

Conte: Like so many who went to Mademoiselle Boulanger, I had a very strong attraction towards French culture and French music, and also what I would call the Franco-American line, which is represented by people like Copland. I had known Aaron Copland's work from the age of 14. And so I was really ready to receive what she had to say.

The first summer I studied with her, I did the things that all of us did: I took the solfege class, and keyboard harmony, where one would memorize the cadence sheets in all keys. She decided when I first went to her that we would study harmony eventually, but she wanted to start with counterpoint. Counterpoint with her meant taking a single cantus and doing it six times: three versions with the cantus in the bass and three with it in the soprano.

I often share with people that one of Boulanger's great gifts was how hard she inspired you to work; I don't think I've ever worked harder in my life than that first summer. My lesson was on Monday, and while everyone else was going to Paris on the weekends, I stayed in Fontainebleau doing my counterpoint.

I remember, and Emile (Naoumoff) may remember this because we were there together: one day Nadia came into class, and she made up an exercise. She said, "Let's make the bass be a whole tone scale, and on each degree harmonize it with a minor seventh chord." [Sits at the piano] So you have the bass [plays], and then on each degree [plays] a minor seventh chord [continues playing]. So there's already something very individual about the exercise. The idea of a whole tone scale is a little out of the ordinary. I was very taken with the sound of those chords. Now, it wasn't enough to have you play that sequence; she said, "Now, my dear, you must play the bass with the left hand [sic] and the upper two voices with right [sic] and solfege the tenor [plays and sings] etcetera. I'm too buzzed with coffee to do the whole thing for you. [Laughter]

After that first summer I went back to Ohio to college to start my junior year. As I reflected on my time there, I realized that Boulanger helped me to see that music is both horizontal and vertical in a way that I hadn't really experienced with my own body before - by simply memorizing all those cadence sheets and doing these exercises reversing the hands, and singing all the voices and doing that kind of thing. And so I sat down to compose. I was working on the Ravel *Sonatine* - I thought I'd like to write my own sonatine. [Sits at the piano] Based on that exercise, I came up with my own chord progression [plays]. So taking a cue from Jay's (Gottlieb) Socratic method - which is how I teach too, and it's hard to teach this way, because you have to pull things out of students, and sometimes you're met with stony silence when you ask a question - I ask you: how does my progression resemble hers? [plays] What's the same about it and what's different? What do you hear? [stony silence] How is it the same?

Audience member: Play it again.

Conte: Okay, let me play it again [plays] - because I have four chords, so that's...

Audience member: Now do the other one. [Laughter]

Conte: This is the "model," as she used to say, meaning the thing that's to be repeated [plays]. There are really two main things that this [plays] and this [plays] have in common - two very basic principles that transcend taste, style - which is also one of the gifts of her

teaching...

Audience member: Contrary motion?

Conte: There's contrary motion: the bass and the upper voices are moving in contrary motion, which is, as we know, the strongest motion, and the bass line of both is a whole tone structure. Now at this point it's very important for me to say that composing is not an intellectual thing, and that was also something that Boulanger helped you arrive at. Composing has really become for me, more and more as I've gotten older, truly like taking a dictation, and listening to where the notes want to go. This was also the great strength of her teaching – showing the student that having a thought, just as she had a thought of that progression, and I had my thought, means following the thought through to the very end.

So what I want to do is play for you this movement of my Sonatine that I composed based on that progression. And you'll hear, I hope, how that progression controls all the structural arrival points of the piece. I wrote it completely, I would say, by ear, using my intuition and my feeling - reaching for the notes that my ear wanted to hear.

So I took the progression, and it occurred to me that the alto voice could be animated and turned into a foreground melody...with a compound rhythm of long/short [plays]. And I now had my basic rhythmic character...the yeast for the bread of the piece. And so the piece became this:

[Plays entire movement from piece, followed by applause].

That's an improvised piece, meaning that it was composed as I've composed all the music I've ever written: by trying to follow the thought and trying to follow where my ear wants the piece to go.

This piece for me, as a composer – I was nineteen when I wrote it – was much more contrapuntal than any piece that I'd written up to that time - and I'd not yet written that much music. Boulanger opened my ear, again, to the relationship of vertical and horizontal, and the unity of those two things. And I just started listening a lot more carefully to what my inner voices were doing.

There's so much I could say about her. But at this point I'd like to say that I find I'm often very stimulated by questions, and I'd really like to use the rest of my time to see if there are any questions about how she taught, about whatever insights I may have into the creative process of composition...from those of you who knew her and from those of you who didn't. [Raised hands] Yes.

Audience member: What organ works did you do as a result of studying with her, at that time?

Conte: I didn't play the organ.

Audience member: But you compose for organ...

Conte: I became aware of the organ through her; I didn't know anything about the organ when I first went to France. Then I met several fellow students, who were organists, and I went to hear the organ in the great churches and cathedrals. I was a bit afraid of the organ.

