

## David Conte 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 January, September, and November, 2016  
Brian Fitzsosa, Interviewer

## **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 Conte Interview**

This interview was conducted in January, September, and November 2016 by Brian Fitzsousa. Sessions were held at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and in David Conte's home in San Francisco.

### **Brian Fitzsousa**

Brian Fitzsousa is a composer and pianist from West Hartford, CT. He received degrees in composition from New York University (B.M.) and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, (M.M.) where he studied with David Conte.

During his time at SFCM, Brian was the Graduate Assistant to the department of Music History as well as a tutor for the SAEC. His musicological interests include German opera of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and dramaturgical issues in opera staging in the 20th and 21st centuries. In addition to teaching and composing, Brian is on the music staff of the San Francisco Opera, where he serves as the Ballet Pianist.

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*David Conte being interviewed by Brian Fitzsosa, 2016*

David Conte (b. 1955) is the composer of over one hundred works published by E. C. Schirmer Music Company, including six operas, a musical, works for chorus, solo voice, orchestra, chamber music, organ, piano, guitar, and harp. He has received commissions from Chanticleer, the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, the Dayton, Oakland and Stockton Symphonies, Atlantic Classical Orchestra, the American Guild of Organists, Sonoma City Opera and the Gerbode Foundation. In 2007 he received the Raymond Brock commission from the American Choral Directors Association. Conte co-wrote the film score for the acclaimed documentary *Ballets Russes*, shown at the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals in 2005, and composed the music for the PBS documentary, *Orozco: Man of Fire*, shown on the American Masters Series in the fall of 2007. Conte received his B. M. from Bowling Green State University, and his M. F. A. and D. M. A. from Cornell University, where he studied with Karel Husa and Steven Stucky. He was a Fulbright Scholar in Paris where he was one of the last students of Nadia Boulanger. He is Professor of Composition and Chair of the Composition Department at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. In 2010 he was appointed to the composition faculty of the European American Musical Alliance in Paris, and in 2011 he joined the board of the American Composers Forum. In 2014 he was named Composer in Residence with Cappella SF, a professional chorus in San Francisco.

January 20, 2016

**FITZSOUSA** Today is January 20th. I'm at the home of David Conte in San Francisco, and I'm interviewing him for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music Oral History Project. To start off, could you tell us a little bit about your early history – where and when you were born, and where you grew up?

**CONTE** My parents met at a wedding. My dad was best man and my mom was maid of honor for mutual friends. They met in November, they got married in May, and I was born in December – so you can do the math. But it's significant, in that my parents didn't really know each other very well, and they were extremely different. My mom was the daughter of a veterinarian and grew up in the country, and my dad was the son of Italian immigrants who grew up in the city. My mom was fair, and my dad was dark. They went to Colorado, where my dad played the trumpet in the Air Force Academy Band – but partly to get away from the embarrassment that my mother was going to have a baby six months after they got married. Of course once they came back all was forgiven, but they moved to Colorado, and I was born in Denver. Then when I was six months old they moved back to Cleveland, Ohio, which is where my dad had grown up.

So my parents were both musical – my dad played the trumpet, he was a music major for a while and was in the Air Force Academy Band, and my mother was a choral singer. In our house we had a large record collection, and my dad had mostly jazz: he had Stan Kenton and Woody Herman, and all of the jazz popular singers; people like Sinatra, Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan. He was always playing those, so I was hearing those from early days. And then my mother had a classical collection; she had I remember five or six pieces that I heard when I was starting at two – *The Rite of Spring*, the Copland *Third Symphony* which was a recording by Antal Dorati, which is one of the earliest recordings of that piece. The Prokofiev *Love for Three Oranges* – Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Swan Lake* – Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the Brahms *Violin Concerto* with Oistrakh playing – the live recording. The Chopin *Four Ballades* with Peter Frankl – all these records were a part of my mother's collection, but as a little kid I especially remembered those big Russian orchestral pieces, which when I look back was significant because when I was nineteen and I went to France for the first time I was already completely predisposed towards the Franco-Russian line of music. Growing up, I was drawn to music and listening to it all the time. Then when I was about six, we got a piano and I actually played on it for five or six months without lessons – I just banged around on it. And then I started lessons when I was seven.

**FITZSOUSA** So you said your father was in the Air Force Band and your mother was a choral singer. Were those their occupations? Did they do other work?

