

The Theme of Childhood in the Works of American Composer and Pianist Inna Onofrei

*"What you see and hear depends, to some extent,
on what kind of person you are."*

*(A quote by Clive Staples Lewis from the book "The Chronicles of Narnia:
The Magician's Nephew", 1955.)*

Contemporary American composer Inna Onofrei frequently turns to the realm of childhood in her musical compositions. This creative thread can be traced across her programmatic, vocal, and instrumental miniatures. In the process of composing, Onofrei intuitively seeks a kind of "miracle cure"—a formula capable of encapsulating a musical language accessible to performers and listeners of any age, endowed with a unique semantic quality embedded within its melodic, intonational, and harmonic structures. As she herself notes: "The concept behind my musical works sometimes emerged spontaneously, often serving as a means of addressing pedagogical challenges in my work with children of various ages." The composer focuses on the artistic and substantive aspects of music, linking them to scenes drawn from real life. While composing, Inna Onofrei filters events and observations through the prism of a child's perception. She carefully selects specific harmonic textures, melodic kernels, and rhythmic patterns capable of resonating with children's emotions. Like a "miracle elixir," these elements are instantly absorbed by the listener's consciousness, drawing them into a world of musical imagery.

In conceiving the programmatic piano cycle for children titled *Lola's Adventures*, the composer addressed a multifaceted challenge: on the one hand, meeting performance and pedagogical requirements, and on the other, catering to the specific developmental needs of the target age group. By broadening the scope of how listeners perceive instrumental music, she endeavored to present these miniatures as a cohesive "mini-performance"—or mini-suite—complete with its own dramatic arc and featuring the distinct role of a narrator (assumed by the composer herself). This dialogue between the composer and the listener is explicitly set forth in the cycle's score, appearing prior to the musical notation itself. A pivotal role in the artistic interpretation of the narrative was played by the creative collaboration between I. Onofrei, the illustrator Maisy Byerly (who created the artwork accompanying the cycle), and the writer Cheryl Williams (who penned the short verses accompanying each individual piece).

The cycle itself is divided into three parts. In terms of dramatic structure:

— Piece No. 1, “In the Park,” serves as an introduction. This brief, playful miniature conveys the general atmosphere—unfolding a story about the lives of pets—while simultaneously presenting a generalized portrait of the central character: a dog named Lola.

— Pieces No. 2, “In the Car,” and No. 3, “Just an Ordinary Tuesday,” function as a form of exposition. Through them, the pets' daily lives are revealed from various angles.

— The central section is unified by the overarching theme of play—specifically, the favorite pastime of Lola the dog. This section comprises the following pieces: No. 4, “Lola on the Hunt”; No. 5, “Playing Tag”; No. 6, “Looking for Tishka”; No. 7, “Squeaky Toy”; and No. 8, “Playing with Butterflies.”

— The concluding section serves as a kind of denouement to the events of this eventful day, featuring a change in the weather—No. 9, “Raindrops”—followed by a peaceful, sweet slumber: No. 10, “Naptime.”

The primary key of the cycle is C Major—one of the first keys children master, and one that is particularly convenient for a teacher to demonstrate practical piano performance techniques. These techniques include strengthening the fingers through the execution of scale-like passages using various articulations—staccato, non-legato, and legato—as well as utilizing a limited range (two octaves for both the right and left hands), which facilitates the memorization of short melodic phrases and the stable tones of the mode (the I and V degrees).

The leitmotif of the cycle consists of two contrasting motives characterizing the figure of Lola. The first motive comprises a perfect fourth leap—frequently introduced as an anacrusis [$\uparrow V-I$ —while the second represents a descending scalar motion [encircling the dominant (V) degree in C major, utilizing the pitches g–a–g–f–e–d–c–b–a–g]. It is worth noting that, within the musical text of the cycle's pieces, the intonations of this leap [$\uparrow V-I$.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece in 3/4 time, C major. The score is written for both the right and left hands. The right hand starts with a treble clef and a 2/4 time signature, while the left hand starts with a bass clef and a 3/4 time signature. The piece is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). The right hand plays a sequence of notes: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (quarter). The left hand plays a sequence of notes: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (quarter). The piece concludes with a final chord of C major (C4, E4, G4).

