

Dectet: an antiphon for all times **(for double wind quintet and voices)**

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Words by Gwendolyn Brooks reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edward J. Thuman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Edward" being the most prominent.

Dectet: an antiphon for all times (for double wind quintet and voices)

words by Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 – 2000) reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions

music composed by Elijah J. Thomas (b. 1991)

X

Exhaust the little moment. Soon it dies.
And be it gash or gold it will not come
Again in this identical disguise.

– Gwendolyn Brooks, *Annie Allen* (1949)

I read and have read this poem more times than I can remember. For a long time I felt that I could not understand poetry. That is until July 2019 when I came across *Blacks*, a collection of renowned works by literary master Gwendolyn Brooks. Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks (1917 – 2000) was the first Black woman and person to receive the Pulitzer Prize with the publication of her book *Annie Allen*. Across her lifetime, Brooks spoke about her deep personal relationship to the work, stating her intentions behind its writing in a 1950 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*:

"I wrote Annie Allen in the hope that it would help to illuminate the experience of the ordinary Negro girl growing up in the South and moving to the North. I wanted to show how her hopes and dreams are shaped by the social and economic conditions around her, and how she struggles to maintain her identity and dignity in a world that is often hostile to her."

The work shifted something core within me. With each passing page of *Annie Allen* I became enraptured with her words – somehow, Gwendolyn Brooks was able to illuminate truths that were revealed to me prior that I had yet to embrace and understood a world of emotions that I myself could not express with the language I knew. Poetry finally made sense. As the life partner to a Black woman and Black man myself, I feel that the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks in many ways was a true godsend. The above poem, however – Part X of the third and final section of *Annie Allen*, titled “The Womanhood” – struck me in a uniquely profound way. Ever since first reading it I revisit Part X every year on my birthday and think of it often in the many of life’s passing moments. It is at the center of this musical work, and it is what I hope remains with all who experience and engage with this work, if nothing else.

The Question I pose for all of us to consider is this: “What does it mean to ‘exhaust the little moment’”? In the music, I hope for this question to be the topic of conversation between two traditional wind quintets (composed of flute, oboe, clarinet, horn in F and bassoon). The idea of the “antiphon” and musical concepts related to it implies *call-and-response*: an exchange of thoughts and emotions and perspectives and identity. In the case of the commission of this work where performers of varying ages and stages of musical development are creating alongside each other, I wanted to spark dialogue on The Question – a question that I believe is imperative to ask and answer for the good and progress of our collective existence. **This piece is a musical meditation.**

As I’ve contemplated Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry and reflected on the question of “exhausting the little moment”, the answer I’ve come to is one’s perception of **youth**. What I’m getting at is our investigation and ultimate embrace of **what it means to be youthful** – to live presently, graciously, humbly, audaciously, and joyfully – all wrapped up in one and intrinsic to our natural mode of being. Although the conversation may be filled with all manner of emotion, debate, and dis/agreement, it is **the** conversation that we should hold, cherish, and revisit at all times. For me, youth and The Question are one and the same. As long as we each hold the little moment close, then life will have been and will continue to be worth living.

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Elijah J. Thomas

instrumentation

- flute (2)
- oboe (2)
- Bb clarinet (2)
- horn in F (2)
- bassoon (2)
- voices (assorted, variable)
- visual text projections
- * pre-recorded voices (**optional**)

notes for performers

1. The work is divided into four (4) primary rehearsal sections, framed by text from Gwendolyn Brooks (reprinted by consent of Brooks Permissions, 2024). The words are excerpted from different poems of the third and final part of *Annie Allen* titled “The Womanhood”, with the exception of **Part X** which appears in its entirety. These words mark the arrival at each rehearsal number, and are meant to orient the performers towards possible personal and collective approaches of engaging with the musical material as well as providing food for thought for the present audience. The text for each Part reads as follows...
 1. **“Life for my child is simple, and good.
And we both want joy of undeeep and unabiding things,
Not that success, for him, is infallible.
But never has he been afraid to reach.
His lesions are legion.
But reaching is his rule.”** (from Part II)
 2. **“Oh open, apostolic height!
And tell my humbug how to start
Bird balance, bleach: make miniature
Valhalla of my heart.”** (from Part IV)
 3. **“We do not want them to have less.
But it is only natural that we should think we have not
enough.”** (from Part VIII)
 4. **“Exhaust the little moment. Soon it dies.
And be it gash or gold it will not come
Again in this identical disguise.”** (Part X)
2. Live performance of the work should *ideally* have the text of each Part projected for all present to read and contemplate if they desire to do so. The text should be made available to the performers prior to performance during the rehearsal process. Inquire: **what do you notice, value, and question about the text?**
3. The occurrence of each text section will be marked in the score and parts according to their rehearsal number (i.e. **1, 2, 3, 4**). The text itself will *NOT* be present in the score and parts, but the rehearsal numbers should signify to the performers a shift in mindset and tone of some kind. During performance, the text should (ideally) visually appear, timed with the progression of the music itself. The piece should be continuous in performance, with the briefest momentary resolutions between sections before the music continues on.
4. The music itself will attempt to explicitly speak to the themes of the four text sections, as envisioned by the composer. It’s here where performers are presented with a sort of dilemma: **to rely upon their experience meditating on the text in the process leading up to performance, while responding to it in their own unique way during performance itself.**

In this way, it should be understood that this piece is designed to encourage and uplift the *agency* of the individual performer within the ensemble context – the idea of “agency” being inextricable from the idea of “youth”, as described by the composer earlier on.