**CONTE** My father started in music but because he was born in the Depression and lived through World War II, as my mother did, he wanted financial stability because suddenly he had a family, which he wasn't really prepared for. He realized his life was a serious matter, so he was trying to figure out what he could do. He got recruited by State Farm, which at that point was the largest insurance company in the United States. So he started selling insurance, and he was extremely successful at it – he was actually the top salesman in the country for fourteen years in a row; he was off the charts successful. Nobody could do what he did now, because the insurance industry has been completely restructured. My mother; she was a housewife and she was home raising me and my brother and sister – we were eighteen months apart. But on Monday nights she would go to rehearse with the Cleveland Orchestra chorus, which Robert Shaw was conducting at the time, and she would take me to those rehearsals sometimes. Those are my earliest musical memories. Then she eventually was president of the school board, she was president of the League of Women Voters, and she ended up starting to work and went into the insurance business herself later. Music was not their professions, but they were both really musical, and really knowledgeable about music.

**FITZSOUSA** Do you have any particular memories about attending any of those rehearsals?

**CONTE** James Levine was the accompanist, I think he was nineteen. I think I'm remembering correctly this bushy-haired nineteen-year-old playing the piano. I've said this in other interviews, that Robert Shaw at one point told the tenors to sing like they have lace underwear on. I never forgot that. Then I went to see my mother perform the Beethoven *Ninth Symphony* with George Szell, and they recorded it. And she did Haydn's *Creation* – I saw all that music, and I still think the Cleveland Orchestra's the best orchestra in the world. For me, it was like a sound image I had in my ear from the age of five or six, and so I had exposure to high quality music making at a very young age.

**FITZSOUSA** Apart from the records you described, what sort of music did you listen to growing up? Things you came upon yourself, or anything really.

**CONTE** That record collection was the center of the repertoire that I loved, but then in 1964 when I was eight, the Beatles happened, and I was completely obsessed with them. I bought every Beatles record. I figured out all the Beatles songs by ear on the piano, I formed my own little group with a neighbor girl who wrote the words to songs and I wrote original songs – I still have the book somewhere – I wrote eight or nine songs when I was around eight or nine. I became very interested in popular music, and I followed, in addition to the Beatles ... I wasn't so interested in the Rolling Stones but I remember Jimi Hendrix, Cream, The Doors, Blind Faith, which was Steve Winwood's band, Led Zeppelin a bit – bands like the Buckingham's, the Association, and then I got really into the Carpenters in the '70s. Dionne Warwick singing Burt

Bacharach, definitely I think influenced me. So I was really interested in popular music. I heard a lot of jazz – my dad took me to see Stan Kenton and Woody Herman when I was a kid. And then I was studying piano.

**FITZSOUSA** So who were your first music teachers – either private teachers, or school music teachers?

**CONTE** My piano teacher was a woman named Bertha Cawrse. She was quite extraordinary because later she became my voice teacher. But she had very bad arthritis, and she was also almost blind, but I studied with her for the first two years and then she went to have her cataract operation. My mother was ambitious for me – not in a stage mom type of way but when she went into the hospital she said “You need a better teacher”, and she found another teacher for me. Bertha, my first teacher, never forgave my mother for that. But then later when I was in high school I ended up studying voice with her. She was a phenomenal voice teacher.

My main piano teacher was a woman named Berdie d’Aliberti, who I still am close to, and still works as a professional accompanist in the Cleveland area – she’s in her eighties. She was a good teacher. I never played as much Bach as I think I should have, but I was really drawn to Chopin, and to Gershwin. I started learning the *Rhapsody in Blue* when I was fourteen – I played a lot of it from memory. I played in piano competitions all through high school. I played the Chopin *D-flat Minor Waltz*, the Chopin *Harp Etude*, and later the Hindemith *Sonata* in competitions. And then I went to a large public high school, which had fantastic music where I had courses in music theory and music history – I played cello in the orchestra, I played drums in the marching band, and piano in the stage band. I played continuo in the chamber orchestra, I sang in the choir and accompanied the chorus.

My choral teacher, Neil Davis, was a huge influence. I was in very close touch with him until he died in 2012. I actually gave the eulogy and conducted the Randall Thompson *Alleluia* for his memorial, which was a piece that we had done many times. So I had those two – my piano teacher and my choral teacher – who were really important to me.

**FITZSOUSA** Do you remember the first time you performed in public?

**CONTE** I played [sings] “Hello, Mr. Robin, you’re so fat and gay. Twiddle dee dee!” I played in piano recitals regularly, probably from the age of eight. The foundation of my own pedagogy, about the importance of memorizing music – because from a very early age I was playing from memory. I played yearly recitals all through from the age of eight until I was seventeen. I remember pieces that I played – the C.P.E. Bach *Solfeggietto in C Minor* that a lot of people play. I played the Haydn *D Major Sonata*, Chopin and Hindemith pieces ... my teacher and I played four hands – we did the *Slavonic Dances* four hands. And then I was accompanying

the chorus and I really worked hard – I played difficult accompaniments, like *Zadok the Priest* from the *Coronation Anthems*– I went to a high school that did really difficult, high quality music, which I had to learn.

