David Garner Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives
50 Oak Street San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted September 20, 2019
Dariush Derakhshani, Interviewer

Recording transcribed by Dyanna Bohorques

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project

The Conservatory's Oral History Project has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's community, which will then be preserved, transcribed, and made available to the public.

Among the narrators will be former administrators, faculty members, trustees, alumni, and family of former Conservatory luminaries. Through this diverse group, we will explore the growth and expansion of the Conservatory, including its departments, organization, finances and curriculum. We will capture personal memories before they are lost, fill in gaps in our understanding of the Conservatory's history, and will uncover how the Conservatory helped to shape San Francisco's musical culture through the past century.

David Gardner:
Drawing from classical, neoclassical, jazz, rock, blues and non-Western traditions, the music of David Garner (b. 1954) reflects a unique blend of musical genres. An alumnus and full professor at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Garner has taught composition, chamber music, music literature and music theory there since 1979. In 2007 he co-founded the award-winning Ensemble for These Times, which continues to gain recognition for innovative and original programming and recording. Trained as a pianist and cellist, he has performed on both the solo classical concert stage and in various jazz-rock and blues bands. A composition autodidact, Garner won the 2015 American Prize in Composition/Chamber Music. His works have won several Global Music Awards. Garner's works are recorded on Pentatone and Centaur Records and are featured online at 3232 Music. Numerous live performances of his works are available on YouTube. www.davidgarner.us

Dariush Derakhshani:
Dariush Derakhshani is a German-born Iranian composer/performer of concert and electroacoustic music. He has written for numerous acclaimed soloists and ensembles, with whom his works have been performed internationally. His main research interests lie in using algorithms for composing acoustic and electroacoustic music, live-coding, sound synthesis, and building new electronic instruments used for free improvisation. Dariush graduated from SFCM in 2019 with a MM in Music Composition, under the tutelage of David Gardner. He's currently pursuing his PhD at University of California, Santa Barbara where he is also employed as a teaching assistant.

Dariush Derakhshani:
My name is Dariush Derakhshani. I'm [a] master's student at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in David Gardner's studio. I'm sitting here with Professor Gardner for his oral history interview, and I'm going to ask Professor Gardner to introduce himself and we'll go from there.

David Gardner:
Hi, Dariush. Thanks for doing this. I'm David Gardner, I'm a composer teaching at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. I've been here teaching since 1979. [I] got my degree in piano performance from the Conservatory in 1979 having come here in 1976.

Dariush Derakhshani:
Okay, so that brings us to my first question, which, I want to go before your time at SFCM. You're one of the oldest, in terms of experience, faculty members here… and I'm pretty sure you're one of the most experienced Composition faculty [members] who have been at the previous building and have seen the department grow and change buildings and move to the new building…

David Gardner:
Well. I was born in 1954. The family mythology has it that around the age of four, I was already pounding on the piano and scribbling on a piece of paper. So I guess I've been a musician ever since I was born, basically. I did not start formal piano lessons until I was in the second grade, when I was living in Lincoln, Nebraska. And I kept taking piano lessons on a weekly basis up until I graduated high school, from second grade until high school. In sixth grade, I was still in Nebraska. We had not moved from Nebraska to Oregon yet. I started playing the cello, and I played the cello from sixth grade up until I graduated high school.

I had always been interested in composition, although that took the form of improvisation on both [my] instruments much more than it did actually writing things down. Although in those days, one was given theory, written theory, workbooks and so on, in conjunction with their lessons. So I had a good understanding of music theory and music notation and so on, simply being as a result of my piano lessons. I do remember writing some things down and being given little notebooks of manuscript paper and so on. But I didn't really start composing for real until I was in high school and joined a couple of rock bands, and started writing music for instrumental music for the rock band. That was really my first serious attempt at writing music, and I wrote some solo piano works then as well.

I ought to bring up at this point that I was not a bad cellist. In fact, in some respects I was a better cellist than I was a pianist. I won awards on both instruments, but the last time I was in a youth orchestra, which was in Wisconsin in 1969, I think, I was Principal Cellist in that orchestra under conductor Michael Raybon. And I never achieved anything of that stature playing the piano, although I won some awards when I was really a little kid. I don't think I was that good a pianist. I mean, I got around on it, okay, I got my degree in it, but I never pursued it.

Dariush:
Right.

David:
So up until I got to the Conservatory, I played the piano, wrote a little bit at the piano, did a lot of improvisation, a lot of improvisation performance on the cello. But, you know, when I graduated high school, I didn't want to go into music as a vocation. I wanted to keep it as an avocation, so I enrolled at UCLA [as a] classics major, Latin and Greek, and wanted to go into linguistics and into ancient languages. But I only stayed at UCLA for two years before I dropped out, and I hated it. Not being able to play music in that second year that I was at UCLA, I ended up sneaking into Schoenberg Hall and playing the piano more than I was studying my Greek. And so I went back to Portland, picked up the piano again, studied for a year, and auditioned for the Conservatory in 1976.

Dariush:
So your family moved from Nebraska to Portland?

David:
Yeah, they did when I was in middle school and my sister was in grade school still.

Dariush:
Right. You mentioned, you played in a rock band. What instrument did you play in the rock band?

David:
I played keyboards and bass guitar. Mostly keyboards: The rock band that I played in the most and wrote the most music for is called The Mike White Band. And they actually stayed together for many years after, after high school. So it's Oregon [the band], kind of… I don't know what you call it. Country-slash-light rock kind of thing.

Dariush:
Beautiful! So, did you ever write any music for your band?