Writing for the organ is very different than writing for the piano or any other instrument; it's really a wind instrument, and there are certain things you can't do that come very naturally to a pianist, like building crescendi in certain ways. Much later, when I moved to San Francisco, I became acquainted with an organist named David Higgs, who's a very, very fine organist now teaching at Eastman, and I started writing pieces for him. I did study also at Cornell for one year with Donald Paterson, who had studied with Boulanger. I decided to study the organ because (musicologist) William Austin, my mentor there, said, "As a composer you should play the organ, because it will make you aware in a new way of the continuity of voices." The piano is an illusory instrument. The piano wears a cape; you can create atmosphere with the pedal in a certain way, whereas on the organ, you play the note and you hold it down – you really can't do much with it once you play the note. Learning to play the organ definitely opened up my ears as a composer, but it was ten years later that I started writing for the organ – which I've now done a great deal, and I enjoy it very much.

Audience member: Would you comment on that pedal point that you used for the *Prelude {Prelude and Fugue; Conte's work commissioned by the American Guild of Organists for inclusion in the Boulanger Symposium}*. What was your explanation for that?

Conte: I do compose at the organ when I'm writing for the organ, because even though I'm not much of an organist, my musical ideas – I'm very much like Stravinsky in this way – ideas never force themselves on me without being in direct contact with sound itself. Once a piece is started and it's gestating in me, I can have ideas in my imagination, but ideas don't occur to me unless I'm actually sitting at a keyboard playing. Then I feel the direct physical connection to the sound, which is also very much what her teaching was about.

So I started to write the piece at an organ at a church where a friend of mine was the organist. I had always wanted to write a piece on a pedal point where you didn't move the pedal. The challenge is of course to create a tonal architecture without actually having a bass line. I composed a very long melody, which is stated three or four times, with episodes in between. It is stated in different tonalities, and of course the character of

the melody changes with what's put under it. That's very much a Ravel idea – like in the String Quartet [goes to piano] where the second theme is in minor [plays] in the exposition, but in the recapitulation [plays] it's in major. This is something that Sondheim does all the time too, where he has a melodic fragment and he puts different harmonies under it, and of course the meaning of the fragment changes. He gets motivic unity by having the same motive and variety through the harmonic changes. It's like looking through a prism: the motive changes character and emotional meaning by having different harmonies under it.

Audience member: I'm very curious about this idea of following one thought. And also, when you're working with someone that has very little experience composing, that following the thought but not getting frustrated with yourself that it all sounds the same – seeking for variety, but when I hear your *Sonatine* it's like a flower that opens, and...

Conte: Thank you.

Audience member: ...it's the same but every time it's different. I find with myself that frustration with "Ah! This is" ... if you could speak to this...

Conte: This is disappearing in our culture: the training of memory. This was the most essential part of Boulanger's training for me: the insistence on memorizing as much music as possible. It's like putting water into a well; composers want to write a piece of music that lasts ten minutes, and the first thing I'll ask them is, "What can you play by heart that's ten minutes long?" Because in the act of memorizing, your body learns – what you learn – and it's through the piano – you really can't do it, I don't think, in any other way – in Bach's day it was the organ; by the time we get to Mozart, it's the piano keyboard – that the collaboration between harmony, melody, rhythm, phrase structure, and how those combine to make forms comes together for the pianist in a very deep way. And particularly the way Boulanger taught, where not only did you play – singing was of course terribly important – you were doing a lot of playing and singing, where you were not playing something and singing it, or reversing the hands the way that organists, of course, routinely have to play things on different manuals, and so this opened up the independence of hearing. At the San Francisco Conservatory, where I teach, I was becoming very frustrated. We would get students who would have such problems composing, and I said, "Let's institute a requirement that all composers must take a piano audition to get into our program." And as soon as we did that, the quality of our applicants rose enormously. Now it didn't mean that every composer was – I'm not myself – a prize-winning pianist, but I started piano when I was seven years old. I memorized a certain amount of music – when I encountered Nadia Boulanger at 19, she told me how she had memorized all 48 Preludes and Fugues of the "Well-Tempered Clavier" by the age of ten. I was inspired to do about five or six of them. It was hard; it's still hard to memorize a contrapuntal work. But she said, "You are enriched by all the music you know by heart; it becomes a part of you." I think so many composers today simply don't know any music. There's so much in our culture that makes us be passive. This is connected, of course, to the rise of recordings. Knowing a piece of music by listening to a recording is not the same as playing that piece. A pianist has access

through playing to chamber music, string quartets, symphonies... One of my favorite scenes from a film is from Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, where he's having an argument with one of his friends. Woody Allen accuses the friend of being very morally lax, and the friend says to him, "Who do you think you are? God?" And Woody Allen says, "Well I have to model myself after someone."