**FITZSOUSA**           What about composing? When did you start composing – and what inspired you?

**CONTE**               Well, I started writing those pop songs that were modeled on Beatles songs when I was eight or nine, and then when I was about twelve I started writing piano pieces. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen I wrote six piano preludes, and I still have them. When I play them, I have to say – I probably wouldn't be ashamed to publish them. It's not that they're hugely ambitious, but the thing about them – they are all of the piece. So I was starting to write then, and when I was fourteen I wrote this rhapsody that was heavily influenced by Chopin and Gershwin, and that has three introductions – I remember that about it, it keeps introducing things. And then in high school I did lots of arrangements. I was the leader of a folk group, and I did arrangements of Peter, Paul and Mary, and the Beatles, and things that were popular and people wanted to sing. I also arranged "Up, Up and Away" for my high school marching band. And I had a chance to write pieces for orchestra that the orchestra read when I was in high school.

All this is to say that the '70s was the golden age in public school music education, and Ohio, being the kind of culture and community it was. It was a lucky moment in the history of music education in the country, and the high school I went to – Lakewood High School – was the largest high school in the state. We had five music teachers, there were four thousand students, and it was just completely lucky that I was there. I'm sure I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if it weren't for that. That was a seminal experience for me – going to a high school that had such good music. Conrad Susa, by the way, my friend and colleague – we related to each other about this because I'm twenty years younger but in Pennsylvania in the town he grew up in, it was very similar. He was in a really good choir, he played in the band. He was born in 1935, and I was born in '55.

**FITZSOUSA**           What do you think it was – you said it was the golden age of music education in public schools?

**CONTE**               Particularly in that part of the country. After World War II the United States came into a kind of wealth and material comfort, and the rise of the middle class. My generation – a little less so for Conrad, but it was similar – there was a certain stability in the communities. This was before Proposition 13, before the movement to disconnect property taxes with the funding of public schools. I know my high school now – I'm still in touch with it – they're not doing music on the level that they were doing in the '70s. It just doesn't exist.

**FITZSOUSA** And what about your siblings? Were they musical as well?

**CONTE** Both of my siblings I think have musical aptitude. My brother played the drums, my sister studied piano and sang in the choral program – the same one that I sang in. My sister always reminds me that when we were kids, she would be practicing the piano and I would slowly push her off the bench so I could practice. She's three years younger ... so I kind of dominated the house musically, in terms of the three children. But it wasn't like there was a lot of resistance.

**FITZSOUSA** So when you went to college, did you start your undergrad as a music major?

**CONTE** I decided to go – five of my closest musical friends went to the same undergraduate school I did – to Bowling Green State University. I wanted to model my career, as far as I could understand it, after my high school choral teacher. I thought I was going to do what he did, which was to be a high school music teacher. So I wanted to go to a school that had good music education, and Bowling Green had that. It was a school of music of about six hundred, and so I went there as a piano major, and what happened was, in my sophomore year I was in a music history class with a woman named Ruth Inglefield, who was the harp teacher at Bowling Green, who had studied with Nadia Boulanger. She lived in Europe for ten years, and she was a fairly young woman – she was maybe in her late 20s at the time, and I was eighteen when I entered her class. In the middle of the spring semester I remember I had to write a paper comparing Verdi and Wagner, and she was impressed with my work, and she took me aside and said, “I think you should study with Nadia Boulanger, and I can arrange it.” I knew a little bit about her, but I didn't know that much, and so Ruth wrote to Boulanger and wrote me a letter of recommendation to go to Fontainebleau, and that's what I did the summer between my sophomore and junior year, when I was nineteen.

I should also say that at Bowling Green, the freshman class had about 200 people in it, and they had this interesting kind of competition where they kept very careful track of your scores in musicianship, theory, and history, and the top student would be awarded a T.A. to assist the teaching of the Theory/Harmony component when they were a sophomore – to teach the freshman. And I did get that position, so when I was a sophomore at eighteen, I was teaching Harmony. I did that for two years, and the teacher saw that I was good at it and I loved it, and he turned over classes to me. So at eighteen I was teaching Harmony – between the ages of eighteen and twenty I was a T.A. in Harmony. So that was the beginning of my teaching. Bowling Green, which was not a prestigious school, and that I had a complex about attending (I thought, “I should be going to a more famous school, or a school that has a better reputation”) turned out to be providentially amazing because for me, I got that experience, and then I got sent to France, which I don't know if I would have if I hadn't gone there.