David:
Yeah, I did, I wrote, I wrote instrumentals for them, and I also taught them how to count in an unequal meter. so I know that we did one, we did one number in 13/8 that took the drummer a really long time to figure out. And then we did another number in 17/8—no, in 19/8—because one of my band members had gone… and heard Miles [Davis]. I don't know what Miles Davis was doing in Portland, Oregon, but he apparently had a show in Portland, Oregon, and his encore was a piece in 19/8 time, which impressed my bandmates. So I wrote something in 19/8. So it's very early prog-rock, right? Really early.

Dariush:
Really early. Yeah. So you said that after the band, you hated studying at UCLA. Was that the major? Was it the lack of music in your life? Was the school? Was it the city? What made you hate the environment and your decisions so much, that it made you go back to music?

David:
All of the above.

Dariush:
Oh, wow!

David:
I was, you know, [in a] pretty…insular group of kids when I was in high school. And, you know, UCLA had, what, 20 or 30,000 students at it. And I was completely lost. I wasn't prepared for the LA scene at all. I certainly wasn't prepared for Westwood and all the beautiful people there. I mean, I was kind of a snow-white, skinny kid with a mushroom haircut, you know, and it just didn't, didn't really fit in. Although I did fall in with a group of good guys my second year there at a Jewish fraternity. And so I spent my second year in a Jewish fraternity, but I did a lot less studying than drinking.

Dariush:
Okay.

David:
And so, I guess all of the above. I just wasn't happy not being around music.

Dariush:
Right, So you started here… not as a composition student [but] as a pianist?

David:
That's right.

Dariush:
So how did that happen?

David:
Oh, well, I auditioned, in early 1976. I remember because all the street cars were painted with the Stars and Stripes, because it was the bicentennial. And I auditioned here with the big C minor Chopin nocturne, something Cathedral. I think the, was it the C minor? It was. I think it was this C minor, Mozart fantasy, not the D minor, the other one. And was soundly rejected by both Mack McCray and Paul Hersh, because I was basically awful. But, Beatrice Beauregard, who taught at the Conservatory at that point, said that she did see something in the way that I played the piano, if for no other reason than I had a better tone than most students, even though I missed 40% of the notes.

And so she accepted me as an Adult Extension student, and I agreed to re-audition the next semester and take some courses in the meantime. So I started as an adult extension into the Conservatory. I took some solfege and something else. I did not have to take any academic classes because I had fulfilled the requirements in those days already at UCLA. So I only had to take music classes. And I graduated in two and a half years after that. I graduated in 1979 with a piano degree.

Dariush:
Right.

David: I still hadn't taken a composition lesson.

Dariush:
Right. So, and that degree is where you were basically recruited to work at SFCM, from my understanding?

David:
I was, that was a very interesting story. My keyboard harmony professor taught at the Conservatory. She's a Black woman by the name of Beulah Forbes-Woodard, and she was a stride pianist. She studied under [pianist] Art Tatum and played with [drummer] Louie Bellson… She was an incredible jazz pianist. But she was in San Francisco at that time, she was teaching in the Conservatory, and so was John Handy, who is a [jazz] sax player. Anyway, the last semester of keyboard harmony, she came down with a really bad case of phlebitis and couldn't continue.

So, she asked me—and this is something that, no way, could be done in this day and age—who was a student in the class, to continue teaching the class. I was at the top of the class. I never found any theory very challenging at all. I don't have perfect pitch, but I have a really good ear, and it just was never very challenging. So I was at the top of that class. Long and short of it is that I was teaching my classmates before I graduated. And so I finished out that semester, and she went to the dean and talked him into giving me a job the following fall, which was the fall of 1979, which was 40 years ago this fall.

Dariush:
For keyboard harmony?

David:
What I started doing was teaching fundamentals of music, which was the first semester of undergraduate theory, as basically, in those days, lines and spaces. [It wasn't] really not the school that it is today.

Dariush:
And, that was right after you got your bachelor's degree, and yet you never went back to get a master's degree?

David:
No, I didn't. You know, Darius, I figured I had a job. In fact, it wasn't paying the rent, but the first couple of years that I was teaching … from 1979 to 1983, I taught part-time at the Conservatory, I played piano in restaurants, I did construction work, and I taught privately, and wrote compositions and played them, recorded them and so on. So I basically had five jobs for the first couple of years after I got out of school.Not unlike what you guys have to do these days

Dariush:
Right, yeah. So you worked at a bar, at a restaurant, and you played the piano. And [from around this time is] your piano suite, which is a work modeled after four composers

David:
Oh, the *Cinq Hommages*?

Dariush:
Yes.

David:
Five composers.

Dariush:
Five composers. Yeah. So you were talking about how you would improvise in the style of different composers when people asked you …

David:
Oh, that's right, [in the] … King George Tea Room at the King George Hotel. And I don't know if it's still down on Mason Street, right by Union Square. [The hotel] had a little tea room and I was a very lazy pianist and was supposed to be playing like, classics … I played both books of the Debussy Preludes, I played the Gershwin Preludes, I played some Sämtliche Tänze, [Franz] Schubert dances, [Erik] Satie, things like that. But, you know, there's only so much that you can do in a setting like that. And so I would start improvising, and that got me to the point where people would request a composer or a composition, and I would simply just make it up. And from those four years that I worked at that place, I was only called out twice.

Dariush:
[*Laughs*] So would you say that was your introduction to, composing quote-unquote "serious music" basically?