[Laughter]

I tell my composers, "Who are your models?" It's so impressive when you hear that Debussy was ten years old, applying for admission to the Paris Conservatory, and what does he do? He plays the Chopin G minor Ballade from memory. What kind of musician is that ten year-old? How is it that Debussy, who really is, to me, one of the most original composers in the entire history of music, also is the composer who had the most elaborate technical training of any modern composer – going through the mill of the Paris Conservatory, and the Prix du Rome. Everything that he went through helped him to find his voice. It was the same with Copland, studying with Ruben Goldmark – who was a real taskmaster – with Stravinsky working with Rimsky, who made him write the early Sonata in F sharp minor, the early Eb major Symphony... You hear these pieces; they are very crude in a way, but these composers, these

great composers, like Stravinsky who then, in 1907 with *Fireworks* and then a few years later with *Firebird* becomes this astonishing personality. It was through the deep contact with the music of others. As Boulanger used to say, “True personality is revealed by deep knowledge of the personalities of others.” People are so afraid not to be original. My students say, “I want to be original.” I always tell them, “Do *not* worry. I don’t care if you’re original.”

I often quote Vaughan-Williams; he says, “It doesn’t matter if what you’re saying has been said before, but whether or not it’s the right thing to say at that moment.” And you will say what the right thing is if you have personality. You have to become as complete a musician as possible. If you do this, nothing can prevent you from expressing your personality.

I think this is, again, something about Boulanger that is very challenging for modern people – particularly Americans. I said to someone, I don’t remember who it was, that “It is not the spirit of the age to embrace the Guru principle” – in the West and particularly in America. But Boulanger was a kind of Guru. The idea of the vertical relationship of student/teacher challenges modern ideas of democracy. Living in California, we see this all the time.

[Laughter]

My colleague Conrad Susa was trying to help a student who was writing a piece, and he made a suggestion and the students said [mumbles:] “Well I don’t know if I want to change that ...” and Conrad said, “Shut up and listen to your teacher!”

[Laughter]

I think students are hungry for this kind of discipline. I do have the strength of my convictions that I gained from working with Mademoiselle and from all of my wonderful

teachers. And I don’t have any fear with my students about really being what would be called opinionated – which can be interpreted by some as being rigid or narrow. It’s not, as Jay, you said so beautifully, it’s not about being true to yourself, it’s about being true to music. And I think composers, in order to even be worthy of the name, must be musicians at a certain level. Working in academic music in the United States, I have to tell you there are so many composers enrolled in degree programs who cannot play a Bach chorale – who cannot take a dictation of a Bach chorale. This is a scandal. It’s true, and we wonder why there’s alienation on the part of performers with composers. Now it’s not true of everyone, of course; those of us who were lucky enough to have worked with Mademoiselle – we feel we’re the keepers of a certain flame that we’re trying to keep alive. It’s a tree we’re continuing to water, and its branches are being hacked off by the culture – but it will survive, because the roots are deep. That’s my experience.

[Raised hands] Yes, Donna.

Donna Doyle: Two comments: Originality – Narcis Bonet, who’s from Barcelona, likes to quote Gaudi: “In order to be original, one must return to one’s origins.” My second comment is about memory; I’m so glad you brought that up, because I’ve done some research on the memory tradition from the ancient Greeks and Romans. Tell me something; we have a musical genre of fantasy, right? What does that mean to you? We sit down to the piano and fantasize. What does that mean to us today? Can somebody tell me? Well in the 19th century, usually it meant to let one’s imagination roll, to be very free and emotionally expressive.

Well that's not what it meant to Quintillian. To Quintillian, and to the memory tradition going back all the way to the ancient Greeks, it meant run through the filing cabinet of one's mind. And first one had to fill up that filing cabinet with formulas, like the Vidal basses. It's a long tradition, and it won't disappear because it's the way the human mind works. And when we abandoned it in European culture, the "jazz" people found it intuitively, and they're the one's who do the wood- shedding, right? They're the one's who sit and practice progressions, and we need to learn that from them. We need to get away from the paper, you know, get away from being slaves of the page and do what they do – in our own idiom with our own language. And we'll have a way to the future.

Conte: It's beautifully said. Thank you.

[Applause]

I just want to say: W. H. Auden, who's one of my favorite personalities, and I don't think that he and Boulanger knew each other – though there's much that they have in common – and certainly Auden and Stravinsky were close – they wrote an opera together – Auden said, "All techniques are conventions and therefore dangerous - but all techniques must be learned and then unlearned. We may get stuck halfway, but there is no other route to greatness." One must submit oneself to technique, and if one's personality is strong enough...it's not enough to have talent; you have to be able to survive your talent. To offer a student a certain approach to technique is to give him the tools for freedom.

Boulanger used to say about Bach: "Bach doesn't submit to convention, he chooses it." It's really very different, and of course Bach, was trained in a way that would be taken for granted, that now is often considered as inhibiting a person's freedom of expression. And again, in California, which is a wonderful place and the site of so much innovation and openness, in the best sense, sometimes can work against this. But I know I couldn't have written the music I've written probably anywhere else but California, and I'm very happy that I found myself there – but of course I'm also very happy that I spent time in the East and in Europe, and growing up in the Midwest, and, of course, we're all a conglomeration of all of these wonderful things. [Gesturing:] There was a hand over here.