**FITZSOUSA** Did you study composition while you were there?

**CONTE** I was a piano major my freshman year, and then my sophomore year, I decided to be a double major in voice and piano. Then I went to France between my sophomore and junior year, and so when I came back after working with Boulanger that summer for two months – it was a two month program – I changed my major to composition.

**FITZSOUSA** Who was your teacher?

**CONTE** My main teacher was a man named Wallace DePue, who actually also was the teacher of Jennifer Higdon many years later. I'm still in touch with him, and he was a good teacher. I worked with him on three pieces, all of which have been published. One was published when I was nineteen – my *Cantate Domino* for chorus. I could look at that piece and I could tell you every suggestion he gave me about how to revise it. The other was an art song, an *Alleluia*. I heard Ned Rorem's *Alleluiah*, which inspired me, and I decided to write a song for voice and piano – just the word “alleluiah.” The first movement of my *Piano Sonatina* ... I only studied with him for one year, but he was a good teacher.

**FITZSOUSA** Could you describe what he was like – his appearance and personality or characteristics?

**CONTE** He was a real character. He was the person who taught theory, and I was his TA. I remember he walked into class the first day of our theory class, and he said, “I want to encourage you to read [raises voice] and hear everything you write.” Meaning, theory is not a crossword puzzle, you have to hear what you're writing, and that really impressed me. It's not that he was flamboyant, but he was a very colorful teacher. He's in his late 80s, and I am in fairly close touch with him. He's a Facebook friend. He's still composing; he's quite active as a composer.

**FITZSOUSA** To go chronologically – you went to Fontainebleau, and then you received a Fulbright scholarship.

**CONTE** That's an interesting story. Ruth Inglefield, who really was such a huge ... on CNN recently they've had a series on, “People who changed my life,” and Ruth Inglefield would be that person. I am in touch with her, but not in as close touch as I'd like. She became the harp professor at Peabody after being at Bowling Green. She's been at Peabody for many years – she's still there, and I think she's in her 70s by now. But at the end of my two months with Boulanger, my very last lesson with her – and it would be interesting to talk about that summer with her – I kept a journal which I still have. At the end of the summer I realized ... what

happened with Boulanger was there were about 75 people at Fontainebleau in any given summer, and in the very first weeks all of her classes would be packed, and by the fourth or fifth week it would be reduced by half. It wasn't that she was a tyrant, but she was very demanding and people either became tired or couldn't keep up with her.

What ended up happening was that by the end of the summer, out of those 75 people there would be about six or seven who had what I would call a conversion experience, which is very similar to a religious conversion. They realized that this woman, as a teacher, was exactly what they needed, and that they had to stay with her. I was nineteen, I was in the middle of my undergraduate career, and I said to her, "Mademoiselle, I want to study with you more." She said, "I want you to come back, but you have to hurry up, because I'm not going to live much longer." She was 87. So I went home to Ohio with the thought of the possibility of going right back, and just interrupting my undergraduate career and going back to study with her. Ruth Inglefield said, "She'll wait for you." She said, "Let's do this," – it was completely her idea – "You have one more year, try and do everything you can do in this third year that you can't do in Paris. Apply for a Fulbright, and if you get it you'll go back as a Fulbright scholar for your senior year, and you'll complete all of the coursework for your Bachelor's degree that you can do with her." And that's exactly what happened. The reason I got that Fulbright – I had not written that much music – was because Nadia Boulanger wrote me the most extraordinary letter, which I could quote.

**FITZSOUSA**            Please do.

**CONTE**                She said, "To recommend as highly as I do the really gifted David Conte is an endless pleasure, for gifted in all the grounds he works with such compassion, with such conviction, that every gesture coming from him is showing the rare quality of his personality. One can feel certain of the result he will obtain as an artist, as a composer, as a pianist, as a musician, and I am with profound conviction for the authorities willing to sustain this excellent musician." So, I heard later when I went to Cornell that she had written a letter for Karel Husa, who was my teacher. Donald Grout was then chair, and apparently the letter essentially convinced them they should hire Husa, because it basically said, "I must compliment you on your extraordinary wisdom in hiring this extremely talented and gifted composer." She was assuming that they would of course want to hire him. Her letters ... she was really very shrewd about her recommendations. The thing about the Fulbrights was that you were supposed to have a Bachelor's degree before you won them, but they would make exceptions in artistic fields. I was nineteen years old – I guess I was twenty when I received it – and that letter from her I think was the reason I got it. And so I did get the Fulbright, and I went back to Paris and ended up staying for two years.