David:
Yeah, I think it was, because several of those improvs made it into my first recording and my first faculty artist series [performance]. You know, I gave a faculty artist series in 1983 when I was still a part-time theory teacher, and it wasn't piano, it was a faculty artist series in composition. So I had the conceit of being a composer from the word go at this school. I never

thought for a minute that I was either qualified to teach piano or that anybody would be interested in studying piano with me. It was always about composition.

Dariush:
Right … When you were hired as a part-time faculty to teach these fundamental classes, you had composition students, right?

David:
No, I didn't. I had composition students privately.

Dariush:
Oh.

David:
I taught composition privately. I taught theory privately, but I was primarily a theory instructor, a theory and ear training instructor until the year 2000. In 1984, I had been working part time in the Conservatory for four or five years, and one day I was called into the Dean's office. Dean [Richard] Dick Howe, great guy, came from Grinnell College. Milton Salkin, who was the president at the time, had recruited him, along with Paul Hersh, from the Grinnell College.

He called me into his office, and he said that he had a problem. And the problem was that most of the theory faculty hated each other and that there was a schism developing between two of the teachers, whose names will remain anonymous at this point. And that he needed to appoint a new chairman [for the department], and would I be willing to serve as chairman? And I said, 'Well, of course I'd be happy to.' I got along with all of these people, but in order to do that, he had to also offer me a full-time position. So in one fell swoop, I was offered a full professorship and the chairmanship of the Theory and Musicianship department. And that was in 1984. I remained the chair of that department until 2000. So I was the chair of that department for 16 years. I gave it up in 2000 because I could not sit through one more discussion of what was better, fixed Do Solfege or movable Do solfege. That was it for me. And I turned the department over to Scott Fogelsang … he and I shared an office for many years [and] go way back. We were students at the same time, and he has done [an] absolutely phenomenal job with the department since 2000. He's just a godsend to the Conservatory.

Anyway, and I pretty much was happy doing what I was doing at that point, except that Conrad Sousa, who was the chair of the Composition department at that point, had apparently had his eye on me for several years since I was still doing faculty artist series concerts in composition. So he asked me in the year 2000 if I wouldn't take a couple of composition students just as sort of an extra thing. And of course I said yes.

One of my first composition students was Darren Jones, who won one of the first Highsmith [Awards], and also Mike Roberts, who won… I don't remember what he won. He won a bunch of awards. He's got good commissions in the East Bay right now. But that was the end of that. And

I just started piling on [my] studio [from] the year 2000, so actually, I did not teach composition at the conservatory until 2000, until 19 years ago.

Dariush:
What was your first composition class that you taught? When was your first composition class that you taught here?

David:
It was an absolute nightmare. It was the "composition workshop" … as an undergraduate field requirement. And I taught it for a number of years; Joe Stillwell teaches it now. It was basically open to all majors, not just composers. But … I made the mistake of trying to use a textbook for composition class. I think I used David Cope's *New Directions in Music* or something. It was an absolute nightmare. I had no idea what I was doing, and, you know, you learn so much by teaching and even more by making grievous mistakes.

Basically, my students tend to transcend me. And I think that all good teachers have the same experience in that their students actually take the information that you give them and then run with it much farther than you yourself can see. So even though I learned a lot in that class, I think the students learned even more simply by… I don't know how to explain it, simply by seeing my mistakes as leverage.

Dariush:
Right.

David:
But you can see this now. I mean, students like you and Nick Denton-Protsack and so on. I mean, your careers have taken off in a way that mine certainly hadn't when I was your age. So I think that's the legacy of most teachers, is that their students do transcend them. If I do my job right, you guys will be better than I am.

Dariush:
Hopefully, let's hope for that. Everyone, anyone in your studio has a completely different voice, and they're drastically, in terms of aesthetics and style … different from each other. They're from both ends of the spectrum to the middle to, you know, up and down, North, South, West, East: So the question for you would be, how does that happen?

David:
[*Laughs*] How do I succeed in not imposing my will on disparate groups of artists?

Dariush:
Yes.

David:
Well, by couching it in those terms, the answer is self-evident. The Conservatory does pride itself on not having an institutional voice, although some might disagree with that … I think the easiest answer to your question is that there's a lot of variety in my own music, and that stems from the fact that I believe that one must always search for something yet to be said. And that has allowed me to find many different sounds and techniques in my own music and to invent some, like in my second quartet, that we can get into if you want.

But basically, no composer on the planet, like no other creature on the planet, is anything like his or her colleagues. And what I feel my job is, is to nurture the individual and not the collective. And so if a student comes to me or, more appropriately, if I see in the applicant's portfolio something that I feel needs to be said in a style, regardless of the style, then I will take that challenge and nurture that thing that needs to be said in that individual with that individual's voice. Glibly put, I will train that individual to sound like themselves and anything at all that composer writes that doesn't sound like him or herself, I will call him out on.

I believe that the composer's mission is to transmit their human experience to their fellow humans in a cathartic way, so that they impart something about what it means to be human to their fellow humans. And there are as many different voices as there are people. We all speak sort of the same language in terms of experiential matters, but the syntax and the rhetoric can differ markedly. So if somebody comes to me with what I guess is now called postmodern leanings, then I nurture that in their voice. If they come to me with Western canon/film music-kind of rhetoric and syntax, then I nurture that in their voice. And as you said before, everything in between. I make sure that the person sounds like themself and nobody else.

Dariush:
Final question about your career at SFCM before we move on to you as a composer. How would you say the Composition department has changed in the decades that you've been a part of it, since you were in [the] Theory department until your move to [the] Composition department?