It can be encountered in a varied presentation, often elaborated through a diversity of rhythmic patterns and articulations. It can be encountered in a varied presentation, often elaborated through a diversity of rhythmic patterns and articulations.

See Table 1.

Variation of the first motif	Variation of the second motif
Pieces: No. 2 (hidden motif); Nos. 3, 4, 6, 9.	Pieces: No. 3 (hidden motif); Nos. 4, 5, 8.
Piece No. 7: The leitmotif returns—almost in its original form, as in No. 1.	

The characteristics of the suite are revealed through the principle of tempo contrast—with a predominance of lively motion—and through specific genre features: Boogie-woogie (No. 2) with elements of polyphonic Baroque genres; Toccata (No. 5); Arietta (No. 9); Scherzo (Nos. 1, 3, 6, 7, 8); as well as Etude (No. 4).

Thanks to the engaging programmatic titles of the cycle's pieces—which evoke images of animals beloved by children—and by composing in a simple melodic and harmonic musical idiom, the composer was able to present the fundamental skills of technical exercises to young, beginning pianists in a manner that was both accessible and easy to grasp.

The central musical theme—which serves to unify the entire cycle of piano miniatures—came to I. Onofrei spontaneously while she was strolling through a park with her beloved pet: a small-breed dog named Lola. Subsequently, another character emerged and found a place within the cycle: a spirited housecat named Tishka, who, together with Lola, would get into mischief whenever their owners were away from home. It is worth noting that this cycle marked the first step in the unfolding of the "children's theme" within Inna Onofrei's creative oeuvre.

In 2012, a long-awaited event took place in Inna's life: the birth of her son. It was precisely from this moment that images of childhood impressions—distinguished from those of adulthood by their bright, romantic dreaminess, spontaneity, and innocence—emerged as one of the significant leitmotifs of her creative work. The musical sketches for her future vocal cycle, **Four Lullabies** (set to lyrics by the American poet Cheryl Williams), were conceived before the complete cycle itself took shape. As Inna recounted, she "had to endure a difficult period following the birth of her child, struggling with her son's insomnia—a time when nothing but lullabies could help him calm down and fall asleep." Consequently, the composer decided to seek out texts akin to lullabies and

pair them with the musical melodies she had already envisioned. She turned to the works of American poets, a search that ultimately led to the creation of vocal pieces set to lyrics by Kimberly L. Brennan-Smith, Cheryl Williams, Irina Tokmakova, and other authors.

This essay outlines just a few details of the stylistic innovations employed by composer Inna Onofrei, as reflected in her vocal cycle "Four Lullabies", set to texts by S. Williams.

It is worth noting that many composers have explored themes of childhood by turning to the genre of the lullaby. However, the music of a lullaby is not merely a soothing nightly song; it possesses an ancient, sacred function. Throughout various historical periods, its characteristics have manifested in other vocal and instrumental genres—taking on traits of the folk song, the art song, and the nocturne. The lullaby has been perceived as a medium bridging the earthly and celestial realms—a symbolic cycle of incarnations (birth, death, and rebirth) across diverse religious traditions—thereby revealing the multifaceted nature of human destiny: its present, its future, and even its past (hidden within the pages of memory).

I. Onofrei's song cycle reflects the multifaceted nature of the children's lullaby. These pieces are inspired by the cherished objects that surround a child. For instance, the cycle's opening song, "Tiny One," evokes the image of an antique cuckoo clock. The song "Night Has Come"—which unfolds like an Impressionist musical painting of a nocturnal landscape—calls to mind for listeners the visual impressions left by famous depictions of starry nights (such as those by Kuindzhi or Van Gogh). For a young audience, however, the piece serves as a colorful illustration akin to those found in a children's storybook. In this context, one is reminded of the book "Starry Starry Night" by the contemporary Chinese artist and author Jimmy Liao. The third song, "Land of Dreams," conveys—through its narrative texture—the mythological and fairytale-like aspects of the lullaby genre. Finally, the concluding piece—simply titled "Lullaby"—is perceived as a musical tableau: a view through a window onto a mysterious garden, where the mesmerizing voice of a feathered singer can be heard.

