

# Literature Forum

## The Choral World of David Conte: A Conversation with the Composer

by

David P. DeVenney

Attendees at the 2007 ACDA National Convention in Miami will be privileged to hear David Conte's *The Nine Muses*, set to a text by Minneapolis-based poet John Stirling Walker. This composition was commissioned by ACDA as the prestigious Raymond Brock Choral Composition for this convention. Conte has previously set Walker's texts, notably in the emotionally taut *Elegy for Matthew* (2001).

My friendship with San Francisco composer Conte (b. 1955) began over a decade ago, when we were introduced at a Chorus America conference. I had just performed my first Conte composition: the well-known and often heard *Invocation and Dance*, to a text from Whitman. Since then, I have performed much of his music, including most of the longer works. As music director of the Reading (PA.) Choral Society, I also commissioned his longest choral work to date, the three-movement *American Triptych* for chamber orchestra and choir.

David Conte is Professor of Composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he has taught for twenty years. He also directs the Conservatory Chorus, continuing his lifelong love of choral singing. A native of suburban Cleveland, Ohio, he earned a B.M. from

Bowling Green University and an M.F.A. and D.M.A. from Cornell University. Among his teachers have been Wallace DePue, Ruth Ingelfield, Karel Husa, Robert Palmer, Steven Stucky, and Thomas Sokol. Prior to teaching at SFCM, Conte held faculty appointments at Cornell, Keuka College, and Colgate University in addition to teaching at Interlochen. In 1982, he worked closely with Aaron Copland, preparing a study of Copland's musical sketches. He was one of the last of many young American composers and conductors to study with Nadia Boulanger in France, traveling there on a Fulbright Scholarship. He has also been a Ralph Vaughan Williams Fellow and an Aspen Music Festival Conducting Fellow.

Conte has been widely commissioned, and it was his many works for Chanticleer that perhaps cemented his early reputation as a composer for choirs. He has also

written for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus; the symphonies of Dayton, Oakland, and Stockton; the American Guild of Organists; the Sonoma City Opera; and the Gerbode Foundation. He has written songs for Barbara Bonney, Thomas Hampson, and Phyllis Bryn-Julson.

Conte's numerous choral works are published exclusively by E.C. Schirmer Music. His works include sacred and secular settings for all voicings (men's, women's, mixed, and unison chorus), both accompanied and unaccompanied. His other compositions include a number of instrumental and keyboard works, and four operas: *The Dreamers*, *The Gift of the Magi* (both available on an Arsis CD), *The Passion of Rita St. James*, and the *Firebird Motel*, which was recently released on CD. He collaborated with film composer Todd Boekelheide in writing the score for the 2005 documentary film *Ballets Russes* (recently available on DVD), which premiered at the Sundance Festival, and garnered wide acclaim from critics and audiences around the globe. He also composed the score for the PBS documentary "Orozco: Man of Fire," about the great Mexican painter Jose Clemente Orozco, which will be broadcast next fall on the "American Masters" series.

David Conte's compositional style is



David Conte

## The Nine Muses

### We Sing the Muses

#### I. Music

For the sake of all that sings  
Bring we mighty, glorious things:  
Things of marvel, things of splendor  
Things no mortal finds an end for.

#### II. Dance

For the sake of all that dances  
Will we gracious motion, glances  
Fervent, hearts on fire,  
All that lifts the body higher.

#### III. History

For the sake of all that marches  
Onward, forward, through the arches  
Of historical conditions,  
Make we light of prohibitions.

#### IV. Astronomy and Astrology

For the sake of heavenly cycles,  
Planets coursing under Michael's  
Brilliant, shining solar power,  
Say we: "Look, it is the hour."

#### V. Tragedy

For the sake of tragic tales  
That deepen, feelingly, travail's  
Strong hold on human minds,  
Write we forthwith much that binds.

#### VI. Sacred Poetry

Bound to virtue, bound to truth,  
Bound to beauty, yea, forsooth,  
For the sake of all that honors,  
Yield we up the Sacred.

#### VII. Comedy

Dawn pours out Her holy light  
Upon mankind in its plight.  
As we lighten mankind's load,  
For the sake of humor bold.