David:
Well … when I was first in the theory department, John Adams was still teaching here and Ellie Armor and Alden Jenks and Andrew Imbrie. And so even then, between John Adams with his proto-minimal music, and Andrew Imbrie, who studied with Roger Sessions, who was like, you know, a 12-tone composer, we had gigantic variety.

In 1983, I think, David Conte came on board. And later on, a couple of years after that, Conrad Sousa. So at that point, John Adams and Andrew Imbrie had left. So we had still had Alden Jenks, who basically was responsible for tape music being put on the planet at the Conservatory in the 60s and Ellie Armer, David Conte, and Conrad Sousa. So there was a slight lessening of the spectrum at that point. We had no 12-tone composer. Ellie was very crunchy and still is. David is more of a Francophile/Americana [composer]. He studied with [Nadia]

Boulanger [and] was [Aaron] Copland's secretary for a while. And Conrad Sousa, who mostly [was] much more of the tonal band.

So, far between when I first started teaching theory at the Conservatory and when I came on board [in] Composition, there was more of a mainstream approach, even though of the four that were teaching here, there was a huge variety. But there was not a variety as much in terms of tonal versus free tonal writing. And really, there still isn't… We have Mason Bates and David and Ellie and myself now teaching at the Conservatory. And I like to think of myself much more as a standout: I have much more of an interest in non-Western idiom[s] and microtonality, graphic score and so on.

My colleagues are a little more conservative than I am, I think, although none of this really shows in my own music. As you know, I'm an inveterate tonalist, and the most outrageous I ever get is in some non-Western idioms that I use in my music and also pretty advanced rhythmic styles. But, you know, there's no [single harmonic language] in my own music. There's no Postmodernism in my own music. There is serialism and neoclassicism. I don't know if that answers the question or not. I think that there's been sort of a change from great variety to less variety in terms of rhetoric. How's that?

Dariush:
In an ideal world, how would you see the department evolving in the future? So let's say in ten years—I don't know how much longer you're planning to teach here—but once you step out and you just come by as one of the ex -professors, what [would] you like to see?

David:
That's a great question. And I love going on record to do this because in ten years, those listening to this are going to know whether what I want to come to pass will have come to pass. I think we are sorely in need of replacing Ellie, with a woman composer. I think that somebody that has a firm foot in the European canon, as well as in the American canon—somebody like Aleksandra Vrebalov—I think would be absolutely perfect. I think that we do need to address, what I hate to call, for lack of a better term, "edgier" schools of music: electroacoustic music, microtonal music, graphics scores, performance art, multimedia, and so on. If we don't do this, Darrius, we're not going to have an audience anymore. And people are not going to sit still to watch stuffy old men and women in tuxedos play chamber music. They're just not going to do that anymore. I'm sorry. I'm going on record to say this, right? The writing's already on the wall in 2019. The most successful performances that we've had this year have been those that employ electroacoustic music and multimedia, as you know.

So, I think we need to address that in the faculty. We need to attract faculty. I'll be here for another six years, I think, absent safes and pianos falling out of the sky. We need to bring people in that have a good grasp on non-Western, non-Western tradition and European avant-garde tradition. That's the thing that I think the Conservatory needs to move forward.

Dariush:
Right, and from my understanding, before or even during your beginning years at SFCM, that kind of was the attitude?

David:
Yes. [In] the New Music Ensemble that Joan Gallegos directed. And the Conservatory, in Chamber Music West and the New Music Ensemble and later in the Blueprint Project concerts that Nicole Paiement spearheaded … premiered some pretty significant avant-garde works at the conservatory.

Dariush:
I was shocked to learn about a few of them. And that says something about the environment, if I'm absolutely shocked to hear some of the most avant-garde pieces were premiered here.

David:
Yes. Yeah, absolutely. And …you know, my feelings about the homogeneity and vanilla-izing of San Francisco are a whole different interview. But I feel that San Francisco has lost a lot of the color that it traditionally has. And I yearn for the city to wake up and get it back.

Dariush:
That was my next question. So do you think that our Conservatory is reflecting on what's happening in the city? Because I also go around to different concerts in the city, different art installations, and it just seems like we've lost that spark, the fire inside us, to be more risk-taking and be more adventurous with our tastes and our art, basically.

David:
I agree, but unfortunately, I think that's indicative of the United States. I think that we see this happening in a lot of different venues all over the country. San Francisco's always been a bit provincial. But it did have a unique character and personality that I am not alone in seeing disappear. Anyway, if any city in the United States can get it back, it would be San Francisco. But, time's a-wasting. You know, the clock's ticking. Let's do this.
…

David:
I was trained as a pianist and a cellist. So I wrote piano music, the *Cinq Hommages* and some other loose piano pieces, [of] kind of a fusion/jazz-rock fusion nature.

I went to Vienna with my girlfriend at the time in 1987…'86. And it was a great experience. It was one of the best experiences of my life. But three weeks in Vienna was a lot for somebody who had never set foot outside the country, except for the UK. And so I came back and as a reaction or *an* action to coming back into the United States, I wrote two songs. I had hardly ever written any vocal music before. I had written two songs for my sister based on William Blake's poems, which are still around. I added a third later on. So the three Blake settings were actually my first serious vocal music attempt, and they're still performed.

