

ALLEGRO for Percussion Quartet - by David Avshalomov
Program Note by the Composer

In my early school years I sang and studied piano, theory and percussion. My first performance in an orchestra was playing third glockenspiel in Orff's *Carmina Burana*, a percussion feast. What fun! Soon I discovered the glory of the kettledrums and set out to master them. I was hooked. Naturally, I felt that percussion instruments had been largely neglected by the greatest composers. (This is not an uncommon feeling among champions of peripheral instruments; I know some "evangelistic" solo string bassists and saxophonists, for example.) Drummers' composer heroes included the likes of Mexico's Carlos Chavez, France's Darius Milhaud and Edgard Varese, and the American William Kraft and Canadian Michael Colgrass, two "drummers who made good."

When I began to compose my own music (as a self-taught teen), I started with choral settings, but I also felt that percussion music needed a core ensemble of pitched chromatic instruments like the string quartet, wind quintet, or brass quintet, to get away from the cliché of drum etudes. This was biting off quite a lot: While people almost always love to hear voices singing, and enjoy string instruments playing for long periods, they eventually get their fill of woodwind sound, and are quickly sated by a brass choir. Imagine where the percussion stand in this continuum . . . Yet, undaunted by the timbral and gamut limitations of the pitched percussion instruments, I set out to write real music for a quartet of them. My first effort was the ethereal *Chiaroscuro* (1962), a ringing monothematic etude in whole-tone scale, in moderate tempo, with a fugal middle, for glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, and timpani. The concept then slept for a decade.

Fast forward: In the Summer of 1972, while studying conducting at the Aspen School, I had my first formal instruction in composition, under Charles Jones. I chose to flesh out my sketches for a more rhythmic and motive-rich piece for my cherished percussion quartet. The resulting *Allegro* is a thoroughly-worked-out, varied sonata form, more adventurous harmonically, generally using a Mideastern-sounding "diminished" scale (half-step/whole-step). It is built around its short, opening fast-note motives; a gallant dance-like second theme tune always belongs to the vibraphone. There are frequent bouncy changing meters (as in the *Diversion*), and dreamlike passages of interweaving scales. The timpani are treated as an equal melodic partner. At the final Aspen School competition, I and three other young pros played the piece, the legendary percussion teacher George Gaber conducted, and, to my astonishment, the piece took a first prize! This piece he also repeated at Indiana U, and there have been performances on both Coasts and (along with the *Diversion* for violin and timpani) in the Netherlands.