

## *DIAMOND VARIATIONS* by David Avshalomov

This work was co-commissioned in 2005 by two conductors: Tracey Rush, for her Dubuque (Iowa) Community String Orchestra's gem-themed concert celebrating the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, and Emily Ray, for her Mission Chamber Orchestra in San Jose, California, for the opening concert of their 10th Anniversary Season Celebration.

This set of variations grew from the "seed crystal" of an original theme with two other variations on it written in the early 1990s for the Gemological Institute of America, then in Santa Monica, California, as theme music for an audio-book course about diamonds (their mineralogy, mining, grading, distribution, cutting—and selling). The cues I created were a little rich and "arty" for background music, the harmonies lush and neo-romantic, so I retained the rights to them for future use, planning to write several more variations when the occasion arose, as it did in 2005. The present set represents the final form of the work.

The simple theme, which widens melodically in an angular way, by moving from its first note up a step, then down a third, up a fourth, down a fifth, etc. to the octave, suggests the clean triangular or trapezoidal shapes (or faces) that are found both on fully-formed rough diamond *octahedra*, and as the many tiny facets that cutters grind onto the surface of a fashioned stone to reveal the total brilliance of a full-cut gem.

This brilliance is both beauty and a snare. My variations thus alternately follow two emotionally divergent tracks (like two sides of a triangle): One track represents the beauty, symbolism, idealism, yearning, and romance that diamonds now evoke as gems, gifts, and tokens of love (both historically and through massive modern marketing). Along the way you hear a light-hearted courtship waltz ( [a girl's] "Best Friends"), a climax in the deeply-felt *adagio* troth of "Forever" (another of my Mahler tributes), and resolution in the serene beauty of the final variation, essentially a slow dreamy recap of the theme, titled "Perfect Gem" (or, if you like, "Diamond Anniversary"). The other line represents the greed, smuggling, theft, and violence often associated with the mining, movement, hoarding, and trade in diamonds over the centuries, culminating in the bitter intensity and brutal haste of the late variation titled "Blood Diamonds." (Modern students of human rights can learn more about recent atrocities with a quick online search. It is not a pretty story.) The combined effect of the two tracks is to set the beauty of the diamond in sharp contrast: Just how at ease are we with such perfect beauty, knowing its true cost?