Robert Levin: First of all, let me publicly express my admiration for that splendid piece we heard yesterday. {Conte's "Prelude and Fugue" for Organ}

Conte: Thank you. [Applause]

Levin: It was an homage not only, it seems to me, in terms of a deeply felt inspiration on your part, but an homage in fact. That is always something very impressive, because many pieces were written for and dedicated to Nadia Boulanger which would not stand the test that your piece does. So I think it epitomizes something to which all of us here relate so keenly. I'd like to go a bit farther in what you said; I couldn't agree more about the issue of memory and heritage and awareness. I couldn't agree more with what Donna (Doyle) said a moment ago. It's interesting that the word improvise did not exist, for instance, in the 18th century. What a performer like Beethoven or Mozart did was called *phantasieren*. It was not called *improvisieren*. Of course, if we read [Carl] Philippe Emmanuel Bach, we will see that the guide to so-called improvisation consists of writing down a bass line, and putting figures

above it, and hanging the curtains of the superstructure on all of those things – things that of course, the French organ tradition incarnated in a glorious sort of way. But the fact is we are, as you have said, in an acute crisis now as far as composers are concerned. Not only because they don't have a really thorough knowledge of the repertoire – not only because they do not have their ears trained with anything approaching an adequate amount – but also because many of them work with programs like Finale or Sibelius where the click of a mouse – anything they write down will be played back retch-ably [sic] through a synthesizer – which gives them the impression that, therefore, an internal ear is superfluous. I teach at Harvard University, and I remember sitting on a composition search committee not very long ago when a professor of composition came in and was having his sample lesson, and a graduate student brought in a minute and a half of an orchestra piece. The composer who was visiting asked this graduate student composer to explain briefly what the basis of this piece was, and he said, “Well it's a chord progression of six chords.” And he said, “Could you please sit down at the piano and play these six chords for us.” And this graduate student sat down at the piano and fumbled for 30 seconds and said “ No I'm afraid I can't.” So the only question we can ask is, “What kind of an artistic or social contact is that?” What Donna says is exactly right, but, of course, it leads to a larger question which is central to Nadia

Boulanger's whole approach – which you know, and I think most of us know here – which is: What is, in fact, art without intuition? What is intuition without culture? What is the difference between intuition and instinct and factual knowledge? She talked about these things all of the time. She often said, as we know, “Talent without genius is so little; genius without talent is nothing.” A phrase often misunderstood by her American audiences, because we think of talent as simply a diminutive form of genius and we don't understand that the French sense of it is craft – and craft is the real problem right now in this world, but we can only heed Donna Doyle's clarion call if in fact composers are able to hook up to the intuition of the listener to which they wish to address themselves. A system of music which is completely abstract and which lacks the ability, viscerally, to engage an audience may be admired for its intellectual standards but it will rarely engage or move us. And this is of course a point that Nadia Boulanger made over and over and over again: that, in fact, a human being – we heard Jay (Gottlieb) say it – what do you know? What do you hear? Your education, as a person within this culture, begins with what God has given you – your innate abilities. Those have a mysterious animalistic aspect to them that nobody can really understand. And then you learn things. If you're lucky, you go to Nadia Boulanger and you learn an extraordinary amount – not just of the fact that she puts in or the quotations or the techniques, but a path that you follow for the rest of your life that reminds you that the work is always unfinished – that the journey is always partial and looks forward. And that what you learn, what you know, fuses itself with that animalistic incertitude and becomes intuition. And that intuition, because it is personal, gives you a voice. And that it seems to me was the point she always made: the people who came in and built a system that was based on artificial intellectual constructs could never be great artists. And she says, and you can read it in Monsaingeon's book, (*Mademoiselle: Conversations with Nadia Boulanger*, by Bruno Monsaingeon) and implied by some of us here, she said, “In the past, people simply sought to be the best that one could. Now one seeks to be singular. One seeks originality.” Bach wasn't

trying to be original. As she said in her absolutely relentless and remorseless way, she said, “All these people try to be original. Unfortunately one is not original by choice.”

[Laughter and applause]

