

*Sunlit Peaks and Dark Valleys* (1995)

Donald Erb

*"Sunlit Peaks and Dark Valleys* was commissioned by the Verdehr Trio and Michigan State University. It was completed in May, 1995. The work is in three movements: two fast movements with a slow one in the middle.

The first and last movements are bright and virtuosic in character. The dark valley in between was my second attempt to deal with one of the most profound events in recent times, the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the murder of the children. The sight of firemen removing dead, hurt, and frightened children from the building moved me beyond words, all the more so because I had spent a significant part of my childhood not far from there. This slow movement is based on *Jesus Loves Me*, a song which I and many American children learned in Sunday School."

—Donald Erb

The world premiere of *Sunlit Peaks and Dark Valleys* was on February 29, 1996 in the Miller Theatre at Columbia University, New York, New York.

Donald Erb (1927–2008) was born in Youngstown, Ohio. His early ambition was to be a jazz trumpeter, and he worked in that capacity for a number of years. After a stint in the Navy during World War II, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in trumpet and composition at Kent State University. He completed a Master of Music degree from the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he studied with composer Marcel Dick, and a doctorate from Indiana University as a student of Bernhard Heiden. He also studied briefly with Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

Erb became Cleveland's most illustrious and controversial twentieth-century composer as he explored fresh sonorities and forged new paths in his boldly imaginative works. With a distinctive musical language, he skillfully mixed familiar tone colors with electronic sounds and unexpected timbres, often requiring extended instrumental techniques such as multiphonics. Erb called himself an abstract expressionist.

A review in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described Erb as "...the kind of composer who can create great music with just about anything." And Erb has written for "just about anything," from music for two contra bassoons to a piece for piccolo and percussion. Many adjectives have been applied to his music: vital, aggressive, raunchy (by Erb himself), "bold and harrowing, even whiz-bang" (Harold C. Schonberg).

Over a period of thirty-seven years, Erb wrote more than one hundred works which have been widely heard. He had commissions from the major orchestras in Chicago, St. Louis, Baltimore, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, and Cleveland. His orchestral music has been performed by over eighty orchestras throughout the United States, as well as orchestras in Europe, Asia, and Australia. His ten concertos were premiered by artists such as Lynn Harrell, Richard Stoltzman, Miriam Fried, Stuart Dempster, and the brass section of the Chicago Symphony. Recordings of his works are available on numerous CDs.

Erb's early interest in electronic music led to the completion of *Reconnaissance*, one of the first chamber works for live synthesizer and acoustic instruments. It had its premiere in New York in 1997 with Robert Moog playing the synthesizer.

Erb received fellowships and grants from the Rockefeller, Guggenheim, Ford, Fromm, and Koussevitzky Foundations; honors and awards came from the International Rostrum of Composers, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Library of Congress, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the American Academy in Rome. He is the author of a definitive essay on

orchestration for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and he served as resident composer at the American Academy in Rome, Artist-in-Residence at the University of Wollongong in Australia, and Composer-in-Residence for the Dallas and St. Louis symphony orchestras.

Erb was a fearless critic of pretension and shoddiness and he had a deep concern for the future of young composers in an “age of sleaze.” where art and culture were fast degenerating into thirty-second commercial sound bites. Sometimes his brutal honesty and outspokenness “ruffled more than a few feathers.” [*Fanfare* magazine, July/August, 1995] (He famously described Cleveland’s Rock and Roll Hall of Fame “a monument to banality.”)

Nonetheless, Erb made a name for himself as a respected teacher. He was affiliated for more than forty years with the Cleveland Institute of Music where he headed the composition department until his retirement in 1996. He also taught at Bowling Green, Indiana, and Southern Methodist universities, and he lectured at more than one hundred colleges and universities.