I came back and my partner said that she really admired the [poetry anthology by Edgar Lee Masters] *Spoon River* [poem], "Lucinda Matlock" and that it ought to be set. And so I looked at that, and then I found a second poem. If "Lucinda Matlock" personified, in that day and age, the feminine for me, then "Fidler Jones," which is another poem in the *Spoon River* anthology, personified [the] masculine. And so originally I wrote those two songs, one for tenor and one for mezzo, to be done in sequence. And that was in 1986, as Americana as I could possibly write them as a reaction to having been in Vienna, which is about as un-American as you can get. I mean, [the] Viennese are so weird. Just bizarre people. And I can talk about what happened with that cycle later, but that happened in 86.

In '88, I was asked by a student, Mimi Ruiz, to set three German poems by a 19th-century German poet by, whose name was Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Incidentally, she and I shared the same disfigurement of our eye: She had a wandering eye as well. In fact, it was called Hülshoff Syndrome, I think, for a while. Anyway, she was a shut-in. She was a Westphalian princess or a duchess or something, and she was a shut-in. And so her music inspired, a sort of a very early feminist kind of breaking out of the norms of the Victorian shut-in, isolated, oppressed woman. And so I set three of those poems for soprano, cello, and piano. I can't for the life of me remember why I added cello. I think it was just because it was there. And that was my first attempt at setting the German language. And those three poems have since been recorded and are performed a lot. They're called *Annettes-Lieder (Annette's Songs)*.

The next kind of music that I wrote… I fell in love with Caribbean music, Latin American and West African rhythm. I wrote *Four for Shiva*, which was a commission for [a] piano piece dealing with the intersection of the Western and jazz idiom[s], again. And so my career through the '90s just picked up and I had pretty regular commissions and so on. [I] continued to give faculty artist series concerts with larger and more varied ensembles and so on. But still predominantly vocal music. This persisted through the early 2000. Pentatone Classics produced and recorded my first solo CD in 2006. It was released in 2009. I also founded Ensemble for These Times around the same time with my friend Nanette McGuinness and that's in its 12th year right now.

And so, you know, things just… you just have to be patient and you have to keep writing, and you can't get discouraged, and you have to, like I tell you guys, I tell my students, you have to write anyway. No matter what the committee says and no matter whether you feel like writing or not. If you're on the planet to compose, then you compose.

So it's just, it's been a Rossini crescendo. Little by little by little … There's been no earthshaking developments. I haven't hit it, hit the big time. You know, I just write and get performed and then write some more and then get performed and then record something and get performed and so on.

Daruish:
So, at this stage…what is one of your pieces that you're most proud of for listeners, so they could go listen to it and understand this is David Garner's voice?

David:
In 2019?

Daruish:
Yes.

David:
In 2019, I would suggest that people listen to the *Spoon Rive*r songs. They're 42 minutes, so you don't need to listen to all of them. I am very proud of my second quartet, which employs a technique that I developed as a reaction against what I'd been hearing in the modernist community, particularly in Asia. And, most recently, I think that the five ricercars—the title of the piece is *Expressions*—but those five ricercars for solo piano, I think those are really good pieces. So *Spoon River* songs, *Second Quartet* and, and *Expressions*.

Dariush:
Okay.

David:
It's funny, the first two [*Spoon River* songs], like I said, the first two were written in '86 … Basically there's only been a couple of performances that were done originally with one male and one female singer, usually just all done by mezzo. And, in 2004, I think … Katherine Growden suggested that I set a third, "Charles Webster." So "Fiddler Jones," "Charles Webster," and "Lucinda Matlock" were the three that were recorded, sung by Susanne Mentzer [on] my CD in 2006. But Suzanne liked those so much that she sent me a bunch more, and I picked five other poems, and those were premiered by Kristen Pankonin and Cathy Cook in 2010. The complete cycle, which is a 42-minute cycle, [was] premiered in 2010 [and] recorded subsequently, and I have plans to record them again with Cathy Cook, because there are some problems with the initial recording. Basically, we recorded in a shoebox and her voice, you know, is not a shoebox voice.

Dariush:
Yeah, yeah.

David:
In 2013, I was commissioned to write a quartet by the Shanghai-San Francisco International Chamber Music Festival, and I knew that I was commissioned to write a string quartet and also my colleague… Sorry, I can't remember his name, the chair of the Composition Department of Shanghai Conservatory was [also] commissioned to write.

So it was basically, that was what that festival was about… sort of a sisterhood between the two schools. But there had been a preponderance of postmodern, what I like to call "silverware on the tile floor sounds," coming out of the Shanghai Conservatory that I never found very attractive. And I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that writing, and I'm not saying that it doesn't have merits or discipline and so on. It's just that it didn't speak to me.

And so I basically, with my second quartet, set out to use a serial technique but strive for tonal centricity as opposed to [avoiding] it. And so I constructed—and I'm still tweaking it a little bit—a very strict technique that I call **tonal serialism**. That is not original: I am not saying that I'm the first person to do this, [Richard] Barrett does it. There's other serial composers that do the same kind of thing, but it's not quite codified in the same way that mine is.

And I used that technique to write the Second Quartet, simply as a reaction against classical serialism. I've written several other pieces using that technique. My cello capriccio uses that technique. *Mein blaues Klavier*, which is a song cycle from the *Surviving: Women's Words* CD, uses that. And oh, and the trio for five instruments, also uses that technique, with more or less success. It is a royal pain, and takes a lot of … finagling, a lot of slide-rule work. But, what it did was get me out of a rut that I thought that I was in with my writing, which was like, "Oh, this is a cool ninth chord, I've used this before. This sounds jazzy, let's use this."