Conte: Robert, I’m so glad you brought up MIDI. I want to talk a minute about it, because it’s a fact of life, and to me it symbolizes what could be called a modern disease, which is a misunderstanding of cause and effect – and people being at effect with something when they should be at cause with it. And we see this with our young student composers. I use MIDI; I use the computer to write down my music. It’s an amazing tool. But I use it out of my musicianship - it is at the effect of how I use it. What’s happening more and more is that people are actually adapting the way they write music to what the technology does. Without naming names, there are quite a few composers working today who are influenced by MIDI in this way, and who are very successful, but, in my view, they don’t necessarily have achievement. Success and achievement are not the same thing. The use of the MIDI and the way it lends itself to certain kinds of rhythmic repetition can give the impression of activity, but it is activity without direction. What concerns me very much is that the culture is losing its ability to follow what I would call a kind of rhetorical thought in a piece of music. And so that, you see a lot of

people kind of plugging into the music, which has the kind of false continuity that Robert was speaking of... when you work with MIDI and you enter information into it, you enter your ideas, your material into it, and then it plays it back to you and you have the impression that you’ve created continuity. That continuity must be earned with one’s own body. In some sense – I often say to my students, “The physical dimension is perhaps the most important.” You see students struggling with how to write convincing phrase – it’s like they’re trying to learn how to walk across the room and they’re thinking, “Well, now my ankle is interacting with this bone...Forget it! Can you play a phrase of music from memory?” If you can’t, you’re going to have problems writing your own music, and the music you write is not going to be organic to you.

The other thing about MIDI is that it encourages the composing of rhythms that are layered rather than interactive. So even in my little *Sonatine* that I played, there are often four different rhythms going on. There’s a hierarchy of rhythms; there’s one in the foreground, but the others have relation to each other, and I felt those relations with my own body, balancing them. Again, I don’t think about it; I hear it, and I feel it. To have all these rhythms just kind of layered with no breathing – it’s almost as if human beings are in their own little compartments. You see this when people are playing this music; they don’t have a chance to listen to each other and interact with each other – which is very inhumane and is going to create inhumane people and an inhumane culture. So, again, there’s just things we can’t skip. What is worth mastering is not easy. The internet has made everything so accessible... [gestures] Yes...

Audience member: You know, the other thing we haven’t really talked about too that’s a pet peeve of mine is the actual writing down of music. You know, these people that are writing at the computer keyboard – they don’t have that manuscript paper in front of them, and all the decisions you have to make when you’re composing, “What meter is this in?” When I used to

teach composition, the kids would want to put it right into Finale, you know. Absolutely not! You've got to write it down on manuscript paper. Isn't that how it comes out to begin with? But again, it's that craft that's being lost.

Audience member: I'm Elaine [??? ~ 33:42]. I guess we also have to consider what our audience is and what they're listening to. I remember in Paris there weren't radios in every house; there wasn't a television; movies were a rare event in the 60's. And for Boulanger, in her life those things didn't exist. Now we have an audience of people who listen to music all the time, all day, in their cars, in the elevators, when they're waiting in line at the bank, when they go grocery shopping...some of the music they're listening to is music of the greats. I don't know how you guys feel going grocery shopping and listening to Beethoven, but I have a problem with it.

Robert Levin: Who listens!

[Laughter]

Previous audience member: But we have a different audience. If you look at the music that happens in film scores – millions of people go to these films and listen to that music;

it's evolved tremendously over the last 40 years, from people who played the piano to silent films to now, electronic music that harvests sounds that never happen in nature but certainly don't happen with a pencil on a score sheet either. So we composers are writing for different ears. I think our repertoire – just as Boulanger talked to us about expanding our imagination - our imagination has to expand to these other domains of sound. We can harvest those sounds too to create our musical structures and our communications.

Conte: It's true, but we also have to lead. The tendency to pander must be guarded against, and the economic life of our culture really encourages this, unless we have deep consciousness. Because, of course, every one wants to be useful. It's nice to be paid to do what you're doing, but artists have to lead.

Film music is very interesting. I teach a course in film music at the Conservatory as an analysis course where I do five or six movies, and I analyze in detail the scores of those films – films that I think are very, very fine scores. It always amazes me how little attention even sophisticated musicians pay to music in film. So it's this idea of: yes, people are being exposed to music; it's in their environment, but, again, it's a passive/active question. Are they really assimilating it? Are they participating in it? I think we always have to encourage people to participate.

Audience member: I think we can use those sounds. We need to open up our ears. But we need to take those sounds and put them in some sort of larger context, because apart from the movie, they don't hold that much sustained interest, right? Those sounds are there to highlight the action on the screen, and the story, and the visual.

Another audience member: One outrageous example is the scene in *Psycho* in the bathtub, when she's being stabbed. If that music alone is played, it has a visceral impact on people who have no sophistication. If they hear the music without the visual scenery, the music itself awakens in the listener some pre-encoded response of fear. So I think that we do have ways

that we respond to sounds that are emotional and fundamental to our nature. And if composers start thinking about learning deeply about those sounds, we can expand our communication repertoire.

First audience member: But I think what I'm saying is that those sounds are vocabulary, right? We need to write the syntax and a larger structure that sounds complete when the film isn't there.

Second audience member: Well actually, I've done that in a recent piece; it's really fun and I'd love to talk to you about it later.

First audience member: Ok.

Conte: I was going to say that Herrmann was really a great film composer, and I always teach *Psycho*. It's the easiest of his scores to teach, though it's not my favorite. There's been a suite arranged from *Psycho*, and it holds up fairly well. Herrmann himself had greater difficulty with concert music, in my view; you know he wrote an opera and

cantatas, and the pieces are not really successful – which doesn't take away from his genius, which was to use sound with image and to underscore the dramatic structure of the film. [gestures] Daniel.

