

Penumbra (1987)

Philip Carlsen

“Penumbra was written in 1987 for the group Penumbra, consisting of Mary Jo Carlsen, Tom Parchman, and James Parakilas. The title is meant to suggest the prominence of musical ‘penumbras’ throughout the work: at the beginning, for example, the faint notes in the violin part are like a shadow cast by the clarinet’s melody, and in the last movement, short notes in the pianist’s left hand generate sustained after-images in the right. The most significant characteristic of the first movement is the consistent doubling of notes in melodies and chords at the interval of the twelfth, for example, a low C is shadowed by a G in the next octave, a low D by a high A, and so on. This was inspired by the tone color of the clarinet, with its prominent overtone a twelfth above every note. The beginning and ending of the first movement are lyrical and dreamy, contrasting with an agitated middle section. The second movement, marked *Largo*, is predominantly lyrical, but underlying it is a progression from playfulness to tragedy, from wispy glissandi and dotted rhythms at the beginning to the final poignant violin solo and the piano’s pounding G-minor chords. Dotted rhythms continue in the last movement, and the melodic doubling of the first movement returns, but in a much more aggressive form.”

—Philip Carlsen

Philip Carlsen (born 1951, Coulee Dam, Washington) completed his undergraduate degree at the University of Washington and pursued graduate work at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center. His principal composition teachers were Robert Suderburt, Jacob Druckman, Stuart Dempster, William Bergsma, Mario Davidovsky, and Charles Dodge.

Carlsen is the recipient of numerous honors and awards including winning a commission from the National Symphony Orchestra, in connection with its nationwide residency program, to represent Maine in writing a new chamber work for premiere at the Kennedy Center that would “express the spirit of Maine’s people.” He also received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Institute for Arts and Letters, the Maine Arts Commission, and a residency at the MacDowell Colony.

In 1989, he was awarded the first American Composers Alliance/Town Hall Commission and in 2003 he was a composition fellow at the Ernest Bloch Music Festival Composers Symposium. Other commissions have come from the Portland Symphony Orchestra, the Bossov Ballet Theatre, the Sebago-Long Lakes Region Chamber Music Festival, and the trio Penumbra.

In addition to his orchestral, chamber, and vocal music for traditional Western musicians, Carlsen has composed for Javanese and Sudanese gamelan, for Laotian khean, and for his own original instruments. His *Suite Mawar Mekar* for Javanese gamelan and Western orchestra was premiered at Bates College in March, 2003. One of the five pieces he wrote for automobile orchestra, *ReinCARnation*, was performed in 2015 in the courtyard of Schloss Mirabell in Salzburg.

Carlsen taught at the University of Maine at Farmington for thirty-three years where he conducted the college-community orchestra and taught courses in music theory, composition, jazz history, film music, and non-Western music. In 1993, he received UMF’s Distinguished Faculty Award, and in 1996, he was awarded the Libra Professorship, an endowed chair that allowed him to devote half-time to composition. He retired in 2015 as Professor Emeritus of Music.

Carlsen plays cello and viola da gamba with the early music group St. Mary Schola, and at the other end of the historical spectrum, he directed the 2016 Back Cove Contemporary Music Festival at the Portland Conservatory of Music. He lives in South Portland, Maine with his wife, the poet Jeri Theriault.

Additional information is available at www.philcarlsen.com.