Because I find that, by repeating myself overly, I limit what I can say. And so I invented a new language, so to speak. The… what you referred to as neoclassical leanings, came about full force in a piece I wrote a couple of years ago, based on the poetry of Paul Celan, which I think you heard the premiere of.

Dariush:
Yes, yeah.

David:
Die Eichne Tür, which is "The Oaken Door," for a quintet, vocal chamber music—that uses that kind of intervallic cell manipulation. I got interested in that when I was teaching the [Bela] Bartók quartet[s], which you also took.

Dariush:
Yes, last fall.

David:
Which, actually, Ellie Armer taught that for years and years and years and I have her to thank for how successful that course was, because I used her notes for a lot of it. But I find economy and discipline to be indispensable in composition. And my philosophies about … putting oneself in a small shoe box and limiting one's parameters to the full extent that one can, are pretty well known by my students. And I stick to them as a way to create, highly disciplined yet highly original and individual music.

Dariush:
Let's say in ten years, you're listening to this. What would you hope that you would have accomplished by then?

David:
Okay. The third quartet, definitely a third quartet. I have sketches for a Piano Concerto. I owe my dear departed good friend, Kristen Pankonin … a set of Piano Caprices that deal with stomping, clapping, tapping on the piano as well as playing the piano. And I've actually written a grant with Dale Tsang, to see if we can get a creation fee for that already.

I still have a giant project, which would be a symphonic work called *The Platonic Solid*s, which is based on the five regular polyhedra. And I've been working on the math for that for a long time, and I am still not happy with it. So that ain't gotten written. I have plans with my brother-in-law to write an oratorio. Other than that…

Dariush:
Those are plenty.

David:
Yeah. So I still have masterworks to write.

Dariush:
Right.

David:
That's the thing. I wake up every morning thinking to myself 'Thank God the Conservatory has been so good to me,' and that I am now part-time at the Conservatory [so]I can just devote my life here to you guys, to my studio and and bow out of the classroom. But you know, it's these masterworks. I really do need to write them before I go away.

I just finished [my opera] *Mary Pleasant at Land's End*. I'm looking now to find funds for engraving and, that hopefully will happen this year. And I'll start vetting it as a production for next year. I got that commission in '15, so it's been four years so far. But that was a….Mary Ellen Pleasant is very, very important in San Francisco history. And [I've] actually had the idea to write this opera since 1987, and it went through four librettists, one of whom was me, and started out as being a very dark tale of occult and voodoo and being brought down by one's own inner demons and so on, to the beautiful, absolutely brilliant historical drama that Mark Hernandez has turned into now. I'm very excited. I think it'll be a great, great, great show when it's produced.

Ensemble for These Times started out as being a single project, which we originally termed the Jewish Music and Poetry Project, which culminated in one CD of four of my own song cycles, and the CD won a couple of awards. It's called *Surviving: Women's Words*, and it's four song cycles of poetry by women Holocaust survivors, or victims. Nanette McGuinness and I met for the first time at—I don't even remember what the hell the recording was—I was recording something at Skywalker [Sound], and she was there learning something else within a cheesy ensemble, I think. Anyway, we met and she had heard some of my music prior to that. And so

we decided that we would do this—one of the cycles that had already partially been written by that point. It was a cycle called *Chanson für Morgen: No. 2, Nachts*, with poetry by Mascha Kaléko's, who was a German Jew who then emigrated to the United States—that's a whole other story.

Anyway, so after we got done with that CD, we decided that we were unnecessarily limiting ourselves by calling ourselves a Jewish Music and Poetry Project, simply put. It's kind of a niche, you know? And so we retitled the ensemble Ensemble for These Times based on one of Kaleko's poems, which is called *In dieser Zeit*, "In These Times." And basically, Nanette is a musicologist. She's a soprano and a musicologist, but her gift is in curating. And while I did write a number of works for this ensemble, what we've really striven to do is to bring to light forgotten or neglected or underperformed music of the mid-20th-century.

We did that for a couple of years. And finally we decided that we needed to do a call for scores, to bring even more new music to light. We did a call for scores and I don't remember when it was, 2016 I think. We got more than 300 submissions, which we boiled down. And we're using those … [with] basically a combination of either soprano, piano and cello, any combination of those three instruments, which is the core, [and performers Nanette, Dale Tsang on piano and Anne Lerner-Wright on cello. And we have commissions for other composers to write for us, and a yearly project. And our project has gone from the project of Paul Celan, to a Guernica project for the anniversary of the massacre of Guernica that the performers went to Madrid and did performances in Spain for that at the Parada.

Dariush:
And film noir?

David:
And film noir, just most recently. Next year is *Mothers and Daughters*, the year after that is something about *Space: The Final Frontier*. So I don't know what the hell it is.. But Nanette is really an incredible curator. I'll tell you I can't spend as much time anymore—because of these masterworks that are haunting me—with Ensemble for These Times as I used to. So I will be from now on, I'll be an artistic consultant, and I will continue to write music for them. But I won't be in the production end of it as I used to be. It just becomes too much after a while.

Dariush:
Right, right, and, the ensemble is … 12 years old now?

David:
We just finished our 11th season.

Dariush:
Wow. That's incredible.

David:
It's incredible for San Francisco.

Dariush:
To survive and …

David:
Yeah, we're stubborn. [*Laughs*]

…

David:
I'll just come right out and speak a little bit about my struggles outside of composition. This doesn't have anything to do with crime. I'm not an ex-con having to serve time and anything like that. But I do come from an alcoholic family. My father was alcoholic, and my mother was alcoholic, and I am an alcoholic.