#### VIII. Epic Poetry

Epic grandeur is the lot  
We take upon our shoulders, not  
By dint, merely, of fashion,  
But imbued with daring passion.

#### IX. Lyric Poetry

For it is the courage-filled  
Who shall bring man's power, killed  
By theory, killed by lace,  
Into lyric beauty's forms,  
now filled with grace.

John Stirling Walker

fresh, although it lies firmly within the mainstream of choral composition in the United States. He relies on more-or-less conventional harmonic movement used in striking and often unexpected ways. His melodic style is reminiscent of Copland's, using intervals that often leap upwards in wide steps, before being tamed by shorter steps in the reverse direction. He often writes passages in a Renaissance point-of-imitation technique, although he can allow these passages to come to rest on an unresolved dissonance. Perhaps the most indelible mark of his compositional style is the rhythmic drive that permeates his music, particularly the faster passages. Frequently changing, asymmetrical meters often create a bouncy, jazzy palette that sounds particularly American to my ears. His orchestrations are unique, clever, and colorful; *American Triptych* (1999), for example, uses a quintet of saxophones for its core-sound—a very American solution complementing the three poems by e. e. cummings, Bliss Carmen, and W. S. Merwin. Conte's deeply touching *Elegy for Matthew* (2001), written to commemorate the murder of Matthew Shepherd, relies on flowing solo wind lines, hovering strings, and a harp to gently ruminate on the power of hate to overcome innocence.

An excellent summary of Conte's style was provided by Ben Finane in 2003,<sup>1</sup> reviewing the opera *Firebird Motel*:

Conte's score for five-piece chamber orchestra, singers, and tape is accessibly tonal and his American sound reveals a penchant for his Yankee predecessors—Barber, Gershwin and Sondheim among them.... His real strength lies in the ruminating orchestration that fills the space between the dialogue. He demonstrates a knack for convincingly avoiding cadences and prolonging musical phrases, which mightily sustains the tension of the [drama].

The following dialogue was conducted throughout the fall of 2006 over the course of several phone calls and e-mails.

**DEVENNEY** Your new composi-

tion *The Nine Muses* is the Raymond Brock commission for the 2007 Miami convention. Could you describe your process in composing this work?

**CONTE** First, let me say that I have attended every national convention of the ACDA since 1987, and I've made many dear friends through ACDA, and they have been the source and inspiration for so many of my choral works. Composing can be a lonely occupation, especially for someone as extroverted as I am, and I really do hold in my mind these many musical friends and their ensembles as I'm doing my solitary work. And during the composition of *The Nine Muses*, I have certainly enjoyed and benefited from being in close contact with Mike Scheibe and the University of Miami Chorale, who will present the premiere at our convention.

It took me a long time to figure out what kind of work would best honor this commission. For a time, I considered writing a piece called *In Time of War* based on several war poems, and this is a work that I do want to write someday. But ultimately for this occasion, I became more compelled to write a work about the transfiguring power of art. I turned for a text to my frequent collaborator, the poet John Stirling Walker, who had written the texts for my works *Elegy for Matthew* in memory of Matthew Shepard, and *September Sun*, a 9/11 memorial piece.

John's poem is in nine stanzas; one for each Muse. The challenge was to compose a single-movement work, lasting about fifteen minutes that, like the poem, holds together as one thought from beginning to end. One way I was able to achieve variety and flow was to create music for each Muse by contrasting choral textures. For example; eight-part mixed chorus for the Muses of Music and Dance; men's chorus for History; women's chorus for Astronomy and Astrology; mezzo soloist for Tragedy; soprano for sacred poetry; tenor solo for Comedy; and a bass for Epic Poetry.

I do ultimately want to do a version for orchestra and chorus, but for this convention performance, I decided to arrange the work for piano four-hands and two percussionists, which is a small ensemble that can also project the work's character.

I used this solution for my *Invocation and Dance*, which has made that work more accessible.

**DEVENNEY** I know that you and I had this same discussion when you were revising *American Triptych* for a performance, by my Concert Choir, reducing the larger group to four-hand piano, percussion, and saxophone solo.

**CONTE** Yes, I remember. It means that people whose singers might be able to sing the piece, but who may not have access to the caliber of wind player at their college or in their community, who can perform the piece. And the smaller orchestration still preserves some of the color of the larger.

