

TORN CURTAIN

Suite for solo viola with piano accompaniment (1990-91) by David Avshalomov.
Written for my brother Dan in resonance with Eastern Europe and Russia 1989-90.
(Notes by the composer)

This work started with a hint from my brother Dan that he might favor a solo piece written for him. A prologue-soliloquy came to me almost immediately; then a number of tunes that felt Roumanian, Hungarian, Russian, Czech. I accepted the expressive mold into which they fell, and wrote out the first movement sketch as a series of purely melodic episodes. Parts of the suite unabashedly echo composers going back as much as a century—but I handle the shaping and sequencing of melody and structure in my own way.

As I worked to clarify the forms, I became aware that the emotions flowing through these tunes paralleled my personal reactions to what was then going on in Eastern Europe as the Iron Curtain began to shred, revealing great damage and pain in the social and cultural fabric of those regions. By grasping unconsciously for old melodic roots I sought to express solidarity with the new struggle which those former subject peoples now addressed. This music, however, is not based on their indigenous musics, nor on art musics connected to those roots. It can be better heard as an attempt to travel as a musical visitor along their beaten tracks, wearing a borrowed old cloak of their style to keep my American self warm. These are songs of empathy and powerless compassion—from a stranger.

Then there are the images. From my reading of reports and analyses from within the region, I began to imagine vignettes that ran parallel to some of the movements I finally wrote. I did not shape the musical forms to the unfolding of visual sequences, but listeners may find the descriptions I have appended illuminating.

As for the viola, I chose to write for it heroically, with my brother's particular strengths in mind: a big, warm tone, technical mastery, a wide expressive range, and a strong and intelligent musical personality. His performance and subsequent recording of the work thoroughly vindicated this choice.

The Old Tunes

This movement has the shell of a sonata form, but with fresh melodic episodes replacing a development section. Developed returns of earlier sections, in reversed order, replace the recapitulation. It forms a lopsided arch: ABCDEFED_BA.

Three notable features: (1) The viola alone intones a solemn, dramatic prologue(A). (2)The arch is crowned in the F section by a free, passionate cadenza for the two instruments (imagine whirling religious zealots). (3) The opening soliloquy returns at the end, now with virtuoso piano accompaniment. The ending is blunt, stoic.

Image: An itinerant bard playing old songs and dances, trying to revive a dying melos from a distance.

Menuetto [omitted for the premiere and first recording]

This is a crude old-fashioned minuet and trio (pseudo-baroque shapes in a quasi-Oriental modal style, with ornamented repeats), putting the piano in the role of plucked string bass at the start. The high viola harmonics in the trio are like the tears of trapped children. Pounding away at the repeat of the dance tune,

fattening it with portentous non-traveling harmonies, does not make the dance any less awkward. The cadence is pure resignation.

Images: the Roumanian orphans, a legacy of the old regime, herded into ugly concrete buildings, wards of the state, the healthy ones destined to be commodities, the halt and sick unlikely to live. Their sad eyes peer at you through tiny, barred, high windows. They are forced to dance for visitors. They are too hungry to hope.

Ballade

A clear ABA form, with the second A varied. The viola offers several dry, solemn, phrases, in a baroque-dance dotted rhythm, with crunched arpeggios on the beats. The piano gives bittersweet falling answers, with subtler rolled arpeggios; at the cadence, it establishes a wistful romantic mood. Now the viola sings a high, sad, old-fashioned love tune, rising to a long held note under which the pianist pounds up to the climax; it then winds the mood down, turns, and repeats the starting dance, dream-like, the instruments now trading roles. A gentle ending.

Images: An old peasant dances alone, a simple clump-shoe dance, awkward but dignified. He recalls an old romance. (As a hapless, lovelorn youth, he lamented an unattainable beauty.) He dances again, remembering a partner long dead.

Incident (in the Town Square)

A sneaky little scherzo, over before you know it. Fast polymeters—fives and sevens and nines—establish a busy theme built on repeating cells, interrupted and resumed. The interruptions consist of a low knocking noise in the piano, and an odd repeated tritone in the viola, which slides by quarter-tones later. Things get more violent; the viola emits squealing cries over crashing hand-clusters in the piano.

Images: This little fellow, a smuggler, a con man, politically powerless but canny; he likes jazz. Things are coming unraveled for him. The jig is up. Angry striking miners from up-country have come to the main square in the Capital to restore order and put down hooligans. The Security Police are going door to door. He's scampering coolly down side streets to avoid them. At intersections, he hears distant sirens. His shoes are shiny, good Spanish leather. He skitters and turns, he grins, he's almost free; he tiptoes, turns the corner, and BAM!—they get him.

Night Prayer

This movement is the closest to my own compositional voice (as heard, for example, in my String Quartet of 1973). An anguished, yet ultimately hopeful nocturne, tracing pain, worry, prayer, release, resignation, with a glimmer of hope at the end. (The form again is ABA.)

The pianist establishes dream bells, high, tiny, distant, dissonant, pulsing slowly. The spirit is being pulled thinly to waking. The violist spins a slow, writhing melody over a plodding, rising bass line in the piano. Tune and harmony turn, arrive at a destination, the soundscape widens, and you are motionless in the open space of a huge resonant sanctuary.

A simple quiet melody like a priest's chant is answered by an explosion of massive bells in the piano, and the viola roars the chant again in choral harmony. At the tragic crash of the cadence, anxieties are released like fluttering bats. The two instruments intertwine in threads of repeated notes and spinning triplets, then the voices separate, one winding down, the other floating up. The rhythm slows, the tension relaxes, evaporates, and a point of return is reached. The second part of the opening melody recurs, the plodding

accompaniment now going back down the hill. Distant, faint echoes of the bells are heard, and finally a lullaby reassures for a while, cut off by a brief stinging echo of the middle outburst. A bitter-sweet cadence gives rest.

Image: The tortured individual spirit in an officially godless collective, seeking solace in the practice of ancient, banned religion. Hope as the only illusion left to provide any warmth to the soul.

Dance It Away (Rondo Finale)

This movement rarely lets up: a varied rondo of rustic dance tunes, with pseudo-virtuoso touches, like a klezmer or gypsy band. The rondo motif is taken from early in the first movement; another subject brings back the scherzo theme. Towards the end, the violist gets some high-and-fast bits. The momentum spills over in a Jewish-sounding extension, and this hits the top—a sped-up, rhythmic, accompanied reprise of the opening prologue from Movement I, which spins into a fast, crazed coda on the rondo tune and a wild-eyed, splashy end.

Images: Even under tyranny, people can still toss back a schnapps, sing an old song, clear a circle, show off some footwork. Life's a struggle, we've got trouble, let's dance it away. In the middle, up jumps the little smuggler fellow, who, with the door-knocking motif as his drummer, dances a step, brags to us how he escaped with his life. One tune returns as a goose-step march of the old State Police, but we thumb our nose at them. The dance speeds up. Manic energy gets us through it—this time.