

Celebrating New Music: The Music of Alyssa Morris and Craig Weston

Featuring:
Alyssa Morris, oboe
Madeleine Jansen, violin
Syneva Colle, cello
Amanda Arrington, piano
Alfonso Hernandez, piano

April 8, 2026
7:30pm
Kirmser Hall, Kansas State University

PROGRAM

Distant Rune (2017)Craig Weston
(b. 1964)

Imperfect (oboe and piano version) (2025) Alyssa Morris
(b. 1984)

- I. Juggling Insecurities
- II. I'm Fine. It's Fine. Everything's Fine.
- III. Help

BRIEF INTERMISSION

Winter Morning by a Lake (2026)Craig Weston

Hope is the Thing with Feathers (2022) Alyssa Morris

Demented Dances (2013)Craig Weston

- I. Tango
- II. Waltz
- III. Mambo

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Notes

(All notes written by the composers)

Distant Rune

Distant Rune is one of three short pieces for oboe and piano known collectively under the title *Vignettes*, but intended to be used either as a set or as individual pieces. Each is an attempt to “paint a picture” in sound.

Distant Rune is evocative of an ancient folk tune, echoing in the distance across a dramatic landscape. Here the oboe shines in its “natural habitat”: playing a sweeping, lyric melody. The title is a hat-tip to Joseph Schwantner’s *Distant Runes and Incantations* (1983). Schwantner’s hyper-dramatic, neo-romantic music immediately appealed to me when I first encountered it, but it wasn’t until years later that it started to appear in more obvious ways as an influence in my own music. The occasional extensions of the piano’s rising arpeggios in this vignette are quite reminiscent of similar percussion gestures in the Schwantner piece.

Imperfect

Imperfect is a concerto for oboe and small orchestra. *Imperfect* explores the feelings of being an imperfect being in an imperfect world, and how to cope with it all.

“Juggling Insecurities”: A perfectionist grappling with the reality of imperfection whilst trying to “save face” and pretend perfection is in reality performing a juggling act. What we juggle are our insecurities. This movement is a depiction of that juggling act. The oboist begins by “practicing” the infamous excerpt from the first movement of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The excerpt shifts into a sort of frenzied fever dream—a schmultzy rubato blues song. It is followed by the same excerpt, but this time, molded into the format of a jazz waltz. Next in the juggling act comes a samba, whilst the oboist plays multi phonics and stomps with the percussion. The oboist relocates to the piano for the next part of the act. The oboist plays a head-banging piano riff with the metal-style drum set groove. Up next, the oboist plays oboe and piano at the same time. Finally, with the sound of a gong, the juggling act is over!

“I’m Fine. It’s Fine. Everything’s Fine.”: “I’m Fine.” Two words that have a thousand meanings. Are we trying to convince the audience we’re fine? Are we trying to convince ourselves? The movement begins with a suppressed whisper of the musical statement, which gradually grows into a plea and a yell of the musical statement “I’m Fine. It’s Fine. Everything’s Fine.”

“Help”: First, this statement is a plea, “Help.” We all need help sometimes. It takes introspection, humility, and bravery to call out for that help we so desperately need. The oboist, isolated away from the orchestra, pleads for the help they need: help to cope with and accept their own imperfections; help to cope with living in an imperfect, harsh, and confusing world. After a cadenza exploring a myriad of emotions, the word “Help” means an outstretched helping hand. It is the refuge from the storm. It is the help we need to move through this life with all of its hills and valleys. This movement is a hymn setting of “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.” I would like to give thanks to my dear friend, Glenn Harman, for commissioning *Imperfect* for oboe and orchestra. I am deeply grateful for his continued support of and trust in my work, and for his friendship

Winter Morning by a Lake

This brand new piece will eventually be the middle movement of a larger piece for “piano trio” (violin, cello, piano). Like *Distant Rune*, it is quite repetitive, harmonically static, and the pace of the action is generally slow. But where the overall color of *Distant Rune* is warm, the mood in *Winter Morning by a Lake* is cooler, with the music sometimes so stark and repetitive as to be “frozen” in place. The insistent chiming chords in the piano are an example of one of my basic compositional obsessions: asymmetric “swinging” rhythms, but at much slower speeds than what we normally call “swing” in music. The strings mostly float surreally in their extreme upper ranges, but the whole things occasionally dramatically plunges.

Hope is the Thing with Feathers

Hope is the thing with feathers for oboe, cello, and piano, was commissioned by the Chamber Music Network of Greater Cincinnati. This work is dedicated to those who lost their lives to Covid-19, and to their loved ones. Hope is a guiding light when moving forward through the darkness of heartache and tragedy.

I was sitting at my piano, improvising some themes and motives for this work, when I kept hearing the sweetest birdsong from outside. It was five distinct pitches: E-G#-E-F#-F#. I decided to mimic the sound on the piano, and to my delight, the bird responded! I “conversed” in this way with the bird (which I later realized was an oriole) for several minutes.

This sweet encounter brought a special brightness to my day, and led me to think about the following beautiful poem by Emily Dickinson:

Hope is the thing with feathers
Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,
And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.
I've heard it in the chilliest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

I used the natural rhythm of the poem to create this “tune without...words,” (to paraphrase Dickinson.) Interspersed in the hymn is the oriole birdsong.

It is my hopeful prayer that this work will bring peace, light, and hope to those who hear it.

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Demented Dances

My goal in this piece was to create a light-hearted set of concert pieces based on “messing with” very familiar dance forms. Rhythm is the essence of dance music, of course, so each movement takes the rhythmic structure of its dance type as its primary point of departure. The biggest difference in the three movements is how far they depart from the traditional rhythmic structure. The first movement, Tango, departs the most radically, with the level of metric chicanery reducing with each movement, until the final Mambo, which actually plays it fairly straight, rhythmically-speaking.

“Tango” takes the 3+3+2 rhythmic pattern of a modern stylized Tango and branches off from there, with the vast majority of the rhythmic variation taking the form of extension of that pattern, always involving some number of long beats (the 3s) followed by some number of short beats (the 2s). In the most extreme this process of extension reaches 3+3+3+3+3+2+2+2, but it always makes its way back to the original tango pattern.

“Waltz” maintains as nearly inviolable the familiar “boom-chuck-chuck” three-beat pattern. (It wouldn’t be a waltz if it didn’t!) There is some room to play with the relative length of the three beats of some measures, though.

“Mambo” is actually a completely authentic application of the *clave* rhythmic concept which is the core rhythmic principle of that dance form. The *clave* rhythm idea already has a “two side” and a “three side”: the principals of rhythmic asymmetry which are the engine of my rhythmic method, so I was happy to leave it un-messed-around-with. Dancers familiar with the steps of the Mambo could spontaneously dance to this one in the familiar way—that would be a little too much to ask with the first two movements.