

**PRINCIPLES by David Avshalomov**  
(Program note by the composer)

"Principles" is a powerful half-hour secular oratorio for large mixed chorus with solo movements for baritone, on themes of liberty, social justice, and religious freedom drawn from texts of Thomas Jefferson. These include the revelatory Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and the Declaration of Independence, plus his mottos, epitaph, and two late letters.

Tonal modern/populist in style, tuneful, rhythmic, singable, accessible, "thinking person's patriotic," the work has strong listener impact. This is a rousing, major statement, with texts for our times. It can be performed with either piano, piano with percussion, or symphonic wind ensemble.

1. Creed – A brilliant ringing opening, a hortatory middle in polymeters on the evils of forced false religions, and a big emphatic close with a powerful unresolved cadence.
2. Our Civil Rights – A bitter, dignified baritone solo elaboration of the proper and necessary decoupling of religious choice from civil rights. With choral echoes and a grimly righteous ending.
3. The Opinions of Men – A serious, energetic repudiation of government control of opinion.
4. We Do Enact – A pure *a cappella*, gentle psalm/prayer-style choral statement of the Statute.
5. The Truth is Great (fugue) – A tight, lively, chromatic rhetorical fugue on the nature of Truth.
6. Rebellion to Tyrants – An ironic solo recitative on the famous Shay's Rebellion letter.
7. We Hold These Truths - A taut, dramatic setting of key passages from the Declaration of independence, with a joyous climax and an *a cappella* buildup to a brave, inspiring conclusion on "our sacred honor", capped by a bright brass outburst, and a quiet coda on his self-penned epitaph.
8. All Eyes Are Opened - A slow-building, populist, revival-style exhortation to remember and honor the Principles he laid out in the Declaration, concluding with an extended buildup peroration on the inspiring refrain, "All eyes are opened to the rights of man," and a skyrocket ending.

## **BACKGROUND**

This work was inspired by my first encounter with Jefferson's personal Creed, chiseled high on the stone wall of his Memorial in Washington, D.C., during cherry blossom time in 1970. It stunned me like a lighting bolt. Other texts there intrigued me as well, given my lifelong concern with social justice. I soon sketched settings for some of those ringing phrases, laying out structural ideas for a work for chorus and band (I was serving in the USAF Singing Sergeants). The sketches then sat in my sketchbook for over two decades.

In 1993, the 25th reunion of the Singing Sergeants was announced; I offered them a new work based on my Jefferson sketches. Though a performance at that event did not materialize, I was already on fire writing and couldn't stop. Some research had provided further texts, culminating in the amazing *Statute of Virginia for religious freedom*, a document for our time, which sets the tone for the whole work. The present version for mixed chorus represents the latest revision.

Musically, the piece is a hybrid; it draws on the old formal conventions of oratorio, with choral sections, solo voice, interludes, more choral passages, recitative, and so on. But it is dramatic in emotional range, and stylistically rooted in mid-20th-century, in the neo-tonal vein. The form was delineated by my choices of text, and the text was a challenge to set. Jefferson's prose uses the long, earnest cadence of the Enlightenment, with formal rhetorical flourishes and extended series of clauses. To get a manageable "libretto," I made frequent ellipses—without altering meanings or inflections. Although many of his formulations spoke directly to me, few evoked lyricism. My

response was to develop a hortatory, structured singing rhetoric to match the logic, rhythm, and structure of the ideas; I managed to eke out some lyric moments as well.

The principles set to music here are not worn out, nor are they merely empty rhetoric (remember Tian an Men square and the 2011 Arab Spring). We have scarcely begun to realize the potential that lies behind Jefferson's optimistic view in his last days, that "All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of Man." I simply hope that my music will help to "refresh our recollection of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them."

The text sources, in order of setting, are:

His personal Creed

*Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, 1779/86*

Letter, London, 1787, in reference to Shay's Rebellion

His personal Motto

*Declaration of Independence, 1776*

His self-penned Epitaph

His last letter, June 24, 1826, declining an invitation to the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, due to his failing health. [He died **July 4**, 1826]

David Avshalomov, July, 2009