As we analyze the individual songs within this cycle, we will uncover various stylistic and generic innovations employed by the composer, I. Onofrei.

An adult's memory retains recollections of childhood in the form of very brief, vivid, and fleeting images: the silhouettes and voices of loved ones, isolated phrases, and the surrounding environment. In the song "Tiny One," the composer—quite naturally—transports us into a world perceived

through the eyes of a small child, reacting to his mother's voice, her storytelling, and the ambient noises and sounds around him. The key—the transitional element that immerses the listener in a state of unreality—is a musical pulse (comprising specific rhythms and intonations) associated with a particular furnishing of the nursery: the rhythmic ticking of a wall clock's pendulum and the call of its cuckoo¹. Thus, both in the piano accompaniment and in the vocal motifs, there exists a semantic figure that effectively conveys this atmosphere. The motif imitating the mechanical bird is embodied in the textural fabric of the accompaniment, where—within a triple meter—a rest (falling on the strong beat of the bar) is followed by a steady rhythm of quarter notes and an intonation consisting of repeated pitches forming the interval of a third [g-h] on the second and third beats. Simultaneously, the vocal melody features a motif based on the repetition of the minor third interval [e-g].

Dolce, Con Amore ♩ = 80

p
Soft-ly, gent-ly,

p
Ped. Ped. Ped. Ped.

The characteristics of a folk lullaby are conveyed through the sounds of a three-note modal motif [e-g-a]. It appears in the vocal line—a melodic cantilena—set to the words: "Night has fallen..." / "Farewell..." / "Soon you will see the sun..." / "...my dear..." This passage reveals to the listener the image of the Mother, her voice filled with tenderness and warmth. This moment is underscored in

¹ Note: In the folklore of many peoples, references to the cuckoo symbolized longevity and served as a sign of domestic comfort.

the piano accompaniment by a vertical chordal sonority—a plagal harmony [c-a-e-g-a]—which emerges precisely at the conclusion of the phrases.

A narrative element—embodying the world of enchanted nocturnal nature, as well as its symbolic figure, the Moon—is introduced with the words: "Look at the moon, sending you its light..." / "...Close your little eyes and dream." In the music, this is conveyed through the descending melodic phrases of the vocal line.

15 *mp*

See the moon sending you some light; Close your

mp

The outer notes of this melody form the descending intervals of a major sixth [b-d] and a perfect octave [b-b]; this span is filled with auxiliary tones that lean upon the V and VII degrees of the dominant function within the E minor mode. Simultaneously, this vocal line is supported by the harmonic language of a parallel-variable mode—shifting between G major and E minor—within the accompaniment.

It is worth noting that in many of I. Onofrei's vocal works, the role of the accompaniment is just as significant and expressive as that of the voice itself. Thus, in this particular piece, one of the narrative threads—specifically that associated with the theme of the nocturnal realm—is conveyed within the piano accompaniment through the harmony of a recurring chord progression [t5/3 – t2-VI7 #1], set to the words: "Softly, softly... / the stars are shining... / Rest now in peaceful slumber..." Consequently, the first song, "Tiny One," features two distinct narrative lines, each fulfilling its own specific semantic role. The sounds evoking the call of a cuckoo serve to delineate the boundary between dream and reality, embodying a protective function—acting, in essence, as a kind of talisman. Meanwhile, the visage of the Moon and the nocturnal atmosphere emerge as an animated feminine presence, acquiring intimate characteristics closely linked to the archetype of the mother.