- a. To support performers in addressing this dilemma, the following musical descriptions can be considered during the rehearsal process for each of the four (4) text sections:
 - i. **“Irreverent, danceable” (1, measures 1 – 48)**
 - ii. **“Tenderly, arriving at the zenith” (2, measures 49 – 102)**
 - iii. **“Scherzo: dark, playful” (3, measures 103 – 182)**
 - iv. **“Exhaustingly, ecstatically” (4, measures 183 – 210)**

5. Part numbering between the two wind quintets does **NOT** denote hierarchy – all parts play their necessary roles and responsibilities.

6. Elements of **improvisation** will be present in the fourth and final section, for everyone to take part in.
 - a. In the fourth and final rehearsal section, the performers will take a moment to rest and silently reflect upon the text and their approach to the performance of the music. The conductor will cue to the present audience to begin a brief conversation with one another before the performers complete their own musical meditation.
 - i. **At this point, everyone present experiencing the work is invited to engage in a two (2)-minute exchange with others close by and share their meditations on the general text, The Question (“What does it mean to ‘exhaust the little moment’?”) and the music performed thus far.**
 - ii. **The conductor will cue the music for the ensemble to resume.**
 - iii. **The performers will play ten (10) measures of rhythmic figures based in 6/8 time, choosing to play any notes they desire from the concert C Major scale according to said figures. This section occurs twice (a total of 20 measures) before the ensemble moves on to close the work, but may be repeated more than twice if desired by the conductor (the performers should watch and follow closely for a cue to move on).**
 - b. Pre-recorded voices that contemplate the text of the fourth and final section – **Part X** – may be employed in live performance, but is **optional** for live performance.

notes for all

- Exhaust the little moment.
- Engage with the work as presently, graciously, humbly, audaciously, and joyfully as you’re able.

Dectet: an antiphon for all times

(for double wind quintet and voices) - concert score

in honor of Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 - 2000)
in memoriam Patricia Martínez (1973 - 2022)

music composed by Elijah J. Thomas (b. 1991)

♩ = 90
1.

♩ = 135

flute (1)
oboe (1)
clarinet (1)
horn in F (1)
bassoon (1)

flute (2)
oboe (2)
clarinet (2)
horn in F (2)
bassoon (2)

p *mf* *mp* *f*

mf

11

Musical score for woodwinds, measures 11-15. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute (1), Oboe (1), Clarinet (1), Horn (1), and Bassoon (1). The second system includes parts for Flute (2), Oboe (2), Clarinet (2), Horn (2), and Bassoon (2). The music begins in 2/4 time and changes to 4/4 time at measure 13. Dynamics include *sfz* (sforzando), *f* (forte), and *mf* (mezzo-forte) with *cresc.* (crescendo) markings. The woodwinds play various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Musical score for woodwinds and brass instruments. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes Flute (1), Oboe (1), Clarinet (1), Horn (1), and Bassoon (1). The second system includes Flute (2), Oboe (2), Clarinet (2), Horn (2), and Bassoon (2). The music features various dynamics such as *f*, *mp*, *dim.*, and *sim.*, along with articulation marks like accents and slurs. The bassoon parts include triplet markings.

fl. (1) *f* *mp*

ob. (1) *f* *mp*

cl. (1) *f* *dim.*

hn. (1)

bn. (1) *f* *dim.*

fl. (2) *f* *dim.* *mp*

ob. (2) *f* *dim.* *mp*

cl. (2) *sim.* *dim.* *mp*

hn. (2) *f* *3*

bn. (2) *sim.* *dim.* *mp*

Musical score for woodwinds, measures 28-33. The score is arranged in two systems of five staves each. The instruments are Flute (fl.), Oboe (ob.), Clarinet (cl.), Horn (hn.), and Bassoon (bn.).

System 1 (Measures 28-33):

- fl. (1):** Starts with a half note G4, then rests. Dynamic: *mp*.
- ob. (1):** Starts with a half note G4, then rests. Dynamic: *mp*.
- cl. (1):** Rests throughout.
- hn. (1):** Rests until measure 30, then plays a triplet of eighth notes (C4, B3, A3) in measure 30, followed by a half note G3 in measure 31, and a triplet of eighth notes (F#3, E3, D3) in measure 32. Dynamics: *f* and *sfz*.
- bn. (1):** Rests throughout.

System 2 (Measures 28-33):

- fl. (2):** Starts with a sixteenth-note triplet (B4, A4, G4) in measure 28, then rests. In measure 30, it plays a half note G4. In measure 32, it plays a trill on G4. Dynamic: *sfz*.
- ob. (2):** Starts with a sixteenth-note triplet (B4, A4, G4) in measure 28, then rests. In measure 30, it plays a half note G4. In measure 32, it plays a trill on G4. Dynamic: *sfz*.
- cl. (2):** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Dynamic: *sfz*.
- hn. (2):** Starts with a half note G4, then rests. In measure 30, it plays a triplet of eighth notes (C4, B3, A3). In measure 32, it plays a triplet of eighth notes (F#3, E3, D3). Dynamic: *sfz*.
- bn. (2):** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. Dynamic: *sfz*.