A Conversation with David Conte
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American composer David Conte (b. 1955) was born in Ohio and educated at Bowling Green State University and Cornell University. The recipient of a Fulbright Grant to Paris, he was also one of the last students of Nadia Boulanger. Conte lived and worked with Aaron Copland in the early 1980s while preparing research on Copland's sketches. In 1985 Conte joined the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he is currently Professor of Composition and Chair of the Composition Department. At the SF Conservatory, he has overseen a thriving composition training program that draws gifted students from across the country.
Conte's catalog of music is published by E. C. Schirmer Music Company and includes compositions in nearly all genres, including seven operas, many works for chorus and voices, pieces for various instrumental forces, and several documentary film scores. While Conte is best-known for his choral and vocal music, in recent years he has written a number of new instrumental works. The release on Albany Records of a new CD of his instrumental music was the impetus for a conversation with him about his work.

Q: Though you have written various instrumental pieces over the years, unquestionably the bulk of your output consists of music for the voice (opera, choral, vocal). In the last decade you've written a number of large-scale new instrumental works (such as the three chamber pieces on the Albany CD). I assume that this was a conscious decision to focus on writing these pieces. What was your motivation for doing this?

A: It's true that my catalog of works has more vocal music than instrumental. I was bitten by the choral "bug" early, in that among my first musical experiences was attending rehearsals of Robert Shaw's Cleveland Orchestra Chorus with my mother, who sang in the Chorus, and also because of the superb public school choral program led by my mentor B. Neil Davis in Lakewood, Ohio, where I grew up. But having taught at the San Francisco Conservatory for so many years, where I have many outstanding instrumental colleagues, I quite naturally have had opportunities to provide pieces for them, opportunities that I decided to take conscious advantage of in recent years. My 30 years of teaching of young composers

also taught me that the rhetorical devices of instrumental composition grow out of spoken language and the conventions of dramatic story telling, and I knew that one would inform the other. I've always found that writing for the voice keeps one in touch with the human breath, resulting in pieces that truly "breathe," and whose form evolves naturally. I knew that all my experience in writing for the voice would make my instrumental music better. Regarding the reverse, I think it is in the area of opera in particular that becoming more expert in writing instrumental music really pays off. One of the main differences between opera and musical theater is that in opera the orchestra is always forwarding the story line in a deep way; commenting on it, animating it. It's often giving the audience information that is not overtly expressed through what the characters are singing. So, in opera, one is dealing with both at the same time in a unique way.

Q: In what ways do you approach writing texted and non-texted pieces differently?

A: I have trained myself to go through a rather elaborate process before setting a text for chorus or for an art song, a process that allows me, once I start to compose, to write quickly. Walter Piston said that composing a good song was more like painting with watercolors than with oils. I find this to be true. First, I memorize the text so I can recite it aloud for others in such a way that the "scene" of the text comes alive, much in the way an actor would treat a soliloquy in a play. By doing this, I internalize the "rise and fall" of the text, its inflections, its energy curve, the way its unique colors and rhythms "hang in the air," as if it were a piece of music itself. I ask myself: Who is speaking, and to whom? Who is this person in this moment of his or her existence? Then, the selecting of every element of music—the tempo, tonality, melody, harmony, meter and rhythm, and texture—is chosen to illuminate the "scene" of the text. I've found that this allows the music to "beam through" the words, and to make the meaning and experience of the words something more than the words themselves. For me, this is the only reason to set words to music. With a text, one is always writing "character-driven" music. In composing instrumental music, the dramatic line of the piece is determined by the musical ideas themselves. The power of expression in instrumental music is created by the unity of form and content; does the character of the idea match where we are in the form? When I figured this out many years ago, I was able to solve the problem for myself of "getting stuck." The experience of composing for me is primarily about one thing: hearing what should come next. If I ever get

stuck, I know it's because I don't yet have the right character of a musical idea for where I am in the form. This is the art of rhetoric, something no longer systematically taught, but something that was foundational in creating previous "schools" of composition, which in turn lead to the creation of masterpieces. Of course in a piece with text, this forward unfolding is driven by the narrative of the text. In instrumental music, it is driven by the narrative contained in the musical materials themselves.

