

SACRED WINDS by David Avshalomov

Program Note by the Composer

This work was written at the request of the Los Angeles Flute Orchestra, Jonna Newcomb-Carter, leader, and premiered by them in 2007 with the composer conducting. Its three movements evoke wind-related aspects of the natural world. These include drought, ground breezes, and gentle rain; dense, wispy, and billowing fog; surf, and all the stages of a wild sandstorm. As the central thread, the melodies express the anguish and yearning of a lost soul. The theme is humans seeking to regain connection with the powers of Nature.

Despite long experience with 20th Century trends, I remain devoted to the vitality of past Western musical traditions, and I draw my musical strength from old roots as I seek to make something new. So I am not an “experimental” composer. But in this work I have selectively explored modern extended techniques and effects available on the various flutes (including the huge low ones) and then tried to make real music with them. I have also introduced some modest stage business, such as stamping the basic rhythm with ankle bells in the Rain Dance. The percussion parts provide necessary sound elements and atmosphere, handling a menagerie of gongs and cymbals, drums, shakers, and rattles, and some exotics like the Miwok Bull-Roarer and rattled Tinfoil Sheet, as well as vocal surf “SHHH”.

This was my first work written in partial collaboration with an ensemble—and they have my gratitude, particularly my friend Ellen Burr, who connected me with the group and encouraged and schooled me. I got to test various passages and effects with individual players first, and then to work with the group to achieve the color effects I intended, ending up with slightly adventurous writing that still remains technically idiomatic. My intention was to add a serious, substantial piece to the thin repertoire for this unique ensemble, and to help raise awareness of its potential.

1. Rain Dance: It is dry. No rain. Crops will wither. The people gather: dancers, chanters, drummers. They beat the air. The big flute moans for a breeze, the others answer with wet drop noises. Nothing. They sigh. They call the breeze up to pull rain down, again and again. No rain. They make a falling-drops tune in harmonized groups. No rain. They build up an intense slow dance rhythm, drumming, stamping, and the tiny flutes scream for the rain, then all join in. Stop. Wait. Now a little rain comes, gently; it falls and rolls in rivulets and soaks into the parched Earth. The sky wipes clear and all thank the breeze, the big flute last.

2. Fog Song: A lost soul stands on the beach, engulfed in dark dense cold salty sea fog. Nothing moves. Surf slides in. Foghorns moan. The soul sings a lonely slow tune in disjointed phrases of a few notes each; the fog wavers and shifts as though in sympathy. The tune shifts to a blues feel; the fog feels the groove and joins in the Foggy Blues, city style. This fades, and a higher, more diffuse fog arises. A lower voice sings another lost tune, with buoy bells bonging offshore; many separate wisps of fog echo it, twisting together, then, pushed by a little wind, all join and billow up in a full new mournful chorus that roars over the surf. At the climax the choir writhes down, slows, and spreads to a wide, thin dodecaphonic fog. The low lonely tune returns, trailing shadows, then soul, fog, surf, and foghorns join in a dark farewell chord, and a seagull wheels overhead.

3. Sand Banshee: Standing on a warm sand dune in the sun, the soul senses a tiny, thready breeze that keens high and grows in widening swoops, then drops and focuses in a steady pulsing center. Flecks of sand flick by, the pulsing builds, and we are piping a fun little Latin Sand Dance. The breeze swoops up to a high keening wiggling wind, pungent but not yet scary. It drops to a murmur under a sweet reassuring melody. The Sand Dance resumes and pushes up to a higher massed shrieking wavering wind with spattering sand. Now the massed low instruments shout the power of the Banshee wind, punctuated by drum tattoos and gong and cymbal strokes, while the shrieking continues in long rising waves, ever louder and scarier, as though it will never stop. Finally it peaks, drops, relaxes to sweet melody and harmony again, a clearing sky and warm sun, and settles to calm motionless unison. Is the Banshee gone?

*(NOTE: The **Banshee** is a female spirit in Irish mythology, usually seen as an omen of death and a messenger from the Otherworld. In Irish legend, a banshee wails around a house if someone there is about to die. This movement evokes the wailing and shrieking of a storm that could well mean death.)*