

Duo for Viola and Piano
Program Note

The Duo for Viola and Piano was composed in 1983, and was first performed in 1984 by my brother Toby Hoffman and myself in Sea Cliff, New York as part of the Sea Cliff Chamber Players series. Though it has since been performed by many other musicians in Europe and in North and Central America, it was conceived with the original performers in mind. This naturally shaped the character of both the details and the underlying structure of the work. The two instrumental parts are always collaborating with each other, yet each has its own unmistakable voice. For much of the piece, there is a running dialogue between the two. One of the main subjects of conversation is the question of who is leader and who is follower. Ultimately, however, this issue is dissolved during the last stage of the work, during which the greatest degree of unanimity is achieved.

There are essentially two musical ideas in the piece which follow from beginning to end, each interleaved with the other: A—B—A1—B1—A2—B2 and so on. One way in which this pattern can be clearly heard is by observing that the “A” music begins at a fast tempo and, with each re-entry, gets progressively slower. By contrast, the “B” music begins slowly and speeds up with successive entries. In the piece’s mid-section, the juncture points between “A” music and “B” music are far less obvious than in the outer sections, since the tempi are much more closely aligned. But in terms of musical material, “A” and “B” are always quite separate from each other. In effect, the piece could be described as a pair of interwoven variation movements.

Joel Hoffman