I battled this ever since I was 12 years old. There was no time in my life that I did not know that I had a problem with alcohol and later, drugs. I am a product of my culture. I'm a product of my time. I grew up in the '60s and '70s. I was in Los Angeles in the '70s, in San Francisco, for God's sake, in the '70s, '80s, '90s and Aughts. So it's this culture, as we all know, it's got a lot of drugs and alcohol in it, particularly the arts scene. Suffice to say that I've been clean and sober for a number of years as of this interview. I have no plans to drink or use today. I find it highly unlikely that I'll drink or use tomorrow, but as we say, it's one day at a time, so we'll let that take care of itself. I'm not going to try to control the future. I just know that I'm happier when I'm not drinking and using. I'll tell you, the most surprising thing about all of this was that, you know, there's a conceit that all alcoholics and drug addicts have is that *that's* what makes their creative spark. As if, you know, that's really what it's all about, that you can't really create unless you're messed up in some way that that really frees the muse and so on.

And I will tell you guys, those of you listening, that that is just such horses–t. I used to think the same thing. And if you listen to my music now, any of it from any decade—and I've tested this with many, many people—you can't tell which pieces I wrote when I was three sheets to the wind and which pieces I wrote when I was clean, cold, sober. There's no difference. And that will surprise those of you that maybe have a problem with this aspect of your personality now. But I'm here to tell you that it's a lie, that … in my experience, there is no basis to the fact that I will be more creative and funnier and prettier and stronger and wittier and more creative if I'm messed up. It's just not the way things are. I, as you know, freely admit that I'm alcoholic. I don't make it a secret. I will keep other people's anonymity. The people that I know that are in the program, I don't doubt them, but I find that I am much more useful to society if people know that I'm alcoholic, that they're free to come to me and talk to me about this. And students do from time to time, come and talk to me about this. And, I'm not a medical doctor, I'm not a psychiatrist, I'm not a MFCC [Marriage, Family, and Child Counselor]. But I do have a certain amount of experience, obviously, inside of this. And, sometimes people find it useful.

I've never lost a job. I've never been incarcerated. I *have* been evicted. I have lost my cars … I've wrecked cars, more than one. But I am very, very, very, very lucky. And I'm actually very grateful for my recovery because I don't think I would have ever grown up if I hadn't had to get sober.

Darush:
How did that happen?

David:
How did getting sober happen? My girlfriend had had enough of me and I was facing eviction, and had lost my car, it had been towed. And then I had not picked it up, so … they said it was just impounded permanently. And my girlfriend had had enough of me, and she moved out.

And so I had a very good friend of mine who I had known for a number of years, and he knew that I was in trouble at that point. So he footed the bill for rehab. And so he and two other people drove me to rehab a number of years ago. And I went into rehab.

And the first time I went into rehab, it didn't stick and … I went out and started drinking and using again two weeks after I got out of rehab. And that lasted for another 18 months, and I almost died. The same three people put me back into the same rehab again a year and a half later, and it stuck that time. And I've gone to meetings. I have an AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] sponsor, I go to AA meetings. I work the steps. I do everything I'm supposed to do.

And look at me: I wrote an opera, I have a job, I have a nice apartment in El Cerrito. I have things that I couldn't possibly have had if I hadn't sobered up. So talk about silver linings. Those of us that are in recovery don't think that we would nearly have had the life that we have now had we not sobered up. It really is better and easier to be sober than it is to be drunk.

Dariush:
Do you still go to the meetings?

David:
Oh, yes. Yeah, I still have a sponsor. I just called him yesterday. Yeah, I still go to AA meetings. You never cured. It's alcohol-ism, not alcohol-wasm.

Dariush:
Right, right. Because I remember asking you in one of our lessons, you know what happens if we just have a drink? You know, it's because of my own ignorance and because it's not talked about at all.

David:
Yeah.

Dariush:
And it's a taboo subject to talk about. And people who are alcoholics are cornered, and they are treated as villains, so they don't want to talk about it. So there was no way for me to know what actually is going on in your head or in an alcoholic person's head, basically.

David:
Well, it's like, you know, alcoholism is…Think of it as cancer. So you have a disease that's incurable, and, or diabetes or something like that. So what happens if you just have a piece of cake, you know? Well, you know, so what happens if you, if I take a drink? But what happens if I take a drink is that all this goes away. The Conservatory goes away, the opera goes away, my girlfriend goes away, my car goes away, my apartment goes away. We say in the program that anything you put in front of your recovery, you'll lose. So the most important thing in my life is not composition. The most important thing in my life is not music. The most important thing in my life is my recovery. Because without that, I lose everything else. And so if I have one drink, all that goes away.

Dariush:
Right.

David:
So I probably won't have one today … I'm not tempted. It's better. It's better now. That's all I have to remember.

Dariush:
Right.

David:
If I keep doing what I'm doing now, then I get to have people like you as a student, I get to have a job. I get to have all of the stuff that I wouldn't have otherwise.

Dariush:
Right, right. So it started at the age of 12. That's pretty early.

David:
Yeah. Here you go. Here you go. It started at the age of 12. Officially, it started earlier than that. Unofficially. [*laughs*] My parents are both academics, right?

Dariush:
Right. So, I don't think you talked about that, actually.

David:
Well, my parents are both academics, and my father was a pretty famous John Henry Vaughn scholar and [also for] John Donne. He also invented what we now call literature of wonder,

which was a literature course that took Lewis Carroll, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien together in and in sort of a body of work that had a certain syntax to it.