**DEVENNEY** So much of your catalog is music for choir, although I don't mean to downplay the importance of your operas, instrumental and keyboard works. Why do you write so much for choir? What is it that attracts you to our medium?

**CONTE** One of my favorite quotes is Kodály's observation in one of his sight-singing texts: the health of a musical culture is dependent upon the cultivation of the singing of the youth of that culture. I experience all music as connected to the breath, so writing for voices is the most natural and organic way for me to connect with my musical ideas. The unique character of each musical culture grows out of its spoken language, so working with texts connects one deeply to the very soul of one's culture. I am also greatly attracted to the social aspect of choral music making. Because it is often the province of amateurs, writing choral music keeps a composer honest and in touch with a wide variety of people. I agree completely with Randall Thompson, who points out that many of the greatest composers' greatest works are choral, and they can all be sung by amateurs. He adds that it would be a terrible indictment of contemporary schools of composition, if they fail to do what their forebears did so well, which is a responsibility that I take very seriously.

I have been around choral singing my entire life. As a little boy, I attended rehearsals of Robert Shaw and the

Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, where my mother was a singer. I was lucky to be a part of a truly outstanding public school music program in Lakewood, Ohio, led by B. Neil Davis, who was a very important mentor. At Bowling Green, composing for Wallace DePue and singing under Dick Mathey were important. My three years with Nadia Boulanger in Paris included much choral singing in her classes. At graduate school at Cornell, my mentor Thomas Sokol gave me the opportunity to both conduct and compose for all the ensembles there. Perhaps most importantly, for the past twenty years I've been having a conversation about the art of choral music with my composer friends Byron Adams, Robert Kyr, and Conrad Susa, among many others, and with the entire staff of my very supportive publisher, E.C. Schirmer.

**DEVENNEY** That reminds me of another interview I once read. Theodore Thomas, the first great American orchestral conductor in the nineteenth century, and who founded the Chicago Symphony, was once asked what America should do to promote the "high art" of music in this country, and his response was that the first thing that should happen was that every school kid should be taught how to sing

– this in an era where there were literally no public school music programs.

**CONTE** Another large part of the appeal of choral singing is that it involves text and the union of music and words. The character of any culture's music comes from its spoken language. Composers are drawn to set words, and maybe that's not just specifically choral; but to set words is in some ways the most organically connected to the culture, and that's the impulse behind it. I think that, for example, Beethoven's instrumental music is as great as it is in part because he did also write choral music.

Choral music always seems to have a second-class existence in the United States, partly because of its association with amateurs. But you look at something like the Brahms's *Requiem* and it's filled with such depth, structure, and emotion. And then you realize that Brahms knew the voice and understood that the singer has to know where the next note is coming from. They don't just push down the key or put their finger on the fret. That's what I mean when I say that writing for chorus keeps one honest: One can't just write anything. One has to really hear it, and I think [writing for chorus] protects the composer from coming to

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rely on abstract, intellectual constructs. You have to write real music. Randall Thompson also wrote somewhere that writing for unaccompanied choir will expose every flaw in your technique! If someone can't write a good choral piece, then, quite frankly, I'm not sure the rest of their music will be that good.

**DEVENNEY** I remember last summer at the Chorus America conference in Washington, D.C., Knight Kippingger gave a keynote speech in which he talked about choral music as the embodiment of community. That speech has since appeared in print,<sup>2</sup> and in it he says that choral music is "the only kind of music that connects people in the most profound ways." It sounds like you agree with that!

Let's talk about texts: How do you find a text to set? How do you know when you've found one that you can use? And how do you work with one once you have a good one?

**CONTE** I look for many things in a text: clear imagery; short lines; many active verbs, especially in the imperative tense, which conjures up to me a group of people expressing something; rhythm, color, and meter, of course.

One just seems to know when a text is right. Stravinsky, when asked if he were going to accept such and such commission, answered: "I can't; it doesn't make my mouth water." I look for texts that make my mouth water.

I work until I can recite my text aloud from memory from beginning to end before writing a note. I find this ensures that I have internalized the rhythm, meter, tone, and shape of the text in the most organic way.