**FITZSOUSA** Let's go back a little bit and talk about Boulanger. Maybe you could start by just talking about who she was to American musicians in the twentieth century, and sort of the way that a lot of American composers once studied in Paris.

**CONTE** The thing about Boulanger was – I was this Midwestern, somewhat bourgeois, sheltered person, when I was fourteen or fifteen in 1970, the film *Love Story* with Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal was nominated for all of these Academy Awards; it was a very popular movie. They are undergraduates at Harvard, they fall in love. She's from the wrong side of the tracks, he's this wealthy preppy, and he asks her to marry him. She says, "I can't marry you, I'm going to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger." This has been written about in books – that was the first time her name was set in this mainstream Hollywood movie. Of course what Ali MacGraw was saying was an historical fact – that Boulanger had taught at Harvard in the '40s during WWII, and Walter Piston, who was chair of the music department at Harvard had been her student, and that there was this history of people – Elliott Carter was one who was at Harvard in the '30s, maybe late '20s, early '30s – there was this connection with Harvard and Boulanger. Virgil Thompson, Walter Piston, Elliott Carter – all of these people were going from Harvard to Paris to study with Boulanger. And that went on for many, many decades. That's the first time I had heard of her, and then when Ruth Inglefield mentioned her, I knew who she was, and I loved Copland's music and I knew that he had studied with her – but I didn't know that much about her. I went, and got into Fontainebleau.

I remember my very first lesson, which was really quite extraordinary. She asked me, "Play something for me." So I played the Bach *D Major Partita* – the overture. She said, "You are very musical, but you move around too much." She said, "Have you ever seen Rubenstein play? He is like a rock." And then I played her one of my compositions, which was the *Cantata Domino*, which was my first published piece, which is still – the USC Choir just sang it, and it's on YouTube, and I was nineteen when I wrote it. I think it's a strong piece, but she listened to it and said, "Well yes, my dear, this is a good piece, however it is in G major far too much." The thing about the piece is that it's about 5 minutes long, and it doesn't really modulate very much. This happens I think often, that a teacher or someone will say one thing to you that seems extremely simple but it changes completely your conception about your development, or your perceptions about what's going on. I started thinking, "Well, it's true – I'm in this key a lot, and how long am I in it, and what other keys did I go to, and how long was I in those keys?"

Later, when I learned about Copland's first class with Boulanger, where this harpist – and again, this connection where a harpist had sent me there and Copland had this harpist at Fontainebleau say, "You have to go see Boulanger teach harmony." He said, "I've had harmony – I've had two years of it with Rubin Goldmark," who's also the teacher of Gershwin, "I don't want to study harmony anymore, I've had enough of it." She said, "Just go and see how she does it." So he went to the class, and at the end of the class he said, "I thought of harmony as just dull harmony,

but in fact Boulanger was saying that the great masterpieces, like Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* were based on these series of harmonic relations." He said, "I realized I wanted to study with this person." It was a similar thing that happened to me. I thought, "Well, the respiration of pieces of music is based in fact on tonal areas, and their relation to each other." And so in my first lesson she said that and the main thing I want to share about that first lesson is that by the end of it she made me feel like I was in this community of musicians. She said to me, in fact, "You're born to compose." Which I always interpreted as meaning ... she didn't say, "You're a great composer," she just said, "An apple tree produces apples, you will produce music." This is just what you do – it is natural for you to compose. At the time it was an important confirmation. I still had some insecurities about being a composer. It was almost like she immunized me from any future doubts, even though it maybe took eight or nine years before I absolutely committed to be a composer above doing anything else in music. She said, "You're born to compose," and by the end of that first lesson I felt like she was my friend. I was still intimidated by her, and felt certain ... I wanted to please her, and all that ... she made me feel like, "You are a member of the fraternity of musicians, absolutely." It was a very strong feeling that I had, and for a nineteen-year-old to have that feeling was hugely important.

**FITZSOUSA**            So then when you got the Fulbright of course you went back – you had already studied with her. Could you describe what it was like going back and studying with her in Paris? And of course, what it was like living in Paris?

