

Sonata for Flute and Piano
David Avshalomov, 2000
Note by the composer.

The sonata grew out of a soulful melodic sketch that came to me several months after returning from Russia in the spring of 1997 after a series of recording sessions that my father Jacob and I did with the Moscow Symphony Orchestra of works by my paternal grandfather, Aaron. Flutist Nadine Asin's masterful interpretation of his concerto for flute, and her astonishing tonal range and control, opened my ears and inspired me to consider writing for what up until then had been my less than favorite wind instrument.

The sketch sat, until I revived my artistic relationship with the gifted Ellen Burr, who over a decade earlier had been my original principal flutist when I founded the Santa Monica Chamber orchestra. Hearing her perform again—and, especially, improvise—renewed my inspiration, and when she agreed to premiere a new flute work, I was off and running. My intent was to write a work of both melodic beauty and rhythmic vitality, featuring the wider timbral range that I had overlooked in this instrument. The style of the work is chromatic tonal mid-20th-century proto-modern.

1. Myth

The first movement is like a mythical story, with a mysterious quasi-modernist prologue introducing two key motives that influence the entire work: a melodic leap of a minor seventh, and a tumbling run of notes centered around successive fourths offset by half-steps. This leads to a folk-like ritual slow melody in the flute built on the opening motive, over a steady slow pulse in the piano, that climbs to a strong climax by extended repetitions of the second motive. After a brief interlude, a second theme appears, this one a Soviet-style march with lyrical echoes, and another more heroic thrust. After another cadence, a long slow-notes melody unfolds in the flute, eventually revealed as the first slow melody over repeated patterns in the piano related to the second motive. Echoing development of the second motive devolves to a low snapping piano ostinato, over which the flute develops a more frantic version of the Soviet march. The manic energy then dissolves into the opening mood of contemplation, winding down on successive modifications of the kernel cell of the second motive, then a series of unresolving chords in the piano, and a final high quick questioning motive.

2. It Ain't Necessarily Jazz.

In the second movement, I come out of the classical closet again as a revealed admirer (if not true practitioner) of the art of jazz. This is a candy-cane jazz waltz, with the occasional quintuplet (group of five notes) thrown in to enliven the mix. The varied-rondo-sonata structure allows the flutist two brief stretches of improvisation on previous materials over specified harmonic changes. After a brief introduction (which later turns out to have contained sub-thematic elements for development), the opening theme is almost sappy with good cheer, the piano gets its own tune, and the variations are off. After one improv section, the flute nods to the movement's melodic debt to a well-known tune by a great American icon. One variation makes fun of a square waltz, but they can't stand it for a full chorus and have to swing the rest. To wind things up, the piano gets a wild showoff version of its tune, the first tune varies again in flute, and a wild coda develops several tunes and their previous allusions, with an obvious jazzlike close. (You'll have to imagine the bass and drums—played with brushes.)

3. Star Fire:

The year I started writing this piece our beloved cat Sadie died, after sharing the sweetness of her existence with us for 17 years. I mourned her most deeply in the mountains at midnight under a sky full of stars, and later as I sketched this slow movement realized I heard that mourning and felt those starbursts in its music. So the piece is dedicated to her memory. It begins in murky gloom, all bottom register. The style is pure oriental modes and melodic gestures, one section of melody after another in a chain building to a hysterical climax, with a full elegiac return of the start.

3. Quarrel

Here the two chamber music collaborators play the roles of the two domestic partners engaged in an increasingly bitter, even vicious quarrel. The movement is built around a series of exchanges between the angry flute and the calm but sarcastic piano. The opening, a sharp rhythmic flute subject, mixes half-step

motives with wide leaps of a seventh. The piano's answers are more tonal and formal—almost stiff at first. Gradually the two start trading barbs, eventually engaging in a formal-argument fugue (a technique I used later in my Pangs of Love variations). Towards the end the piano finally loses his temper and delivers a long building oration of anger with a pounding finish, while the flute yelps hurt answers . . . and then breaks down in tears. The ending is sad, quiet, resigned. Nothing is resolved, they are just spent. (I also wrote an alternative ending where they start up again with “and another thing . . .” but fizzle out in exhausted disgust.)