Then I ask myself a series of questions: Who is the speaker of the text? To whom are they speaking? Do they go through any changes in the course of the text? What is the time/place/mood/emotional state of the speaker? I often try to imagine what kind of music would be required if the scene described in a text were a scene in a film. This all influences the choice of tempo, meter, tonality, texture, and form.

**DEVENNEY** What makes a text pecu-

liarily suited to choral utterance? What makes it right for a group to sing, rather than a soloist in a song?

**CONTE** The imperative tense is particularly choral, since it conjures up a group of people, as a command; also those texts that use the first person plural. There are also some texts that are really sung by a community of voices, gathering to make a statement. It's interesting, for example, with Whitman who is so popular [as the poet-of-choice for American composers seeking an appropriate text] and how he frequently used "I." I don't know if I heard this somewhere, or if I coined it, but it is what I call the "Choral 'I.'" Everyone in the chorus is thinking about themselves, but it is all [uttered] together.

**DEVENNEY** Do you think that's why so many American composers have set Whitman?

**CONTE** I do, but I also think that it is because the tone of the poetry is so visionary. He also has fairly short phrases which may be repeated, and that is another aspect that makes them appropriate for choral singers. John Stirling Walker does the same thing, for example in *Elegy for Matthew*, that opening "Memory" which I have the choir sing several times: It becomes quite powerful through its repetition by the group. Some disagree about word repetition, of course, but Britten, Purcell, and Handel all do this to great effect.

It's often difficult today, as you and I have talked about before, to find modern poetry that has a choral character. So much of modern poetry is written for the individual and from the individual's perspective. There is little that resonates "publicly" like texts taken from the Bible, Shakespeare, John Dryden, or Whitman and others. That is a real problem and a challenge when trying to write music for today's audiences that reflects today's world. And of course, not all poetry needs music or accommodates it, including some of my favorite poets.

**DEVENNEY** What advice do you have for aspiring choral composers?

**CONTE** I would say that one should be

on both sides of the podium, as a conductor and singer. One should master the piano as well as possible, for it is very difficult to fully internalize the relationship between melody, harmony, rhythm, phrase structure and form without playing a harmonic instrument. Above all, memorize as much music as you can, because the ability to control the flow of ideas in time depends on the well-developed memory. So much in our culture now works against the training of memory, and music is one discipline which requires it.

I work at the piano until I have a long passage memorized. Then I go to the computer and write it down. Once I've done that, I take it back to the piano and sing each part while playing the other parts at the keyboard. I make revisions, and then repeat this process. I strongly advocate to young composers that they sing out loud every note that they write for choir: it's the only way to make sure that the notes fit, that it is clear how one thing comes after another in the right way.

The longer I work at composing, the more I experience it as simply listening for what should come next—almost like taking a dictation. This puts the composer in the position to receive the spiritual impulse behind all creative activity, and to be the vessel through which music can pass.

**DEVENNEY** David, it's been great to talk with you again. Who knows when we might have had a chance to talk again at this length! It's always a pleasure.

**CONTE** And for me, David.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> <<http://classicstoday.com>,> review dated November 28, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> "We Sing and We're Proud!" *The Voice of Chorus America* (30/1, Fall, 2006), 40.



Choral Works by David Conte  
(all publications by E.C. Schirmer Music Company, Boston)

