

CHIAROSCURO by David Avshalomov
Program note by the Composer

In my early school years I sang in choirs 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 brave effort, the Chiaroscuro (1962) for glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba, and timpani, was a brief, ringing, monothematic, ABA-form etude in the whole-tone scale, at moderate tempo, with a fugal middle. (It is an elaboration of my very earliest piano etude, which I wrote at the age of 12 in the theory class of my teacher, Nellie Tholen.) It starts with slow arpeggios in the vibraphone, and gradually adds in the other instruments. The melody grows in length to its full form across multiple repetitions, starting with just a 2-note motive. One modest textural effect I invented was a melody in long single glockenspiel tones, enhanced by quiet fast rolls (tremolos) on the same notes in xylophone. A special characteristic was my confident use of the kettledrums as a melodic instrument. And according to a later teacher who heard this piece, I apparently solved the problem of how to write a harmonic cadence in the whole tone scale. . . . The overall effect is ethereal.