Audience member: Much, though, of the new musicology seeks to connect music to a larger context...I've read a lot of criticism of Boulanger's teaching as being obsessively formalist, and the sense of restricting the significance of music to certain criteria of excellence – of restricting meaning to the meaning of the notes alone, etcetera. Anything that we can pin to...about music, limited to just notes. But everything I...

Conte: You mean pitch, literally?

Same audience member: I'm just being metaphorical ... but just attributing to Boulanger this notion of music as dealing with notes, and about notes, and not about larger human issues. But everything that I've heard at this conference acknowledges a metaphysically dimension of music – indeed a spiritual aspect of music, which seems to have been at the heart of Boulanger's teaching. How could this have been lost?

Conte: I think, you know, it's just the culture; it's not the spirit of the age. Who is it that said, "He who believes in the spirit of the age soon becomes the ghost." [?] I can't remember. There's a spirit of the age, and the spirit of the age is not Nadia Boulanger at the moment, but that doesn't mean that, again, it isn't still present in some ways, as we see in this room...

Same audience member: I mean her legacy has been just rid [??? ~ 39:41]

Conte: Yes, but again, this is this cause and effect question that so fascinating: actually trying to adjust the information to reach a conclusion. I would posit to you it really has to do with a kind of Western, Newtonian scientific way of inquiry as opposed to a Goethian way of thinking. How many people know that Goethe was a scientist first and foremost? And that he actually has a very different way of looking at things that I think is much more connected to the way that Nadia Boulanger looked at things than is Newton, We see so many problems, for example, with Western medicine, for all of its marvelous inventions....

Audience member: Can you define a little more your idea of the spirit of the age? If you can put a few words...

Conte: I like using the analogy of vertical and horizontal relationships, which the Asians have a much deeper sense of: parent and child is a vertical relationship; student and teacher is a vertical relationship; husband and wife or lovers or friends is a horizontal relationship, which may have some vertical aspects, but this idea of making everything “equal”– it has to do with this idea of democracy and that everything is equal and everyone is equal and everyone’s opinion...

Audience member: This is an interesting discussion, which makes me think of several things. I’m a journalist; I write a lot about music and literature and was a student of Boulanger’s briefly. This brings up a number of things that interest me, because I’m very interested in the pan-discipline movements over the last century among the arts. And it’s often occurred to me that serialism, and we haven’t mentioned the “s” word here really, although we’ve been dancing around that issue...you know, that’s a very interesting movement that made music very intellectual, very much about a way of organizing music that was not for the ear, not for the instinct. It reminds me a lot of the motets of Machaut, because it was a kind of internal...if you look at the Machaut motets there’s a way of internally organizing those structures that may have been tonal, but it was not for the ear. It was not for the listener; it was for the composer himself, in those days, well, herself too. Serialism very much related to a kind of intellectualizing, which, as we look at the history of culture in any of the disciplines, we find the pendulum swinging back and forth between the intellectual and the emotional – between the mind and the body, as it were. And I think what interests me particularly right now is the kind of movement that’s happening in music back toward the body – back toward the ear. Boulanger was a figure who, in a sense, kept the ear and the body alive through those, we might say, dark years of serialism. But it’s very interesting to me because I’ve taught poetry a lot – and what’s happening in poetry right now is a return to prosody – and a lot of poets very hungry for a return of the ear in poetry. And this is only within the last ten or fifteen years, and that’s been a new formalism, and that’s been a very interesting movement that makes me feel that there’s a hunger in the culture for a return to...

Conte: I think you’re right.

Audience member: ...**tradition** and a return to the ear and the body, yet poetry’s very much like music. And so it’s very interesting to hear Boulanger in this context as someone who kept that bridge.

Conte: And the balance between the intuitive and the intellectual.

Same audience member: Exactly.

Conte: She used to say, “If there’s too much intuitive order **in** the intellectual or too much intellectual in the intuitive...going too far in either direction risks the opposite reaction.”

Same audience member: Yes.

Conte: I often think of what **Honegger** said, which was, “The cure for swallowing sulfuric

acid will be to be forced to swallow syrup.” Which I often thought could represent serialism and, maybe, perhaps minimalism, and I’m not saying there isn’t a deeper meaning behind minimalism. I often describe Phillip Glass, for example, who is a fellow student, as acting as kind of musical enema. Washing away all that excessive chromaticism...and I just saw *Akanaten* in San Francisco...

Same audience member: Where’s the tonic? We all know.