**CONTE**                I have to say that I can hardly believe – I was mature in some ways about my discipline about music, but I was in many ways socially immature. For example, I had not dealt with my homosexuality openly. You have to remember, this is 1975. I thought I might be gay, but I didn't know for sure, so when I looked back, from the ages of twenty to twenty-two I lived by myself in Paris – I'm somewhat astonished that I was able to do it. And some things about it were very difficult. But there was a kind of community that formed around Boulanger. When you studied with Boulanger in Paris during the year, you took her analysis class – if you were one of the more advanced students, which I was at that point, you took her keyboard harmony class on Saturday morning. I studied solfège privately – two lessons a week with her assistant, Annette Dieudonné, and I had a private composition lesson once a week. Because I had certain insecurities about composing, and I also had this deep instinct that she was going to teach me a certain approach to craft that no one else knew – that I would do that. So I did mostly harmony and counterpoint with her. In the two years I was her student, I wrote two pieces. I wrote a piano sonatina, and I wrote the first movement of a clarinet sonata. It was really very little. Everything else I did was harmony, counterpoint, musicianship, score reading, solfège – I worked really, really hard on ear training.

**FITZSOUSA**            Did she push you to compose more?

**CONTE** She didn't, actually. Something that happened to me, which was unfortunate, was that the second summer I went to Fontainebleau, Clifford Curzon was giving a masterclass. He was one of the great English pianists. He decided that the students at Fontainebleau could only play pieces that he wanted them to play – a Mozart concerto, the Brahms *Intermezzi*, certain pieces and a lot of the pianists didn't have them in their repertoire, and so Boulanger was upset because people weren't signing up. And so I came in for my first lesson the second summer and she said, "I want you to play for Mr. Curzon's masterclass. You will play the Brahms *E-flat Intermezzo*." And I did. At the end she said, "Mr. Curzon was very impressed with your playing, and you're a very fine pianist, however you'll never play the *Double Thirds Etude* of Chopin if you don't really work on your technique, and you should do Cortot," – which was this book of piano technical exercises by Alfred Cortot, the French pianist and pedagogue. So what happened was I got that book and started doing them, and I developed problems with my hands.

So the whole two years I was in Paris I actually had problems ... it was a combination of tendonitis and nerves, and insecurity about my sexual identity, and this whole complex of things where I was not able to work as hard as I wanted. And so this leads back to the question, "Did she push you to compose more," because I had this problem with my hands. The first summers I was with her I had played concerts in public at Fontainebleau, I played my own pieces, she asked me to play a Scarlatti sonata. I was somewhat restricted in my piano playing. But the thing about that that was really interesting, was that in my musicianship work there was a period of time when I had a hard time writing. I had to memorize all of my dictations. So instead of writing them down, my dictation teacher would play the dictations and then I would have to sing them back, and keep memorizing two bars after two bars, and it was really a very valuable thing. The idea that because I was restricted in one area, I had to develop this other area, which ended up being a blessing. So she didn't really push me to compose more because she was worried about me. I have a dozen letters from her, because at one point I had to go home for two months because I had to stop playing the piano altogether. Here I had this Fulbright and I was there to study with her, and I couldn't work as hard as I wanted. It was difficult.

**FITZSOUSA** What was different about the way music was taught in France, apart from the way it was taught in the United States?

**CONTE** The main difference – first of all, you have the longest unbroken tradition of composition pedagogy in the west, which is the Paris Conservatory. There's really no other tradition, and I'm quoting, I think, Virgil Thompson here. So what that means is that there was this set of methods of training the ear, of learning keyboard and harmony, of developing a kind of basic musicianship that was at a far higher level than really American institutions have time to teach. It's not necessarily that they're opposed to it, but they simply don't have time to teach it to anyone, and if you were going to learn it you would have to somehow get some time apart from

the American institutions. So I was a theory T.A. as a sophomore ... I was bored by theory and musicianship in college. It wasn't hard enough for me. So when I went to Boulanger at nineteen, I loved how hard it was, and it kept getting harder and harder, and I kept working harder and harder. I think the main difference was that if you're going to know harmony ... you study harmony it's one thing to know, "Oh yes, it's this chord and that chord," but it's another thing if someone says, "Please realize this figure-based at sight, and now realize it in a different way." Or, "Improvise a modulation from this key to this key." It means – have a fluency with the language of common practice that was simply not insisted upon, particularly in the '70s. I remember that the composer Barney Childs, who probably has been forgotten completely, came and did a masterclass at Bowling Green. He said, "Well, you could learn the principals of counterpoint in six weeks." Even then it occurred to me – what about Samuel Barber, who studied at Curtis for ten years and did years of counterpoint? I already knew that there was a kind of phoniness on the part of pedagogical attitudes in composition in the United States. It seemed to me it was like they were charlatans.

