



# RESOURCE NOTES

BY ARTIST & COMPOSER

**MATT OTTLEY**

**'DANCE OF THE JELLYFISH'**

ARTWORK & MUSIC CREATED FOR THE  
2025 NSW PREMIER'S READING CHALLENGE





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### THE ARTWORK

The major themes of the artwork are about reading and literacy. There is an obvious reference to the commonplace metaphorical expression that with learning one 'can fly'. The theme of learning here is specifically in relation to reading. The girl is reading a book, but she is also sitting on a chair that is a book: the act of reading is carrying her on a journey into the clouds. I have deliberately tipped a common expression I often heard when I was a child, 'you've got your head in the clouds', from a slightly negative statement into a positive one.

*'Reading, learning, dreaming are the ways for us all to grow and elevate ourselves as human beings.'*



Both on the flight and the growth themes, I have depicted the girl's wild hair morphing into butterflies. A butterfly transitions in its chrysalis (metaphorically the time of learning and reflection) into something beautiful that can soar on the wind. The flying fish adds to this theme of flight as do the 'book' jellyfish, the 'book' stingrays and the whale. These sea creatures are all out of their natural environment, but there is no sense of anxiety about them, more a sense of wonder and mystery.

*'Reading can take us out of our comfort zone, and this often leads to growth and a deeper understanding of the world.'*





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There is also an oblique reference to the idea of connectedness, whether that's the relationship of us, as humans, to the rest of the natural world, or the way our communities work. Jellyfish are fascinating creatures as they are made up of separate parts that together form the whole creature. They don't have brains or central nervous systems, but through all of their parts working together, they can survive and thrive. If a jellyfish is cut in half, the separate parts can regenerate into two new jellyfish. The whale, seen in the distance in the image is veiled in mist, giving it an air of mystery. Whales are so different from us humans, yet we share some every basic things; we are both mammals with all that that entails.

*'I believe that reading is the great connector, it not only helps us learn about the physical universe, it is a conduit into the lives of other people and other cultures and as a result can help us become more empathetic.'*

### THE MUSIC

The music I composed for this image is in three sections with the first section having three parts. Each of these sections and parts are based on objects or ideas in the image. They are:

Section one – Whale  
Jellyfish  
Butterfly Hair

Section two – Stingray

Section three – Clouds (with a recap of Whale)

The instruments of the ensemble are as follows:

Two violins, viola, 'cello, double bass, clarinet, French horn and timpani. An ensemble of nine instruments is called a nonet.

The recorded music was performed by arts ensemble students of the NSW Arts Unit and recorded by the NSW Arts Unit. You can download the music from: <https://artsunit.nsw.edu.au/program/nsw-premiers-reading-challenge>



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### Section one

The cello and the double bass provide a deep drone, like the deep notes of a whale call. The timpani, which are a set of large pitched drums – sometimes called kettle drums – begin with a cymbal placed on one of the drum heads so when it's played in the opening 'Whale' section it creates a shimmering wave-like ocean sound. The two violins and the viola play sliding notes (glissandi) reminiscent of the high wavering sounds of whale song. Then the first violin plays a melody that is based on the outline of the back of the whale in the painting. I often do this; use lines in my artworks to create melodies in my music.

When the piano comes in, it has a very short three note melody, or *motif*, based on the movement of a jellyfish as it swims. This motif is the central musical idea on which the entire piece is built. The same motif is taken up by the viola and violins towards the end of the 'Jellyfish' section of the score (near the end of the first part of the music before it changes dramatically into the second, middle section).

The double bass and the cello provide a grounding of long notes, like the ocean swell under the jellyfish, and the cello, horn and clarinet also provide longer melodies to knit the jellyfish motif together.

The final part of section one has a flurry of descending piano notes, again in groups of three notes, describing the fluttering of a cloud of butterflies.

### Section two

The three note motif is also used through this section, but the intervals (spaces between the notes) is changed and dissonance is added to the first note of the motif (an added note to make it sound crunchy). I wanted to create a sound based on the quick, darting movements of a stingray when it sits on the ocean floor covered in sand, then quickly darts off in a puff of sand. These little bursts of energy are interspersed with more lyrical piano passages harking back to a favourite composer of mine; J S Bach, and describe the flowing, rolling movement of the stingrays fins.

### Section three

This section is a repeat and development of the first section, with larger, sweeping sounds where the whole ensemble plays together, conjuring an image of the backdrop of clouds in the painting. It begins with the viola playing the jellyfish motif and this time, because of the way the player is instructed to use their bow, the third note sounds slightly on its own, emphasizing that nanosecond of stillness in the middle of the pulsating movement of a swimming jellyfish.

Section three ends with a reminder of the whale song that opens the whole piece.



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Sample page of the score

*Dance of the Jellyfish*

14

The musical score for page 14 of 'Dance of the Jellyfish' includes the following parts and dynamics:

- Cl.**: Clarinet, dynamic *f*
- Hn.**: Horn, dynamic *f*
- Timp.**: Tympani, dynamic *f*, with a *G/Bb* chord marking.
- Pno.**: Piano, dynamic *ff* in the left hand, *tr. sub. mf* in the right hand, and *mp* in the right hand.
- Vln. 1**: Violin 1, dynamic *ff*, *sub. mf*, and *p*.
- Vln. 2**: Violin 2, dynamic *ff* and *p*.
- Vla.**: Viola, dynamic *mf* and *ff*.
- Vc.**: Violoncello, dynamic *ff*.
- Cb.**: Contrabass, dynamic *ff*.

Measure numbers 73, 74, 75, 76, and 77 are indicated at the bottom of the score.



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### ABOUT MATT OTTLEY

Matt Ottley is an Australian award-winning illustrator/author/composer with more than forty picture books to his name. He is recognised for creating works that help others see things from a different perspective.

Matt was the 2024 Australian nominee (illustrator) for the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award, the highest international distinction given to the creators of children's books, awarded every second year to an author and an illustrator whose complete works have made an important, lasting contribution to children's literature.

Matt has won numerous state premier literary awards, was joint winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award and has twice won the CBCA's Children's Picture Book of the Year Award and recently won the World Fantasy Award in the US for his young adult multi-modal work, *The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness*. His film of the same work, combining images from the book, and a 50-minute symphony that Matt composed for the work, received a Special Mention at the Bologna Ragazzi CrossMedia Award in Italy.

As a composer and an endorsed Yamaha artist, Matt has written scores for 12 picture books as part of an initiative called **The Sound of Picture Books™**. These have been performed by the West Australian Symphony Orchestra and other ensembles nationally and internationally over the past ten years, including the Brno Philharmonic Orchestra in the Czech Republic.

### ABOUT THE SOUND OF PICTURE BOOKS

**The Sound of Picture Books™** was created by Matt Ottley for audiences to experience literature, art and music linked in a truly original sensory way, showcasing Matt's intermodal approach to the creation of music and images for many of his picture books. **The Sound of Picture Books™** aims to bring deeper emotional experiences of narrative and image through music, providing audiences with an insight into the potential of multi-modal creativity. It is not simply the coupling of music to a picture book - the music is literally created from the images and the words with Matt taking audiences on a journey of creativity, turning lines and shapes in images into music composed live on stage.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

To obtain a copy of the score for *Dance of the Jellyfish* please contact Matt via his website:

[www.mattottley.com](http://www.mattottley.com)

To download music from Matt's Sound of Picture Books initiative visit:

[www.tsopb.com](http://www.tsopb.com)