**SATB**

|   |
|---|
| <i>Ave Maria</i> , #4729, (SATB), [Marian Festival], \$1.45   |
| <i>Candles in the Wilderness</i> (Score and parts), #5970, (SATB chorus & chamber orch), [Secular], (Rental)                    |
| <i>Candles in the Wilderness</i> , #5271, (SATB, Piano), [Secular], \$2.05  |
| <i>Cantate Domino</i> , #4184, (SATB/SATB), [Psalm], \$3.10   |
| <i>Celia Singing</i> , #5182, (SATB), [Secular], \$1.45   |
| <i>Charm Me Asleep</i> , #4835, (SATB), [Secular], \$2.05   |
| <i>Christmas Intrada</i> , #5166, (SATB, Organ or Piano 4-hands), [Christmas], \$3.10   |
| <i>Composer, The</i> , #6076, (SATB), [Secular], \$2.50   |
| <i>Elegy for Matthew</i> (Full Score and Parts), #5469, (SATB or TTBB and Orchestra), (Score and parts on rental)               |
| <i>Elegy for Matthew</i> , #5470, (SATB, Piano or Orchestra), [Memorial], (Score and parts on rental), \$3.70                   |
| <i>Great Spirit of Love, The</i> , #5108, (SATB, Piano), [Secular], \$2.05  |
| <i>Hosanna</i> , #4188, (SATB), [Palm Sunday], \$2.05   |
| <i>In Praise of Music</i> , #4973, (SATB), [Secular], \$9.75  |
| <i>Invocation and Dance</i> (Vers. II SATB) (Full Score), #4378A, (SATB, Piano or Orchestra), \$30.25                           |
| <i>Invocation and Dance</i> , #4378, (SATB, Piano or Orchestra), [Secular], (Orchestral parts on rental), \$5.10                |
| <i>Journey, The</i> {Cantata from The Dreamers} (Piano/Vocal Score), #5969, (Soli, SATB & Chamber Orchestra), [Secular], \$7.60 |
| <i>Journey, The</i> (Score and parts), #5971, (Soli, SATB, Chamber Orchestra), [Secular], (Rent Available)                      |
| <i>Nunc Dimittis</i> (Now Let Thy Servant Depart in Peace), #6045, (SATB, organ), [Canticle], \$2.05                            |
| <i>Prayer of St. Teresa</i> , #5111, (SATB, Organ), [General], \$1.75   |
| <i>O Magnum Mysterium</i> , #5888, (SSATB), [Christmas], \$2.05   |
| <i>O Sun</i> (from "September Sun"), #6086, (SATB (divisi)), [Memorial], \$3.10   |
| <i>Psalms 121</i> , #4868, (SATB, Organ), [Psalm], \$2.50   |
| <i>September Sun</i> (choral score), #6085, (SATB [divisi], piano), [Memorial], \$9.75  |
| <i>September Sun</i> (Full Score), #6083, (SATB (divisi) & string orchestra), [Memorial], \$45.00                               |
| <i>September Sun</i> (string set: 3-3-2-1-1), #6084, (SATB (divisi) & string orchestra), [Memorial], \$80.00                    |
| <i>Set Me as a Seal</i> , #4272, (SATB, Organ), [Wedding], \$2.05   |
| <i>Silent Night</i> , #4562, (S Solo, SATB & Descant), [Christmas], \$1.75  |
| <i>Snow Lay on the Ground, The</i> , #6419, (SATB, harp & keyboard), [Christmas], \$2.05  |
| <i>Stable-lamp Is Lighted, A</i> , #5332, (SATB, kbd), [Christmas], \$3.10  |
| <i>Three Sacred Pieces: No. 1. Thou, O Lord</i> , #4193, (SATB & Piano), [Psalm], \$1.75  |

**Choral Works by David Conte**  
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*Three Sacred Pieces: No. 2. O God, Thou Hast Been Our Refuge*, #4189, (SATB & Piano), [Psalm], \$2.05

*Three Sacred Pieces: No. 3. Canticle*, #4180, (SATB, piano 4- hands), [General], \$3.10

*Two Hymns in Honor of the Blessed Sacrament: O Salutaris hostia; Tantum Ergo*, #6598, (SATB unaccompanied), [Communion], \$2.05

*Valediction*, #4608, (SATB & kbd), [General], \$2.05

*Waking, The*, #4182, (SATB, Piano), [Secular], \$3.70

**SSAA**

*Candles in the Wilderness*, (from *The Dreamers*) #5965, (SSAA, Piano), [Secular], \$2.05

*Christmas Intrada*, #5168, (SSAA, 4-Hand Piano), [Christmas], \$3.10

*Great Spirit of Love, The*, #5110, (SSAA, Piano), [Secular], \$2.05

*Hope Carol, A*, #6605, (SSAA & piano), [General], \$2.05

*Hosanna*, #4187, (SSAA), [Palm Sunday], \$2.05

*In Praise of Music*, #4742, (SSA & Piano), [Secular], \$6.90

*Milky Way, The* (from *The Dreamers*) #5966, (SA, piano), [Secular], \$1.45

*Snow Lay on the Ground, The*, #6420, (SSAA, harp & keyboard), [Christmas], \$2.05