Q: I know some composers who have specialized in instrumental music find that writing music with text is a much harder process. The reverse is also true. Do you see any divide of that sort?

A: Well, again, one informs the other. I would say that composers who have trouble setting texts only need to sing more. A lack of singing in these times is understandable, though regrettable, given the lack of emphasis on singing that has plagued our music education culture for some time. Can one really imagine any of the great composers of the past not being able to sing? In this age of technology, where the electricity of MIDI is replacing the actual physical mastery of performing skills, composing music for the voice keeps the composer connected to the breath. Given that from about 900 to 1700 our Western canon of music is primarily choral, it does seem strange that our composition pedagogy is not built on acquiring choral technique. Writing an a cappella choral piece will show the level of a composer's technique more quickly than any other medium, in my experience. If a more experienced vocal composer has trouble writing without text, I find that it is related directly to how much instrumental music one knows by heart. It's also hard to imagine that if a composer had played from memory even one Beethoven sonata that they wouldn't intuitively understand a great deal about how a purely instrumental piece naturally unfolds. This is another way of saying that a composer's ability to write for different mediums is a direct expression of their musicianship, which ideally should be both broad and deep.

Q: What is your opinion about both specialization as a composer and typecasting? You clearly have specialized (and developed a reputation) for your music involving voice. I know some composers who have a kneejerk reaction to anything that seems to them like typecasting—if they have a lot of success in choral music, for example, they'll immediately and defensively point out that they do also write instrumental music. And yet I know others who are perfectly happy to work well and successfully in a single genre or

two.

A: Well, unfortunately, there is a prejudice against vocal music in our culture. Because it is largely the province of amateurs, it is not taken as seriously. It's very compelling to consider that many of the 19th century's greatest composers' greatest works are choral, and they can all be sung by amateurs. Before Brahms wrote his Requiem, he had composed over 65 shorter choral pieces. The composing of those pieces contributed richly to his mastery of symphony and chamber music. So he didn't "specialize;" he simply was a deep musician who wrote great music, no matter what the medium. I've always found it revealing that, for example, radio stations have special rules about limiting the amount of vocal music that is broadcast. This may be because one can't project one's own reactions onto vocal music in the same way as instrumental music, given that there is always a story being told, and that it takes another level of comprehension to understand a work with text. Opera is an exception, in that it requires a composer to write both instrumental and vocal music, and, indeed, to integrate the two.

Q: What do you look for when choosing a text? Do you have (like almost every composer I know) a file of texts that you hold onto for future possibilities? Or do you begin the hunt anew for each project? How picky are you about text choices—particularly in the context of a commission where somebody else's suggestions may be given to you?

A: I think many composers experienced in setting text will agree that one immediately knows a good text for music when one first reads it. For me, the imperative mood—"Praise; Go; Seek," etc.—suggests a heightened intention that invites singing. Vivid language, rhythm and meter, and clear images pull music out. I like to think of texts for music as being like rocks and water. If you pour water on some kinds of rocks, it slides right off; on others—those more porous—the water is absorbed. There are great texts that don't need music, and great texts that do, and quite ordinary texts that are elevated by music, and texts that aren't really worthy of music. I feel about texts the way Stravinsky did about accepting commissions. He would say: "I can't accept this commission; it doesn't make my mouth water." If a text makes my mouth water, I know I can set it. I do indeed save up files of texts, and I am always looking.

Q: You've written pieces to all kinds of texts—liturgical Latin, poetry

centuries old, and also collaborations with living authors. This latter category also includes some pieces that were written in direct response to contemporary events: such as *Elegy for Matthew* (the Matthew Shepard murder) and *September Sun* (September 11, 2001). Does your approach to the music change at all depending on whether you are working with a living collaborator (and a "living subject") as opposed to setting something from the far past?