My mother was a clinical psychologist, [a] child psychologist, by the way, in case you couldn't tell. Anyway, they would throw cocktail parties. And before I was 12, I remember going sneaking in after all the guests had left and drinking what was left in the bottom of the glasses around the rec room. But at the age of 12, my father traded me a beer for mowing the lawn. And the thing that cemented that was that I was not supposed to tell my mom. So I had this male bond with my father about this beer that I drank. It didn't get me drunk, which really should have been a—

Dariush:
Red flag?

David:
[*Laughs*] —signpost at the age of 12. So we kind of had that: Every chance I got, [I could] take a sip of his beer and so on. And by the time I was in high school, I was [a] full-blown alcoholic.

Dariush:
Wow. You don't hear that every day.

David:
No, you don't. And those that you do hear it from are mostly dead. So I'm very lucky. Very, very, very lucky.

Dariush:
How did that affect you as a performer? Because you were a cellist. You know, you were a pianist.

David:
I could control it for a while to where I did not drink before a performance.

Dariush:
Okay.

David:
But that did not hold. After a while …I quit performing. I would [have] rather [drank] than perform, so I quit performing.

Dariush:
Right.

David:
I told myself, "Well, I just wasn't that good anyway." But the fact of the matter was that I would rather have not had to limit my intake, and I'm being perfectly honest.

Dariush:
Yeah.

David:
I could still compose, as I said. I could teach. You know, I, for all intents and purposes, was a high-functioning alcoholic.

Dariush:
Right.
…

David:
My mother's parents, my maternal grandparents, were German, and so my mother spoke German to them. But … my maternal grandparents, my paternal grandparents, and my parents all played word games all the time. They were punning all of the time. They were always doing Tom Swifties and Spoonerisms and so on all the time. So my sister and I both grew up with just a really terrifying command of the English language and I got interested in languages. I don't even remember how that started. I made up my own language after I read the *Lord of the Rings*. I had learned a little bit of high Elvish, at least the little bit that you can learn from the appendices in the *Lord of the Rings*, and I was interested in German and started studying German. More or less, [I'm] pretty good in it now, although I don't use it. Therefore my vocabulary is gone. But, as I said at UCLA, I wanted to study ancient languages and so on. So that was a lifelong thing. I've written music in German and Spanish, Renaissance-era Italian, Latin, Japanese, Greek, French, and English. I'm just fascinated by it. My fiance is Chinese-American, and I'm trying to learn Mandarin now, at the advanced age that I'm at right now, which is futile,but interesting. We'll see in ten years whether I can even say anything at all. My other interests, as you said, include geometry: I've always have had a flair for it. I use design books and geometry books when I want to think about musical form.

The symphony that I've been working on for so many years, the *Platonic Solids*, is a geometrical construction. When I was a kid, my parents used to give me those three-dimensional puzzles that you would have to take apart and put back together again. And they get harder and harder and harder over the years. But I never couldn't solve one within 30 seconds after I got it. So I have very, very good spatial relations. It's just fascinating to me. The shape of space.

My father was also a Shakespeare scholar and a Restoration scholar. So I have had a lot of that, too. I studied historical martial arts, historical armed combat for a number of years. [I] was in the Renaissance fairs up and down the West Coast for a number of years. I am an expert in Italian long sword, the 14th/15th-century Italian long sword. I don't know, I'm just one of those guys, [a] polymath and autodidact for composition. I find all sorts of things interesting, particularly in terms of looking at form and symmetry and patterns. And I think that that's where the language comes in: If you speak a different language, you have a different thought pattern. I forgot Farsi.

Dariush:
Yeah.

David:
I've written in Farsi. I knew there was another one in there somewhere. It is fascinating.

Dariush:
So because of your fascination with pattern, I think that's where your admiration of Bartók's music also comes in, because Bartók is a master of using what seems like a simple pattern and creating some extremely complex patterns and music out of it …

David:
That's true. And you can see… that's indicative of Arabic. Arabic tiling, the kinds of geometric patterns that you find in architecture … The beautiful tilings that you find in, more Moorish Spanish and in Arabic architecture in general, in Persian architecture in general. It's just all of this symmetrical, mirror, bilateral symmetry, and radial symmetry. I could … I get lost in it all the time. And there are… and particularly in Persian music, there's that same kind of patterning rhythmically. So between Bartók's intervallic cell construction, Persian *radif* patterns, West African drumming and so on … you're right, it's all about pattern for me.

I'll tell you a funny story in 1983, or it might have been the next, in fact, the artist series after that. Whichever the first one that David Conte came to. You know, one of his favorite questions is to ask you what your musical influences are. And so he had never heard me play before. And so he was mystified. He came up to me and asked me what my musical influences were after that, and I told him, well, basically it was [jazz keyboardist] Joe Zawinul, Led Zeppelin, and [jazz bassist] Stanley Clarke, and he looked blank and walked away. [*Laughs*]

So, I would say now that my musical influences still are jazz-rock fusion and hard rock, particularly German metal, which I have fallen in love with over the last decade.

But in the classical canon … my love of variation and development stems from the [Ludwig van] Beethoven piano sonatas that I've played and the [Johannes] Brahms that I've played, from the Bartók that I've played and studied. My rhythmic drive comes from non-Western idioms, but also from Leonard Bernstein—and William Bolcom, to a lesser extent. So those are my influences: Western jazz-rock fusion, Balkan music, Middle Eastern and African rhythm, and German heavy metal.

Dariush:
Beautiful, beautiful. Those are good influences.