The song-romance "Night Has Come" reveals to us one of Inna Onofrei's key stylistic traits: the sensibility of a composer-painter whose palette consists of a interplay of sonic highlights—intervals, modes, and harmonic sonorities. The very pulse of the music's breath is conveyed through strokes and dynamic nuances, executed with an improvisational pianistic technique akin to an "artist's brush." This approach allows the listener to perceive a lightness of touch and the unbridled freedom of sweeping gestures—intricate lines, spirals (arpeggiated harmonies), and "eloquent" voids (pauses)—all concealed within the musical fabric. As one listens intently to the melodic phrases of "Night Has Come" from the very first chords, an image rises before the listener's inner eye: that of a mysterious Moon, radiating an unusually warm glow. One is involuntarily reminded of musical imagery evoked by the piano works of the French composer Claude Debussy (such as "Clair de lune" from the *Suite bergamasque*, *Rêverie*, and others). In those works—much like in this song—a pictorial scene emerges and unfolds: an ephemeral vision of a nocturnal landscape revealed through gently descending, swaying harmonic chords, textural patterns, and shimmering chromatic sonorities. Perhaps this comparison is no mere coincidence; after all, Inna herself has performed works by Debussy, and she feels a deep affinity for the harmonic spectrum of his pieces—imbued with an Impressionistic palette of pastel tones (at once luminous yet cool, detached shades of blue, silver, and sand)—as well as for his exquisite sonic nuance. While many artists and composers have sought to capture the silhouette of the Moon reflected in water—or the shimmering path of moonlight upon its surface—I. Onofrei, employing the painterly hues of a sonic palette, unveils before us the image of a delicate lunar silhouette, whose textural contours evoke the form of a celestial cradle. The intricate pattern of arpeggiated chords in the accompaniment transforms into an airy feather-bed, while a vertical column of triadic harmonies traces the contours of the nascent Moon.

Dolce, Con Amore ♩ = 88

Ped. ——— ^ Ped. ——— ^ Ped. ——— ^ simile

The melody of the vocal line conveys a swaying motion, marked by long, lingering pauses at the end of each phrase. Following the trajectory of the melodic-harmonic phrases—each spanning four measures—one observes that they invariably conclude with a plagal cadence. Most often, these cadences resolve onto a harmony—specifically, a minor-diminished seventh chord [e-g-b-d], a minor seventh chord [e-g-h-d], or a major-minor ninth chord [c-e-g-b-d]—imbued with an Impressionistic color that, rather than providing a sense of functional stability, underscores a tonal fluidity and an air of mystery. It is worth noting that, within the song, these specific harmonic sonorities are inextricably linked to the text: "little one, close your eyes... the stars are twinkling... shining brightly... little one... dreams will come to you... sleeping... day..." Yet, amidst the interplay of light and shadow cast by these plagal, minor, and half-diminished seventh chords, harmonies of a purely tertian structure—drawn from the parallel-variable modes of D-major and B-minor—emerge with vivid tonal color. Thus, the harmony evoking the moonlight and the nocturnal atmosphere is underscored by a seventh chord built upon a major triad, wherein the outer voices form a minor seventh interval [d-fis-a-cis and g-h-d-fis]. At these very moments, the vocal line articulates the words: "night... sun... stars..." The image of the Moon is delineated by the specific timbre of a minor seventh chord [h-d-fis-a], accompanying the words: "coming... the moon is shining... coming... sweet dreams... winking... until the new..." The most striking artistic discovery within the second piece of the **Four Lullabies** cycle is the choice of the D-major tonality. At times, its scale highlights a melodic major mode featuring lowered sixth and seventh degrees, or wavers—momentarily drifting into the parallel minor. Conveyed through an unusual blend of harmonic and melodic timbres, this major mode unfolds as a symbolic scale of shimmering, pearlescent hues—much like a gleaming pearl. For many musicians, this modal tonality evoked joyful, jubilant earthly imagery—a trope frequently employed by composers of both the Classical and Romantic eras. In the music of I. Onofrei, however, this mode reveals a new sonic identity—one linked to the celestial music of the ether, imbued with the fluid, swaying song of the nascent Moon and the evocative atmosphere of a moonlit night.

Thanks to its timbral inventiveness, harmonic coloring, and the picturesque melodic line of the leading voice, the piano part evokes the sensation of immersion in a flowing stream—one that

carries the listener away into a fairytale-like spiritual realm where nature itself comes alive². This interpretation is substantiated by the piano introduction and the first descending phrase of the song's lyrics: "May the land of dreams find you, my child..." / "...May the stars shine brightly all through the night..." / "...May the sun awaken you with its light." The modal aspect of the music further reinforces the imagery of this mysterious world (moving through diatonic A minor / B-flat major / A minor). Thus, A minor predominates in the first section, while the central section (the second part) begins with the lines: "May the stars shine brightly all through the night... / May the sun awaken you with its light."