A: I always strive to serve the text and the poet of whatever text I'm setting. If I'm setting a text of Christina Rossetti, she is as alive to me as working with any living poet or librettist. The occasional pieces that you mention were written because of my special collaboration with one then living writer, John Stirling Walker, with whom I wrote a dozen works, including three stage works. We had a mutual commitment, going back to our student days together at Cornell, to create works of art in the spirit of contributing to the transformation of humanity—a lofty goal, to be sure, but there it is. For us, this included commenting upon some of the pressing matters of our time, including world events. We were convinced that art which expresses a certain consciousness can be transformative for those who have contact with it. This is my goal for my own music. I try to put "my heart on the page" in such a way that requires performers and listeners to enter into a concentration of feeling and thinking that leaves them changed. This is what contact with the great works of others has done for me.
In my operas, I've worked with four different librettists, all of whom brought their unique personalities and talents to our respective projects. As far as my approach is concerned, again, I always try to put myself in an "object" relation to the "subject" of the text and poet, which means that I am serving their idea.

Q: You've been a faculty member for many years at the San Francisco Conservatory and have in that capacity overseen a large composition program. How has teaching impacted your own work as a composer?

A: A teacher is the best student; he needs to be. I've learned an enormous amount from my students. First, teaching others requires one to organize one's knowledge in order to be helpful. When a young composer has a problem, I ask myself: Do I have or have I had this problem? If so, how did I solve it? If I've not had that problem, what is in my background and training that has enabled me to avoid it? Through teaching I've gained a

solid understanding of how my own training has allowed me to do what I do, and how to best help others do what they want to do, and has enabled me to compose with greater fluency. I'm also inspired by my students' work. One of the reasons I decided to write more instrumental music in recent years was because many of my students were turning out such fine work in these genres, and it became clear to me that I had things to say myself through the mediums of chamber music and orchestral music. I also felt that I owed it to my students as a teacher to demonstrate skill in all areas of composition. It helped that I had extraordinary teachers, the most influential being Nadia Boulanger for three years, but also my teachers Wallace DePue, Karel Husa, and Steven Stucky. The musicologist William Austin taught me above all to examine how my musical habits informed my creative work. I also learned a great deal from my colleague the late Conrad Susa, with whom I was very close after having finished my formal education, but to whom I showed every work I wrote between 1986 and 1996. Because he was sympathetic to my basic style and language, and because we shared similar backgrounds as pianists and choral singers, he was an ideal mentor.

Q: None of your own formal education was on the West Coast, but that's where you've settled. While I know your compositions take you many places, your primary teaching career has been largely focused in San Francisco. Do you feel a sense of geographical identity behind the Conservatory, the way you teach, or the kinds of students who choose to come there to study composition?

A: Taking into account my answer to your last question, I can say that my mentorship with Conrad Susa did constitute an important part of my education, and that was in San Francisco. As we were not only friends but teaching colleagues for 25 years, we had the advantage of sharing ideas about our creative work as well as pedagogy. By the way, I would like to say here that I consider Conrad to be the most important American composer of choral music and opera in the last third of the 20th century. Conrad grew up one state over from me in Pennsylvania, and was educated there and in New York. We talked a great deal about San Francisco, and after acknowledging our debt to the East Coast and Europe, we agreed that we both would not have been able to write our music had we not settled in San Francisco. Why? For me, having the background of rigor that the "old world" provided, combined with the freedom and openness of San Francisco, was the ideal combination. There is always the feeling in San

Francisco that everyone is on some kind of personal adventure, seeking to know themselves more deeply, more completely. In addition, the amount and quality of music making in the Bay Area given its size is I think unequaled anywhere in the United States. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive in the Bay Area in the best sense of that word; one can get things done there. Also, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music is one of the least political institutions that I've ever known. It is a place about supporting everyone to do their best work.

Q: I think it would be fair to say that while your music has a personal and "contemporary" sound, your language is rooted in traditional musical principles: modal and tonal harmony, counterpoint, and the like. Is this partially a product of your own training (with Boulanger and others) and interests? Was there ever a point in your development as a composer where you either explored or had interest in other sorts of writing?

A: I can only write what I hear, which is based on what I know. For me, the great masterworks, including those of the 20th century, remain vast and bottomless in their lessons and ability to inspire. When I went to Boulanger when I was 19, I saw immediately that I was predisposed toward what I would call a "Franco-Russian" approach to the musical language, one that would also be filtered through the American school that she had been instrumental in creating. I add to this popular music, whose influence I find inescapable and nourishing. When composing a new work, I always feel that the limits of my musicianship are being tested: how much can I hear, remember, make accountable to what has just come before or after, as the piece is unfolding? I'm always encouraging my students to read the biographies or autobiographies of composers they want to emulate. I know from my study, and also through personal knowledge, for example, having known Copland very well, that I have developed my habits along the lines of my favorite composers, such as Bach, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Vaughan Williams, Ravel, Poulenc, and Copland. Continuing to master what these composers and so many others have to teach me seems to be enough for this lifetime.

