



## Alan McMurdie, composition

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Three Lessons in Pride (2021) (*world premiere*)

Alan McMurdie

- I. The Hare and the Tortoise
- II. The Ant and the Grasshopper
- III. The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Hannah Hall, flute; Ethan Pham-Aguilar, oboe; Janice Calvento, clarinet;  
Cesar Zarate, French horn; Victor Nuno-Robles, bassoon

Pondering (2022) (*world premiere*)

William Masters, cello

Kitty Hawk (2022)

Joseph Peterson, viola

Declaration (2020) (recorded track)

Midnight Mystery (2022) (*world premiere*)

Yang Yang, melodica; Arend Aldama, piano;  
Alan McMurdie, cello; Andrew Finley, double bass

A Winding Path (2021) (*world premiere*)

Nocturne in B Minor (2020) (*world premiere*)

Caillie Bousquet, piano

Redemption (2020)

LuAnn Higgs, piano

Long Night On the Ice (2021) (recorded track and video)

*This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Music in Composition.  
Alan McMurdie is a student of Dr. Shuying Li.*

## PROGRAM NOTES

Alan McMurdie - Graduate Composition Recital - April 7, 2023

Alan McMurdie's first wind quintet, *Three Lessons in Pride*, is a collection of three stories, all taken from Aesop's fables: "The Hare and the Tortoise," "The Ant and the Grasshopper," and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." Each of these fables features a character who exemplifies a bad case of pride, and is humbled in learning their lesson, hence the name *Three Lessons in Pride*. Likewise, each of the five instruments of the quintet plays a part in telling the stories. For example, in the first movement, "The Hare and the Tortoise," the clarinet plays the hare, the French horn plays the tortoise, and the other instruments play the animals watching the race, even calling out a 3-2-1 countdown.

Each instrument plays a lead role in at least one of the stories, while French horn, the only brass instrument of the group, shines in two of them. There are two lead roles in each story. Whichever character has an issue of pride, the other demonstrates how to humble oneself and reap the long-term rewards.

*Pondering* is one of McMurdie's first solo cello pieces. As the title suggests, the music attempts to show the audience what might be happening inside a person's mind when they are studying, or otherwise "pondering." The initial burst of energy is followed by a slow, soft pizzicato passage, which is then followed by a passage of sustained intensity, before returning to the motif from the pizzicato. The main difference the second time is that the score indicates arco and fortissimo, instead of pizzicato and piano.

The entire piece ends with the same theme it started with, except for being pizzicato and piano instead of arco and forte, the opposite of the way the main motif is introduced. The slow pizzicato and the fast arco respectively represent the following: the student either spending time to think or being stuck, but then suddenly having an epiphany and quickly writing down his notes, answers, ideas, etc.

*Kitty Hawk* debuted at the 2022 FeNAM Student Composers' Competition, as McMurdie's first ever solo viola piece. Despite the seemingly obvious reference to the United States aircraft carrier of the same name, *Kitty Hawk* has nothing to do with the military and everything to do with cats. This playful, yet tense viola solo work is inspired by outdoor cats that used to hunt other animals, from gophers to grasshoppers, on McMurdie's home property. Several chromatic and virtuosic viola runs are found in this piece, portraying the cat sneaking up on the gopher, step by step. Perhaps the cat accidentally steps on a twig, alerting the gopher, after which the cat subsequently chases its prey and eventually catches it.

*Declaration* was originally composed as a dance piece with virtual instrument accompaniment, in collaboration with Professor Bernard Brown and the Sacramento State Department of Theatre and Dance. The work uses the Deleted Clause of the Declaration of Independence as its premise. Listeners will hear the clause spoken aloud before the music begins, emphasizing Thomas Jefferson's disgust at King George III's disregard for colonial slaves, suggesting the idea of their eventual freedom; this would indeed come, though not in Jefferson's lifetime. Per Brown's request, the music incorporates elements of Latin and African percussion, while McMurdie also weaves in piano, a classical string quartet, double bass, and even a dulcimer—all generated by computer software, making this a fully electronic dance piece.

*Midnight Mystery* is written for an unconventional quartet comprised of melodica, piano, cello, and double bass. It was originally composed for a class assignment on aleatoric music, and these were the instruments available at the time. Originally titled "Cruise Ship Mystery", this piece leaves quite the

mystery. The story could be told in many ways; it could be a murder mystery on a cruise ship, a haunted house experience, or even a night on a 1960s Egyptian river cruise. In any case, the listeners are left in suspense and wonder at the end of the piece.

Despite its short length, *A Winding Path* is perhaps one of McMurdie's most intricately written solo piano works to date. McMurdie developed a pattern of intervals specifically for this piece. The pattern goes as follows: three minor 2nd's, three Major 2nd's, three minor 3rd's, three Major 3rd's, three perfect 4th's, and so on and so forth. The piece also features quartal harmony and bitonality at several points throughout, making this a very intellectual and thought-provoking work.

*Nocturne in B Minor* is composed with heavy inspiration from Chopin, with elements of Rachmaninoff at one point. To put it simply, the piece as a whole takes a somewhat melancholy approach, yet retains elements of beauty and gentleness throughout.

Composed in Sonata form, *Redemption* paints a story of a former hero turned villain who has fallen from grace, but is ashamed of his past and is working to redeem himself, hence the title. The main motif starts by reminding us of the villainy, yet ends on a hopeful note. Several other motives emerge, each with a different theme. One motif suggests the loss of a loved one, or perhaps separation from family. Either way, there is still the hope of seeing them again. Still another motif appears in the transition between the development to the recapitulation, representing determination and passion. This eventually leads us back to the main motif, which again reminds us of the villainy. But when it appears for the very last time, it is quite heroic, ending on a Major chord when it started on a minor chord. The villain is not so evil after all, because there is always hope and opportunity for redemption.

*Long Night On the Ice* is another one of McMurdie's early electronic compositions, using only virtual instruments generated by computer software. It is also McMurdie's first piece accompanied by video and sound effects. This piece holds a special place in his heart as it is also his last piece composed while studying under the late Dr. Jeffrey Hoover.

An explorer is trekking the flat, barren Antarctic landscape. The wind howls and whispers while the snow blows across the ice, all under a clear sky with stars and the aurora australis overhead. A drone can be heard underneath a long, lonesome melody that seems to tail off almost endlessly. A Nordic male choir shines through accompanying sound effects, some which resemble a wind chime, sparkling stars, the howling wind, and even cracking ice and glaciers. At various points, the drone shifts and changes tone, while harmonic clusters rise and fall. The Nordic choir can even be heard whispering with the wind. This is followed by a musical color change, signifying a clearing of the blowing snow as the explorer comes to a high overlook, where he is able to fully appreciate his surroundings and watch the aurora overhead. However, he must be careful of the thin ice, as it could crack beneath his weight, sending him down the mountain to his inevitable doom.

This is the story painted by McMurdie's *Long Night On the Ice*, initially inspired by the Scott-Amundsen research station located at the South Pole, as well as the explorers for which the station is named. Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer, was the first to reach the pole in 1912. However, he mysteriously disappeared during a North Pole rescue mission in 1928 and was never found. Hence the more menacing ending to this piece after being so certainly serene, chillingly remarkable, and wonderfully mystical.