Dolce, Con Amore ♩ = 80

Ped. — ^ Ped. — ^ Ped. — ^ simile L.H. sempre legato

7 *p*
May the land of dreams find you my

The modal coloring gradually shifts. The pitch "B ♭" appears transiently in the accompaniment—initially as a Neapolitan seventh chord [\downarrow II7], and subsequently, in the third section, accompanying the words: "Dream, my angel..." To this pitch (the

² Note: In ancient Egypt, people believed that during sleep, the soul relived and recalled several of its past lives; moreover, a person's nocturnal journeys sometimes served as prophecies of a future life. In ancient Greece, a sacred place was referred to as the abode—or the Islands—of the "Blessed," to which one could be transported only in one's dreams.

"B ♭"), an "E ♭" is added (during the repetition of the phrase "Dream, my dear one; sweet dreams"), underscoring the transition into the key of B-flat major.

26 *mp* *dim.*

Dream, my an - gel sweet dreams. Dream, my dar - ling sweet

mp *dim.*

In this unusually colorful manner—true to the composer's intent—the realm of reality is set apart from the world of dreams.

The final song of the “Lullaby” cycle symbolically reflects certain imagery and motifs drawn from the preceding songs. In “Lullaby”, one can perceive the contours of a painted canvas—much like in the impressionistic song “Night Has Fallen”—here evoked by the image of the nocturnal natural world coming to life through sound. This imagery is conveyed via a timbral palette reminiscent of woodwinds and strings—instruments associated with the whispering wind, the echoes of birdsong, and alluring harmonic and modal hues that capture the shimmering glimmers of the starry night sky. While in the first song, "Tiny One," the image of the cuckoo was associated with the onset of night and with a tangible object within the interior of a child's bedroom, here the backdrop shifts to an external nocturnal landscape, accompanied by the singing of a feathered night-singer (identified in various folk beliefs as the nightingale). An interesting detail is that in this particular song, I. Onofrei employs the minor pentatonic scale—[d-f-g-a-c] and [a-c-d-e-g]—within the instrumental passages of both the introduction and the coda, thereby inadvertently evoking Hans Christian Andersen's Oriental fairy tale, *The Emperor's Nightingale*. Each night, the nightingale would sing outside the Chinese Emperor's chambers; its song—reminiscent of the chiming of bells—would ward off cold, darkness, and death, while healing the spiritual ailments of all who listened. This chain of associations is brought to life by the instrumental piano part, in which the musical texture stratifies into several distinct layers of timbre. From the very opening, the uppermost voice traces a melodic line. Within it, one discerns a trill-like motif—a rustling, fluid melodic contour

across the phrases—that closely resembles the timbre of a flute. Indeed, throughout the introduction, the melody possesses a distinctly flute-like coloration: crystalline, delicate, and ethereal sounds—much like tiny silver bells—that coalesce into a smooth, flowing cantilena. At the moment of the vocal entry (where the voice joins the accompaniment), the piano part transforms into something akin to a chamber ensemble; it divides into two distinct layers, reflecting an imagery that captures the atmosphere of the nocturnal natural world—the whispering and rustling of trees, and the soft, gentle murmur of the wind. This nocturnal tableau is conveyed through the harmonic complex sounding within the piano part. One layer of the texture serves the role of a gently swaying, arpeggiated... ..of melodic-harmonic figuration within the sonic range of string instruments (cellos and violas), pausing on the second and third beats of the bar; while another layer—a vertical stratum of triads—evokes the simultaneous sonority of a chamber ensemble (woodwinds and strings),

Dolce, Con Amore ♩ = 80

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system is a piano introduction in 3/4 time, one flat key signature. It features a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The piano part has dynamics *p*, *mp*, *p*, and *mf*. Pedal markings are present: *Ped.* with a wedge-shaped symbol under the first three measures, and *simile* under the fourth measure. The second system begins at measure 6, marked with a '6' above the staff. It shows the vocal entry with the lyrics "Sweet dreams will come your way" and a piano accompaniment with dynamic *p*.

enriching the overall backdrop with glimmers of minor harmonies.