Q: The three recent chamber pieces on the Albany CD also I think make this point as well: one finds things like key signatures, sonata-form, fugue, chaconne, etc. I assume that you see both continued value and imaginative musical possibility in these traditional elements. As a teacher, do you see interest as well in younger generations in these same principles? In the

summers, you teach at the European American Music Alliance in Paris, which is known for its "post-Boulanger" approach to providing students with a strong grounding in traditional musical principles.

A: I'm very much of the mind that it's best to encounter traditions before "countering" them. It is understandable that the young want to assert their individuality, but I've always found that the most talented composers want to learn the traditional forms. Boulanger said of Bach: "He doesn't submit to conventions; he chooses them, and then transcends them." We have to remember that the root of the word "original" is "origins." One isn't original by choice. Boulanger gave the best advice to young composers: "First, make a list of the music you love. Second, learn it by heart. Third, when composing, never avoid the obvious." I'm privileged to teach at EAMA in Paris, where I have wonderful students who are self-selecting in their commitment to these ideals. I find this approach helps young composers in our pluralistic musical culture transcend the dominating tendency to become more like archeological "assemblers" of various devices, gestures, and sound colors, and less like composers of true personality who have a grasp of rhetorical traction that makes for compelling music.

Q: Do you think there is value for a young composer in having any kind of rebellious relationship with tradition? Is it important to be conscious of actively trying to find one's own voice? Or does one simply write the music and let others worry about how to categorize it?

A: Again, to quote Boulanger regarding the question of personal voice: "True personality in music is revealed only through the deep knowledge of the personalities of others." The quickest way to find out what a composer is made of is to learn how much music they know and how deeply they know it. I am not by nature a rebel. We know that some composers, Ives, for example, in Virgil Thomson's words, "gave a kick in the pants to the profession;" in other words, freeing up academic habits and expectations; thinking "outside the box." I think the achievements of the "pioneers" in music are continually undergoing revision with the perspective of time. There was no more original or rebellious composer than Debussy, and he had the most elaborate formal and technical training of any composer I can think of. There seems to be a lesson in that. I personally identify with Ravel, who said something like: "There are two ways to get air into a room. One is by throwing a brick through the window; the other is by opening the window. The first is revolution; the second evolution. I prefer the second."

Q: You've written much music (solo pieces as well as accompaniments in choral and vocal works) that involves the organ, an instrument that is often felt to be tricky for the non-organist composer. I've know you've had a long collaborative relationship with organist David Higgs, and he features on the "Music for Chorus and Organ" CD. How did you come to be comfortable writing for organ?

A: Well, we know that throughout history certain performers have been of special inspiration to composers. One thinks of Joachim for Brahms and Dushkin for Stravinsky. The organist David Higgs has been that for me. During our time together in San Francisco from 1988–92, we worked very closely, and he encouraged me to compose for the organ. He gave me two pieces of invaluable advice before I wrote my first organ piece: first, the organ is a wind instrument, not a percussion instrument like the piano; and second, when composing pedal parts think as if you were writing for a timpanist, with the alternating feet working like two sticks in the hands. I heard David play dozens of concerts in those years, and I used to sit in the hall or church and advise him on how various registrations were working in the room, which was an invaluable education. Before knowing David, my activities in the choral world were more confined to universities and community groups; he introduced me to the world of church music, especially in the United States and England. It's not an exaggeration to say that at least a third of my work since knowing him has been as a direct result of our association, for which I am eternally grateful.

Q: While you've been primarily a composer for a long time, you have also maintained a degree of activity as a choral conductor, including directing the chorus at the conservatory. I imagine, given your many other activities and conservatory duties, that you continue to do this by choice. What does staying active with conducting choral repertoire mean for you as a composer?

