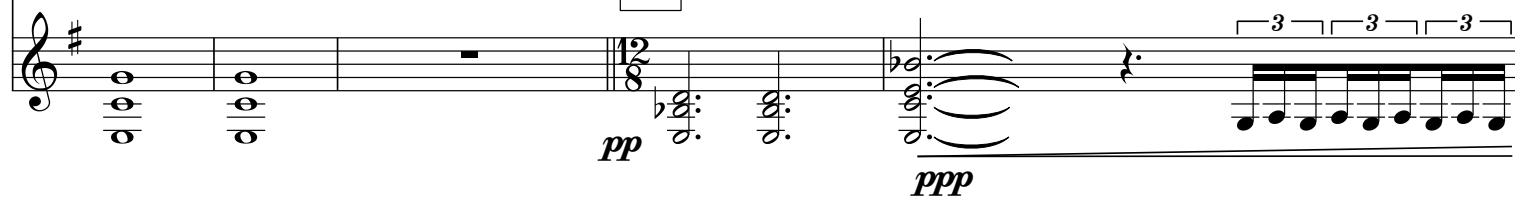
**D** ♩=45 *p*



Their souls asked to be car - ried

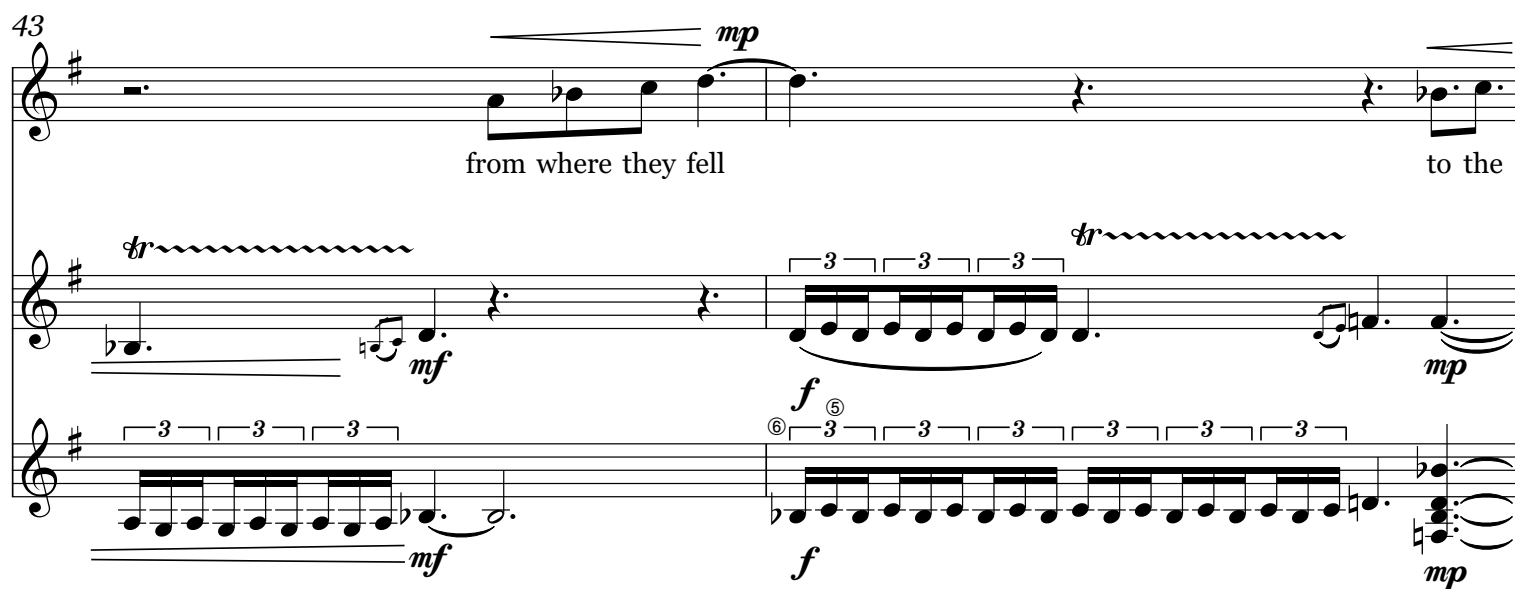
## Meno mosso

**D** ♩=45



from where they fell

to the



edge of town.

Let us guide them

to where the wind



48 37

*p* *pp* *mp*

tears the black clouds a - bove the trees.

*ff* *p* *pp*

*ff*

51

**E** *pp*

*mf*

**E** VII *pp*

② *similie*

53

*p*

They will float to the

55

high - est branch of the old - est tree

57

on the dark - est night, the dark - - -

59

est night

60

of the

year,

*ppp* *ff* *ppp* *ff*

*fff*

*mp*

*pp*

*p*

**G**

**G**

*p*

61

*mp*

*pp*

*p*

**G**

**G**

*p*

63

*mp*

and \_\_\_\_\_

*pp*

*p*

**G**

**G**

*p*

40  
64

dis - ap -

*f*

*f*

65

pear.

67

*ppp*

*pp*

*pp*

**H** A tempo primo

 $\text{♩} = 40$ 

70

*mp*

We knew all a - long that the

*p*

**H** A tempo primo

$\text{♩} = 40$

*p*

(with the flesh of the thumb)

*simile*

73

mu - sic had reached its ral - len - tan - do, the slow - ing

*ord.*

*f*

XII

XII ② ③ ④ ⑤

76

dan - cers, now locked in time, were ta - ken by a

(with the flesh of the thumb)

*p*

*simile*

*ord.*

79

stiff - ness that di - min - ished them to still - ness.

(with the flesh of the thumb)

*p*

*simile*

83

*pp*

Now a qui - et set - tles in our ears

*pp*

*ord.*

87

*ppp*

like a fea - ther in a shell.

*pp*

*niente*

*f* *pp* *ppp*

*VII*