**FITZSOUSA**           What other memories do you have of Paris? Maybe outside of music, or just living there?

**CONTE**                One of the main memories I have is that I was terribly homesick. And that – I had always loved movies, my whole life, because my father was a movie buff, but Paris is a great city for film. And so my main recreational activity was going to movies, and the Parisians were crazy about American films, so this is in 1976 to '78 – I saw many of the major American films from the history of cinema. Every week *L'Officiel* came out, which is still there, which lists everything that's going on in Paris. I had one particularly close friend who was Canadian, who was a conductor who lived in the same apartment building, and we would study this to see what films were playing that week. I would go to the movies probably two, three, four times a week. Also, I went to Shakespeare and Co. – the bookstore, which is right across the river from where I lived, and I read a lot of Americans ... Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Henry Miller, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair. I read Hawthorne, I read a lot of American literature. So while I was living in Paris I had this strong need to connect to my own culture, which I hadn't really done.

**FITZSOUSA**           Is there anything else you'd like to mention about Nadia Boulanger?

**CONTE**                I'm often asked about her because she was such a famous pedagogue – what was the heart of her teaching? And I understood a lot about it at the time, but now that I've taught for 30 years, I understand it of course even better. What I've always said is that the main value of her teaching, which is something that isn't understood with as much clarity as it needs to be because of changes in technology that have happened since that time, was her emphasis on training of the memory, because the most important faculty that a composer needs to develop is their memory. By that I mean very specifically their musical memory, which means how much

music do they know by heart, how deeply can they remember whatever choices they're making, how they relate to the choices they've made before and the choices that are to come later as the piece unfolds. That was the heart of her teaching, and it was connected to something about musicianship. In this time you have a lot of composers who have a very shallow musicianship. They may be very intelligent, they may be very culturally aware, they may be interested in and knowledgeable about other forms of art, but at the end of the day since they're dealing with materials of music, which are essentially pitches and their duration, which has to do with rhythm, it has to do with their memory specially about those things. To the extent to which they've developed that, or are continually trying to develop it, is the extent to which they can achieve greatness as composers. In fact, very few people are focused on that, and that's why today we really don't have that many great composers, in my view. The only way you can have a great composer is if they focus on those things, and so that's what Boulanger was teaching, and that's what I'm trying to teach.

**FITZSOUSA**            So when you went back to the United States, did you immediately go into graduate school?

**CONTE**                While I was in Paris I decided that I wanted to go to grad school. Boulanger wanted me to stay a third year, but I was really just too homesick. I decided I would apply to three graduate schools – I applied to Indiana, Eastman, and Cornell. I had this interesting connection to Cornell – I had a teacher at Bowling Green who had gone to Cornell and I had visited the campus when I was thirteen because my father's secretary's son was a student there and we went to visit him. I was very drawn to it in some way, and Karel Husa was there, who had studied with Boulanger. There's an interesting story that I think I should tell. I came back in January from Christmas from my second year in Paris and I arranged all my interviews. The first interview I had was in Indiana. I liked it, but because it was in the Midwest I thought, "I grew up in the Midwest ..." I liked the school. There was no teacher there that I really knew for sure I wanted to study with. They did offer me a full fellowship to go there. Then I did Cornell and Eastman together, because they're an hour and a half apart. I first went to Eastman, and I was interviewed by Samuel Adler. I was extremely turned off by the interview, because he said to me, "Oh, you're studying in Paris. Who are you studying with – Olivier Messiaen?" I said, "No." He said, "Betsy Jolas?" who's an American who taught at the Conservatory. I said, "No, I'm studying with Nadia Boulanger," and he went – "Oh," in this completely dismissive way. I had listened to his music and didn't think very much of it, so I actually withdrew my application from Eastman after that interview. And so I can't say that I did get in or I didn't get in, I just knew I didn't want to go there. And then I went to Cornell, and I had my interview with Karel Husa, and I loved Husa, who's a truly great human being. I think I've told you this story, about the Indian man speaking to me.

**FITZSOUSA**            Tell it.

**CONTE** This is a real thing that happened to me, and I can't explain it. It's definitely in the realm of the paranormal. It was a late afternoon in January. Ithaca is built – the campus of Cornell is on a hill looking down over Cayuga Lake, which is one of the finger lakes. It's a really stunningly beautiful setting. I was just looking out over the water – it was about five in the afternoon, so in January it was already quite dark. It was like what we would call the gloaming. I heard a voice speak to me, it was like the voice of an Indian chieftain saying, "You must come here."

**FITZSOUSA** Just like that.

**CONTE** Just like that. I already had a strong feeling I was going to end up there, which ended up being a hugely important decision. So I went back to Paris, and then I heard from Indiana and Cornell, and I ended up deciding to go to Cornell. That was in the fall of 1978, I was twenty-two.