Conte: Well, it washes way this excess of chromaticism and maybe a false chromaticism. I wanted just to say a few things about Schoenberg, because we had that talk the other day. Is Mr. Lachey [sp?], David here? There are some things about Schoenberg that are interesting to remember: first, he was not a pianist. He also didn’t know music before Bach very well –he had a certain ethnocentricity, and of course this is a magnificent tradition: the music of Germany and Austria. He didn’t know about modal theories; he assumed the equal-tempered 12-tone scale was organic to music, rather than, perhaps, the older and more basic modal scale of seven notes. I remember the very first thing Boulanger said, the first day of class at Fontainebleau – she walked in the room and said, “Good afternoon. How many notes are there in music?” Someone said, “Twelve,” and she said “No!” So someone said, “Eighty-eight,” and she said “No!” The answer was seven, to her way of thinking. This idea of diatonic/chromatic – of structure and ornament – of inflection – of character through inflection. In fact, the seven-note diatonic system had many more possibilities than the 12-tone scale, because you have, as Jay pointed out, G natural becoming F double-sharp in Chopin. Schoenberg also said two things that I think are really fascinating and revealing and, to me, shocking. He said, first, and most people probably know these quotes, “I have just invented something that will ensure the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years” and then he said, “I only want to be considered a superior sort of Tchaikovsky – that my melodies be hummed and whistled.” This will never happen.

[Laughter]

There are some people in this room who probably could hum and whistle a Schoenberg melody...I could sing a couple of rows from memory; I studied Schoenberg, actually, very deeply, when I was at Cornell. I listened to everything he wrote, and I tried to memorize some of it. And I did memorize some of it, and I know Pollini plays the Piano Concerto from memory, and maybe you play [gestures towards Jay Gottlieb] a lot of Schoenberg from memory. I’d love to talk to you about this...

[Laughter]

...and learn what’s involved in that, because I always think that Schoenberg’s decisions were probably not arrived at in the kind of visceral way that Stravinsky arrived at his. And it’s revealing; it’s interesting to consider. [acknowledges raised hand].

Audience member: [??? ~ 46:46] in his book on Schoenberg, pointed out that at Schoenberg’s soirées when they played new music, he demanded that they play from music, that they not memorize, because he said that he thought they could discover something every time they looked at the music. That’s a different ethic.

Conte: There’s the story of *Pierrot Lunaire* being rehearsed for the first time for many, many

hours before anyone noticed – and I believe Schoenberg was included in that; I’m saying I’m not sure – before anyone noticed that the clarinetist was supposed to be

switching back and forth between Bb clarinet and A clarinet. Now you understand, this is the difference of a half step; so through vast stretches of the music, someone was playing everything a half step off – and for hours no one noticed.

[Laughter]

How many of us would notice? Some maybe. I don’t know what our time limit is, but... [gestures to audience member] Yes.

Audience member: I just am fascinated by this discussion. I do a form of music therapy that uses classical music to evoke inner imagery. It’s called the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music. What I’m noticing in this very small field I’m in is that more and more music therapists are using new age music instead of the classical greats.

Conte: Instead of Mozart they’re using Michael Nyman.

Same audience member: Yes. What I see that is really lacking when that happens is that all this structure and tradition that comes embodied in Beethoven’s music, in Mozart’s music, in Chopin’s music that goes into the body of my clients and releases through points of tension and release in the music – blockages, energetic blockages – and takes them back to early memory, and helps them make intuitive connections between them...it’s as if the whole mind and body light up with connection. That doesn’t happen unless you use the music that has this integral structure and...

Conte: You must write about this. Have you written about it?

Same audience member: I’ve written about it, but not quite in this way...and I’m realizing that I owe my time at Fontainebleau a great deal in my perception of using music as a therapeutic tool, because it brings out the depths of the psyche – and it does not work unless the music has that integrity. So I’m deeply moved by this, because it makes sense why I’ve brought Nadia’s work into therapeutic uses of music, and I see it healing the psyche of my patients. And it’s really beautiful.

Conte: That’s a wonderful testimony, and, of course, that’s what Don Campbell’s *Mozart Effect* is about. [gestures towards audience member] Yes.

Audience member: Two quick comments. You were talking about democratization and hierarchy; well isn’t that what Schoenberg tried to do? He tried to democratize the tones – to make them all equal.

Conte: Yes, and that was the problem.

Same audience member: Yet you reject that.

Conte: Well in a sentence...can you imagine if I said, “I’m going to make up a sentence that has twelve nouns in it, and I want you to memorize it. Some people have that facility. When great poetry is, [gestures towards audience member] as you pointed out...

Audience member: I would just like to say: try to get students to memorize a free verse; it’s impossible.

Conte: Well, this again. As Boulanger said, then they've not been disciplined. The memorizing of poetry...

Same audience member: You can get them to memorize poems with rhyme and meter, but you can't...

Conte: Oh I see.

Same audience member: Free verse throws them. They can get about a half a page, maybe a page into it, then they're lost.

Conte: There's nothing to hang on to.

Same audience member: Exactly. There's nothing to hang on to.

Another audience member: That's why they started rhyming things way back in the Middle Ages from the memory tradition. They understood that that helped us remember things.

Conte: Rhyme and meter.

First audience member: That it goes in the body. That's what memorization is about.

