

*Suite on Medieval Themes* (1990)

James Niblock

This suite is based upon Medieval themes. It is not a literal arrangement of Medieval music but a free composition utilizing material from a variety of thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth century sources.

The first movement is based upon a ballade by Matteo de Perugia and features three against two rhythmic patterns, cross relations, and series of parallel first inversion triads, all techniques common to Perugia's style and to the period.

The second movement is a fantasy for clarinet solo based on a Gregorian chant melody from the *Liber Usualis*. The clarinet line is accompanied by a persistent double ostinato in the violin and piano. The third movement utilizes several themes from both a motet by Machaut and a madrigal by Landino. It contains sections of hocket (distributing notes of a melodic line among two or more voices) and sections of close imitation.

The fourth movement is a set of variations on *Sumer is icumen in*, a four-voiced infinite canon over a two-voiced *pes* from the thirteenth century.

—James Niblock

The world premiere of *Suite on Medieval Themes* was on June 23, 1991 at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.

James Niblock (1917–2018) was a composer, conductor, violinist, and music educator. Born in Scappoose, Oregon, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Bachelor of Education degree from Washington State University. After serving in the US Air Force in World War II, he earned a Master of Arts degree from Colorado College and a doctorate from the University of Iowa. He studied violin with Franck Eichenlaub, Jascha Brodsky, and Josef Gingold; composition with Roy Harris and Paul Hindemith.

From 1948 until 1985, Niblock was a faculty member at Michigan State University where he taught theory and composition, performed as violinist in the Beaumont String Quartet, and served as Chairman of the College of Music. During his fifteen years as Chairman, a new music building was constructed to expand departmental facilities, student enrollment doubled, the number of graduate assistants tripled, eighteen new full-time faculty positions were added, and the Juilliard String Quartet became visiting artists on campus for nine years. For many years of his service at the University, Niblock was also Concertmaster of the Lansing Symphony Orchestra.

Following his retirement, Niblock remained active as a conductor, performer, and composer. He also had a long association with the Blue Lakes Fine Arts Camp in Muskegon County, Michigan and continued to serve as Senior Vice President and life member of the Board of Trustees until his death. In 2006, MSU honored Niblock with the first ever Distinguished Emeritus Faculty Award for his continuing work in Fine Arts Education, and in 2012 he was presented Washington State University's highest award, the Alumni Achievement Award.

Niblock's more than one hundred compositions are housed at the Michigan State University Library Archives. Many of these were written and performed for the anniversary celebrations at the Blue Lake camp, e.g., the opera *Ruth* for the thirty-fifth anniversary and the chamber opera *The Last Leaf* for the fortieth. His works have been frequently performed both in America and Europe and are available through Harrock Hall (choral works) and Brotons & Mercadal Edicions (instrumental works). Recordings available on CD include the six trios for violin, clarinet, and piano and the *Double Concerto for Violin, Clarinet and Orchestra*, all of which were written for the Verdehrs.