

David Avshalomov  
SIEGE for Orchestra  
NOTES by the composer

## ORIGIN

This early tone poem grew out of a sketch I wrote as a senior at Harvard College in 1967. The sketch was first read through by members of the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra under my baton. I completed the work the next year, while studying orchestral conducting at the University of Washington. There I was encouraged by Walter Welke to transcribe it for symphonic winds, and I conducted the successful premiere of that version with his enterprising Wind Sinfonietta.

While serving in the USAF Band in D.C. in 1969, I revised the band version, and they played it at a reading session for new works led by Col. Arnald Gabriel. In 1992 I revisited the unperformed orchestra version and further smoothed some rough spots, without changing basic thematic materials or the overall form (A B B/development A’).

## DESCRIPTION

This is a lyrical, dark, moody, dramatic work, modern-tonal in style (influenced by Shostakovich, Mahler, and Bartok), using the full resources of the orchestra. It was originally conceived as pure music, not program music, but listeners found that it immediately evoked images, places, action. I decided that the succession of moods, from slow tension through confrontation and release, suggested the **siege of a medieval fortress**; hence the title.

The grim, stolid music of the slow gloomy opening evokes *the Fortress* in the pre-dawn mist and watch-fire smoke. A simple rising modal melody builds up contrapuntally from the lowest voices through the full orchestra, growing twice to abrupt deceptive cadences. Immediately, muted trumpet and then oboes establish a repeated dotted rhythm, over echoes of the opening Fortress theme in solo tuba, then bassoon, and then, increasingly chopped up into rhythmic phrases, in full strings.

The tempo quickens, and woodwind cluster-chords thicken the persistent rhythm to push us into an episode of muscular brass music that evokes the saber-rattling and posturing threats of the **attacking forces before the gates**. Over the dotted rhythm in trumpets, solo trombone introduces the second theme (**the Full Challenge**), which starts with a key four-note expanding motive, and continues aggressively downward, reinforced by horns. Taking this up, the brass forces pile up over the insistent rhythm, related motives are spat out, tension builds, the snare drum rattles boastfully, and a climax is reached. **The full challenge has been given.**

**Like an echo in stone halls**, the rhythmic pattern continues in quiet strings, over which successive woodwinds (bassoon, clarinets, flutes) outline and extend a plaintive descending melody (related to the Challenge theme), suggesting the **frightened lone**

**night watch on the tower walls.** The flutes trail off in anxiety, and the string rhythm slows, then stops.

The next section suggests **the covert undermining of the walls.** A series of short, compressed episodes follow, piling up motives in muted brass, then in double reeds, then horns, then pitched percussion, then in strings massing to a thick tone cluster of foreboding, overlaid with woodwinds, further overlaid with brass, swelling suddenly in volume. **The gates have been breached!**

**Immediately the final attack is mounted.** The tension is compounded by successive loud piled-up variants of the Challenge motive fractured across the choirs of the orchestra, building a dissonant repeated harmony juggled by three offset rhythmic and harmonic groups. Over this menacingly pulsing background, winds and trumpets nastily restate the Full Challenge theme, and the whole assault machinery grinds to a halt on a series of truly ugly full-orchestral chords, hammered out and punctuated by a huge gong smash. **The defending forces have made a last stand.**

Suddenly, in reply, solo timpani, piano, and chimes hammer out the Challenge motive alone, and the brass take it up in augmentation, all landing on an astonishing, vainglorious major chord in full orchestra, scored Wagner/Ring style. Under it, repeated Challenge motives in low brass and timpani establish **the attacker's victory**; then this outburst yields to quiet sustained octaves in woodwinds.

Out of this cold emptiness the opening Fortress music returns twice (again in counterpoint, but now without its strong cadences), in haunting muted strings, then in pale woodwinds over string harmonics, evoking **the vanquished fortress and the heaps of the dead.** Over gentle echoes of the dotted rhythm, the solo oboe plays a **quiet lament**, suspending a final high note in the air. Under it, the low instruments try the Fortress melody two last times, yielding to a sustained pedal tone over which the orchestra places four inconclusive chords echoing the opening cadences, then settles on a soft, bitter final chord of defeat.

\*\*\*\*\*

Santa Monica, 2002