Conte: Of course some of the great poets – Whitman is an example – who I think is an uneven poet, although a great one – who doesn't use meter often or always. But his poems...the vividness of the imagery...

First audience member: When he does use meter it's very significant. **Conte:** Yes, it's true.

First audience member: And suddenly he will have a metrical line, and he's doing it for a very good purpose. It's very interesting. But he actually was trained in prosody and has a deep prosody in his work.

Conte: Yes. We need to end; maybe take one more comment.

Audience member: Talking to Jay about this, it's different for you. But Richard Goode said that...you know, he commissions. He likes to play new music; he feels a

responsibility to play contemporary music, so he commissions new pieces. Whereas he has said that even though he has learned the pieces thoroughly and performed from memory, when he back to them, he has to relearn them in a way he never has to relearn tonal music. It just doesn't stick in his corporeal self the way tonal music does.

Conte: But Boulanger would say that when one memorizes a piece by Stravinsky, one doesn't have to start over from the beginning. And I think with a composer like Stravinsky who, again, has tapped into something deeper; archetypal structures of music, and there is this connection, as you demonstrated, Jay, that makes – perhaps, I myself use that as a kind of criterion to decide what music I want to get into bed with, you could say. I mean it takes a lot of commitment to learn a piece of music, to memorize it. For a composer, it's like the food you're going to eat. Is it going to nourish you? Is it going to make your fingernails grow better? Or is it going to be like McDonalds and make your teeth fall out and give you indigestion? And I try to use that consciousness. I feel that Boulanger helped me to sort this out. I remember when I heard a piece by Dutilleux for the first time; it was very clear to me that his music embodied these principles – that every note was growing out of every other note. And his music is very complex and, one could say, very dissonant. I think we have to

finish. [gestures towards audience member] I'll let you have the last word, Bob.

Robert Levin: Well, no one will ever have the last word in this heated philosophical dialogue,

[Laughter]

but there's a very important issue here which is: of course, some people have photographic memories, and for them the abstractness of something...Nadia Boulanger used to mention a friend of hers whom she knew who had memorized the entire *Encyclopédie Française*. And you would meet this person and you would give him the first word of a particular page, and he'd think for a minute and then he'd recite the page all the way down the first column and the second column - he'd stop in the middle of a sentence at the end of the page and look up at you expectantly; if you nodded he'd continue.

[Laughter]

So she mentioned this not in admiration but simply to talk about the prodigious potential of the human brain, mysterious as it might be. But I think the point that does need to be made is that there are fantastic musicians whose memories being trained in tonal syntax will remain in that tonal syntax and can only go so far outside of it without losing the grasp of an intuitive ability to deal with these things. The thing about Nadia Boulanger, and I think it's very important that we end this morning's session by thinking about her, and not about us - as much as our anguish and our time and how we move forward; this conference is about her - the thing about her that was so amazing was that she could effortlessly enter the aesthetic system of any musician who walked into the room. She did not tell people how to write their music that was outside of their aesthetic; it came

from within. She made anybody better, in the sense that she made that person truer to him or herself. And this is the thing that so floored me, that I thought to myself that, you know, the serious musician must understand that sort of multiplicity. We talked about Nadia Boulanger performing everything, in a way, in a similar style. And yet, in fact, that was the way in which she was of her particular age. But her teaching was for the ages and was precisely dependent upon the idiosyncrasies of individual artists and not upon a unitized performance style. And to me, my whole life has been about that. Every thing that I do as a musician, whether it's a performer, a composer, a teacher, is about that. I remember about a year and a half ago, for instance, I got the manuscript in the mail of John Harbison's Piano Sonata #2 - which I had commissioned and which he wrote for me. And when I got his manuscript, which is about 30 pages long, I went through it for about a week and a half and sent him a six page single-spaced list of notes that I thought lacked the proper accidentals. Now bear in mind, I've been playing John Harbison's music since 1968. I got his letter back astonished that, I think with exception of two spots, that all of these eighty places were absolutely right; the sharp was missing there, the natural was missing here, and so on and so forth. Now, this is not about me; this is about her. She told me that to play music is to enter that world and to make yourself a part of that world - and to create an absolute congruence between your intuition and that of the composer, because you could not speak the composer's lines if you were not inside that composer's world. And I think, if there's one message that is as

poignantly and as crucially relevant for today, when everybody suffers from attention deficiency disorder, when everyone is channel surfing, you say people are listening to music everywhere – they're not listening! Nobody listens! Go into a Conservatory; someone starts to play a French suite by Bach – everybody's tuned out within a minute and ten seconds because Bach is too challenging to listen to unless you concentrate. Boy did we have to concentrate back then! Let's sing a hymn too concentration.

[Laughter and applause] **Conte:** Thank you.

Audience member: May I, may I make...I don't want to have the last word, but I'd like my remark to be the last word. Someone said once that, "We need to remember the etymological origin of the word 'authority'; it's author, it's self."

Conte: Thank you.