A: Being a choral conductor has made me a better composer and a better composition teacher. I just completed 14 years as conductor of the San Francisco Conservatory Chorus, an ensemble that with the support of several colleagues I founded in 1999. The Conservatory felt that it was important that every student experience choral singing as a foundation for general musicianship. Also, the Chorus serves as a laboratory for our student composers to write for. I supervise every other year a Choral

Composition Competition for our students, which has resulted in over 100 new choral pieces, half a dozen of which have been published. The choral program at the Conservatory is now under the supervision of my brilliant colleague Ragnar Bohlin, who is also the conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus and the newly formed professional choir Cappella SF. We recently made a CD together of music by Conrad Susa and me, which will be released in 2016.

Q: You've written operas that range from a full evening work (*The Dreamers*) to those with more chamber dimensions. Are you enthusiastic about the specific possibilities of chamber opera? I know many composers write them out of practicality (since commissions and productions for large-scale operas are few and far between.) Yet, to grossly simply, I've often seen two kinds of chamber operas: those that are really "compromised grand operas" just shrunk down to fit the limited budget and performance context of chamber opera. Then there are those that really take advantage of what is possible in the chamber opera medium (shorter duration, smaller theater, instrumental forces, casts, etc.) and the different kinds of stories that can be told in that context. Something like *The Gift of the Magi* seems ideal for a chamber opera, since the core of the story itself has such intimacy to it.

A: For me, opera is both the most satisfying and the most difficult medium to work in. I've written seven, including three one-act chamber operas. I'm lucky to have commercially available recordings of two of them: *The Gift of the Magi* and *Firebird Motel* with a third, *America Tropical*, on the way. *Magi* is so far the only opera with real "legs;" it has had over 25 productions in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. In order to make this opera even more accessible, I spent the last two years doing a reduced orchestration, from 14 instruments to 7. There's no question that some stories lend themselves to a more intimate setting, and *Magi* is one such story. But when a work is strong, it can make its effect in both contexts. One thinks of the fuller orchestral versions of *Sweeney Todd* and the version for eight instruments. I am ready to write another full-length opera, and have been working for quite a few years to develop several different projects. The question of rights for literary properties is always a challenge. Incidentally, it seems to me that even with all of the activity and interest and good will in the commissioning of new opera, our country has yet to develop a true "school" of opera. The reasons for this are many and complex. I recognize that the idea of developing a school of anything, be it

choral music, symphony, or opera, is not something that is on many people's radar. But for me, a culture can't have a school without having a unified view of itself, and more importantly, without a true school there can be no masterpieces. I confess that this question is one that lives with me daily, and one that I am determined to address in my own work. And personally, the thing that is most enlarging about writing an opera is that one has to become all the people that one is writing about, and that requires a level of self-examination that is very rewarding.

Q: Are there certain "bucket list" future projects that you'd really like to tackle?

A: As I look back on my life of composing, I see that opportunities for projects have presented themselves in an organic way, and grew out of deep personal relationships with individual performers, ensembles, and institutions. I recently had my first experience working with wind ensemble with the superb U. S. Marine Band and am working with them on future projects. As I mentioned in the previous question, I continue to prepare myself to write another large scale opera. I've also never written a concerto, though I'm about to begin work on a violin concerto for Ariana Kim and the Cornell University Orchestra. I also want to write an organ concerto, and I would love to contribute another work to the repertory of extended works for chorus and orchestra, in addition to the half dozen I've composed. I greatly enjoyed my two films; the documentaries *Ballets Russes* and *Orozco: Man of Fire* for PBS. Writing music for film is a completely natural activity for me, and I'd love to do more, though of course it's very rare for any composer nowadays to straddle the two worlds of film and concert music. Teaching classes in film music at the Conservatory keeps my passion for composing for film alive, and I would jump at the chance to do another film. There is for me a strong connection between the technique of writing for film and for opera, and again, the two inform each other. The challenge I see today in composing opera is to transcend the tendency to compose more than a sung screenplay, in that music has to both animate and drive the story, not just accompany it. All of these "bucket list" projects are attractive to me for what they offer in expanding my work and activity into all areas of the art of composition, which has been the driving force of my life since I was about 14. One of the great privileges of having a life as a composer is how close one gets to the work of the great masters. It is an ongoing, ever evolving relationship.