*Stable-lamp is Lighted, A*, #5247, (SSAA, kbd), [Christmas], \$3.10

**TTBB**

*Candles in the Wilderness*, (from *The Dreamers*) #5967, (TTBB, piano), [Secular], \$2.05

*Carmina Juventutis* (Songs of Youth), #4906, (TTBB, 4-Hand Piano), [Secular], \$11.00

*Christmas Intrada*, #5169, (TTBB, 4-Hand Piano), [Christmas], \$3.10

*Drinking Song* (Vinum bonum) from "Carmina Juventutis", #6523, (TTBB & piano 4-hands), [Secular], \$2.50

*Elegy for Matthew*, #5471, (TTBB, Piano or Orchestra), [Memorial], (Score and parts on rental), \$3.10

*Eos* (Choral score), #5690, (TB soli, TTBB, piano or orchestra), [Secular], (Score & parts on rental only), \$6.90

*Eos* (Full score), #5691, (TB soli, TTBB, piano or orchestra)

*Good-bye My Fancy!*, #4765, (TTBB, S Saxophone), [Memorial], \$3.10

*Great Spirit of Love, The*, #5109, (TTBB, Piano), [Secular], \$2.05

*Hymn to the Nativity* (piano/vocal score), #4271, (S solo, TTBB, chamber orchestra), [Christmas], (Full score & instrumental parts on rental), \$4.40

*Invocation and Dance* (Vers. II Piano) (2 Scores), #4179Q, (TTBB, Piano or Orchestra), [Secular], \$35.30

*Invocation and Dance: Dance* (chorus part), #4179B, (TTBB, Piano or Orchestra), [Secular], \$2.50

*Requiem Triptych*, #4190, (TTBB, Piano), [Requiem], \$8.80

*Snow Lay on the Ground, The*, #6421, (TTBB, harp & keyboard), [Christmas], \$2.05

Choral Works by David Conte  
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*Stable-lamp Is Lighted, A*, #5399, (TTBB, kbd), [Christmas], \$3.10

*Three Sacred Pieces: No. 3. Canticle*, #4180, (SATB, piano 4- hands), [General], \$3.10

### Solo Vocal

*Alleluia*, #4183, (Medium Voice, Piano), \$5.30

*Candles in the Wilderness*, #5193, (Solo Voice, Piano), \$6.90

*Milky Way, The* #5968, (Solo voice & piano), [Secular], \$2.50

*Everyone Sang*, #5333, (4 Songs for Baritone, Piano), [Secular], \$15.15

*Sexton Songs*, #5635, (5 songs for Soprano and Piano), [Secular], \$22.50

*Songs of Consolation*, #5317, (Soprano & organ), [Memorial], \$12.65

*Stable-lamp Is Lighted, A*, #5388, (Medium Voice, kbd), [Christmas], \$10.35

### Opera

*Dreamers, The* (Piano/Vocal Score), #5219, (Opera), \$63.00

*Firebird Motel*, (Piano/choral score), #6269, (Full score & parts on rental only) \$20.45

*Gift of the Magi, The* (Piano/Vocal Score), #5248, (Opera), \$63.00

### Instrumental

*Antiphon* (Score and Parts), #4561, (2 Trumpets, 2 Trombones, Organ), \$18.25

*Fantasy for Piano*, #4384, (Piano Solo), \$11.50

*Marian Variations*, #6535, (Harp solo), \$10.00

*Meditation on Silent Night*, #4953, (Organ), \$7.60

*Of a Summer Evening*, #4385, (Guitar Duo), \$17.50

*Pastorale and Toccata*, #4563, (Organ), [Secular], \$12.50

*Piano Quintet* (Full Score), #5472, (Piano and String Quartet), \$22.70

*Prelude and Fugue*, #6216, (Organ solo), [General], \$10.10

*Recollection* (Soliloquy No. 2), #5963, (Organ), \$6.25

*Soliloquy*, #5149, (Organ), \$6.00

*Sonatine*, #4555, (Piano), \$12.60

### Orchestra

*Fantasy for Orchestra*

*A Copland Portrait*

*Of A Summer Evening* (Double-orchestra)

*The Masque of the Red Death*