

THE LAST STAND

Tragic Tone Poem for Symphonic Winds

by David Avshalomov

Commissioned 2012 by the Western Plains Wind Consortium,
Daniel Baldwin, coordinator

Program Note

This work, as with all my dramatic instrumental works, began as pure music, growing out of an expanding group of sketches and melodic/thematic kernels (some of them from my sketchbook, some new for this work). As the character of the music emerged and crystallized, a series of “scenes” or visual images came to me that I associated increasingly with the various sections in this highly episodic piece. Daniel Baldwin had asked me for “something like your Elegy for Strings, slow modern-tonal, but more cinematic.” I had riposted that I would be more likely to write something operatic, but I think cinematic won out. In the end, I was imagining realistic nature video scenes that could be cut together to make an accompanying video. (Enterprising groups could assign a video creative to find publicly-shared clips that match my “program” and drop them into a slide-show program that, with a live human triggering the start points for each clip, could be shown on a stage background screen while the music is performed live.)

Nevertheless, this music can be heard as pure music and will have a serious emotional effect on its own (given that it was not written to a pre-existing program). But if modern video-conditioned listeners who depend on visual stimulation want a “story” or “screenplay” to consider while listening, here it is.

This is a statement from deep in the heart of a conservationist, nature-lover, outdoorsman, and mountain man. Mountain pine forest is my natural habitat; that is where I feel most at home and where I have worked to contribute my small part in the necessary global activities of respecting, honoring, healing, restoring, and preserving *all* Nature—including our own. If you have ever seen a forest clearcut you will know the bitter feelings from which this music springs.

The piece is a grim tragic depiction and lament for the cutting down of one of the last stands of old growth pine forest (thus the title). And worse, senseless cutting down merely for greed, profit and (mostly) waste. I provide only a hopeful hint of reforestation at the end.

These are the scenes or elements:

- **Grim grey foggy dawn on a forested mountain slope. Motives of doom.** The condemned trees await their fate.
- **Song of dignified farewell** from the trees, with a sad cadence.
- Gentle turn to:
- **Memory of the ancient forest primeval** (*silva antiqua*), sweet vast endless beauty—the wistful song turning bitter in the face of today’s impending deed.
- **Distraught wailing lament** for the victims to be slaughtered, building to a huge grim relentless tragic cadence, after which the legion of loggers appears through the fog.
- **Threat by the first chain saw**, revving up.
- **Song of the Chain Saws.** The cutting begins; cutoff cadence.
- Clank of **maul on wedge**, trunk-separating crick sounds, the eerie pitiful **creak of tipping**, and then **the first giant falls**. Silence.
- **Chain Saw Canon Chorus**, revving up one after another, then uniting for cut after cut.
- The **trees begin to fall** in measured cadence.
- **Clearcut March**, bitterly triumphant.
- Worse to come: **Wildfire inferno** in the remaining forest, with racing tongues of flame in the crown, roaring blaze on the trunks, and huge water-dropping helicopters fading in and out.
- Silence. (Tableau: **Clearcut wasteland next to burnt holocaust remnant**.)
- Gentle tinkles of **rain**, distant thunder, trickles of runoff.
- **Vision of Reforestation**, in a montage from seedlings (both hand-planted and naturally sprouting) to babies to saplings to young trees, pulling back to reveal the **Forest Reborn** (*silva nova*), in a broad panorama from a high mountain viewpoint at sundown, light **breeze** in the needles, **birdcalls**, **sunset**, **fate motives** behind, and finally **moonrise**.
- Coda on a new melody, a song with the heart’s secret lyric: “Where is the forest that we loved? Could we have saved . . . the trees? **Final Question on an unresolved half cadence.**

(note by the composer)

