

DAVID AVSHALOMOV
ELEGY for String Orchestra (1990)
Note by the Composer

This work grew out of its soulful opening melody, arching up, gently falling down. It is my most performed large-ensemble piece. The main theme came to me when I was earning part of my living writing and scoring cues for educational videos. I immediately realized this melody had too much art in it for such use, and set it aside. (I keep old sketches and melodies sometimes for as long as 40 years or until I find the right moment and piece to use them. In this case it was just a year later.) The piece was originally in the key of Ab, not A. I realized that it would be much easier for strings to play in A, so I made that change before the premiere (which came *after* I conducted the Naxos recording with the Moscow Symphony in 1997).

Elegy was originally dedicated to the memory of Leonard Bernstein, one of my conducting teachers, whose career was a beacon for young American conductors and composers. It has been performed in memory of others, including my paternal grandfather, Aaron Avshalomoff. I conducted the piece most recently at the memorial concert for my late father Jacob in 2013, with an orchestra of alumni/ae of his beloved Portland Youth Philharmonic (which he led for 44 years).

FORM: The piece has five sections. The first (in A minor) spins out the tune in the first violins (who carry the melodic thread for most of the piece), gradually adding accompaniment, cadencing on a “farewell” harmony, then repeating. The second is a solemn chorale in the lower strings, turning to A major. The third is a high sweet melody in first violins (memories and hope), becoming more impassioned in a second section, under a pulsing accompaniment. The fourth is an unexpected slow blues-y “stomp,” hitting deliberate “sour” notes and adding mildly jazzy harmonies in the plucked accompaniment, building, climaxing, relaxing. (This shift has been described by listeners as “Mahler meets Cab Callaway.”) The fifth re-works the opening, now more bitterly harmonized, reaching a “death” chord (of my own devising), then repeating the “farewell” cadence. It closes with several plangent phrases echoing the opening motif of the piece. The first violins are left hanging high above a deep bass note, then the inner parts complete a sweet harmony of acceptance, fading away.