A picturesque musical canvas of a nocturnal landscape fills with the sounds of natural elements—with the colors and shimmering nuances of whimsical vocal timbres—bringing to life the words of poetic verses: "Sweet dreams will come to you; the Sun brings a new day; but for now, simply close your eyes, while I sing this lullaby." The element of air—the energy of a gentle breeze—

transforms into a quiet, swaying, lulling melody within the piano accompaniment, serving as the atmospheric backdrop of the night. Meanwhile, the vocal line unveils the persona of a nocturnal singer, narrating—in a lyrical, song-like manner—tales of a beautiful, fairytale world. It is worth noting that many scholars, observing the song of the nightingale, have remarked upon its resemblance to human speech. The nightingale is capable of producing both low-frequency and high-frequency sounds, while simultaneously constructing short vocal phrases that resemble variations on a single melodic motif. This technique—the repetition of brief phrases—is evident in the musical notation of the song's vocal line, the range of which corresponds precisely to the low-frequency timbre of the nightingale's song (spanning from the 'a' of the small octave to the 'f' of the first octave).

"Lullaby" also incorporates elements of the third song, "Land of Dreams." The two are linked by a spiritual dimension—one rooted in ancient sources of knowledge and encoded messages. Thus, the sacred and ritualistic character of "Lullaby" is underscored by numerical symbols concealed within its structural and melodic phrases. The recurrence of these symbols is not coincidental; rather, it highlights a predetermined path of spiritual growth—a trajectory toward which every individual is meant to strive throughout their lifetime. The sacred numerical symbol hidden within the melody of the vocal line is the number seven. In the context of an esoteric worldview, this number symbolizes spirituality, the awakening of latent extraordinary abilities, and wisdom. The following table illustrates the musical segmentation of the poetic text within the vocal line:

Phrase 1	« Sweet dreams will come your way”
Phrase 2	« the sun brings a brand new day”
Phrase 3	« For now just close your eyes..as I sing this lullaby”
Phrase 4	«The moon shines down on you”
Phrase 5	« the stars are twinklink too”
Phrase 6	« May God in Heaven above”
Phrase 7	« bless you with his love”

The rhythmic structure of the phrases is also imbued with the symbolism of the number 7, featuring a specific arrangement of quarter and half-note durations [Phrase 1: 3 quarter notes and 4 half notes—totaling 7 durations]. This pattern can also be observed in the second, as well as the

fourth, fifth, and sixth phrases. In the third phrase, the numerical code expands: 7 quarter notes are joined by 3 eighth notes and 6 half notes, yielding a total of 16 ($1 + 6 = 7$); finally, in the seventh and final phrase, the numerical code becomes 5—a number that, in esoteric terms, signifies the embodiment of creative freedom and the struggle between the past and the future. Even during the instrumental interlude, the upper voice—specifically during the two-bar phrases—presents a sequence of durations comprising 4 quarter notes and 1 half note, collectively underscoring the significance of the number five.

Thus, having analyzed certain nuances of the final song, we can affirm that it serves as a unique culmination of the entire work. By tracing the connections across the cycle's entire dramatic arc, we can construct a logical narrative sequence: the journey begins with a door opening from the realm of reality (Song 1) into an illusory and mythical—or spiritual—world (Songs 2 and 3), and concludes in a "looking-glass" realm (Song 4) that reflects a multifaceted destiny—much like a Romantic symbolic universe—melding the past with the present and prefiguring the future. The cycle's underlying concept thus crystallizes into a triadic formula: birth, creative freedom, and the source of wisdom. These three components constitute the very essence of the spiritual growth of the individual—the creator of their own destiny.

In concluding this brief sketch on childhood themes—illustrated through selected musical works by the composer Inna Onofrei—I would note that the stylistic hallmarks of her music lie in its extraordinary subtlety, its sensitivity to the listener's perception, and the concision of her musical miniatures, both piano and vocal. Onofrei's music tends toward programmaticism, wherein a pivotal role is assigned to the composer's own perspective on the nature of childhood perception—and beyond. The composer accentuates these evocative imagery through a musical palette of colorful harmonies, while also incorporating the semantic dimension of various genre associations. It is essential to emphasize that, for this composer, the theme of childhood is inextricably linked to family values instilled in her from a young age—values that, like a mighty force, are woven from the roots of international traditions and the customs of many generations of her lineage.

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