**FITZSOUSA** So you started there. What was Husa like? If you could describe his appearance and his characteristics?

**CONTE** Well, the thing about Cornell – I went there to study with Husa, whose music I deeply admired, and still admire. But I ended up not studying with him the first year, because of Robert Palmer, who is a name most people don't even know anymore, but Copland had called him the American Brahms in the 1940s. He was a particular enthusiasm of Copland's. One of my teachers I had at Bowling Green who had gone to Cornell had studied with Robert Palmer. Robert Palmer fancied himself a pedagogue kind of modeled after Hindemith. He had all these ideas about twentieth century music, and he was leaving – it was going to be his last year there. I thought, "I should study with him for a year." I told Husa I wanted to do that, and I didn't realize at the time that Husa was deeply insulted and hurt that I did that. I don't want to say it was a mistake, but I had come to study with him – he had arranged for me to go there – and I thought, "Well, I can study with Husa for four years ... I have five years I'm going to be here, I can study with Palmer for one year and then study with Husa." But I didn't really understand how teachers want to feel a certain loyalty from a student.

So I did study with Palmer, and he and I got along not at all – not at all. In fact, at the end of my first year at Cornell, because it also coincided with my coming out, I decided to leave graduate school. I told Cornell – I said, "I'm not coming back." I gave up my fellowship, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. And then that summer I got a job teaching at Interlochen, and over the course of the summer I thought, "Maybe I should go back to Cornell," and I decided I wanted to talk to Husa, and I went to see him. I was thinking that maybe I should go into music theory, or into choral conducting, which I had a lot of experience with. He said, "Well, if your talent is

as a composer, why would you want to be a music theorist or a conductor when you can be a composer?" I went to see him at his cottage at Interlaken, where he did a lot of his composing. He said, yes, he would take me back – and amazingly Cornell gave me back my fellowship. They just gave it back to me. They were very puzzled that I left, and then I wrote my first string quartet with Husa and I kind of found my ... Palmer somehow had just really inhibited me. We had a big fight because I was analyzing the Copland *Short Symphony* and I insisted it was in a certain key and he insisted that I was wrong. To this day, I know that I was right. He literally could not hear what key it was in, and that was just one of the many disagreements we had. I think he was a really quite decent composer, but we just didn't get along.

I should also mention that when I went to Cornell I didn't know who William Austin was, and he was actually the most important influence at Cornell for me. At the very first meeting of the new grad students he came up to me – they had given me a graduate assistantship to teach music theory because I'd had all of this experience in Paris and I taught for two years at Bowling Green. Austin came up to me and said, "Welcome to Cornell. Tell me – I have a question for you – what is theory?" And that was the beginning of a very deep relationship I had with Austin. I have many, many letters from him – we had many deep exchanges about many, many topics. He would advise me on my thesis about Copland....

**FITZSOUSA**            Could you go back and talk about who William Austin was?

**CONTE**                William Austin was a musicologist who started teaching at Cornell in the '40s. He was brought there by Donald Grout, who had been his teacher at Harvard. He wrote a very, very important book called "Music in the 20th Century" for the Norton series. He spent ten years writing this book, and I think it's still probably the most important book about music that I ever read. He loved composers, and he had encouraged Steve Reich when he was an undergraduate philosophy major at Cornell – Austin had encouraged him after he took his class to be a composer. Reich dedicated his piece *Drumming* to Austin. Paul Chihara was another Cornell composer who was close to Austin. He was very important to composers. He was important to my friend Byron Adams, who was at Cornell when I was there – the two of us were very close to Austin.

**FITZSOUSA**            What are some stories from your time with him?

**CONTE**                My favorite story about Austin is that he taught a course called Schoenberg, Bartok, and Stravinsky, which was based on his own ideas about 20th century music – those three composers being the center, growing out of Debussy. In this class one day, which was a class that had both undergraduate and graduate students in it, he was trying to make a big grid on the board where he asked all of the class members (and there were maybe twelve of us) to name important writers, or important works of literature or theater, and we were trying to

make a big web of the confluence of various cultural movements and ideas. This hapless undergraduate said, “Ayn Rand.” Austin handed her the chalk and said, “You’ll have to write her name on the board, I can’t bear to write it myself.” She said, “Why?” And he said, “Because her writings are so political, and her politics are so mistaken.” He was always saying brilliant things like that, and I already had my suspicions about Ayn Rand even as a twenty-three-year-old. Austin was amazing. At Cornell, it was a small graduate program but you really developed intense relationships with your teachers. I used to have hour-long conversations with Austin and with some of the other professors. He was the most important teacher I had at Cornell, without question.

**FITZSOUSA**           And then you also studied with Steve Stucky?

**CONTE**                 Steve Stucky had been a student at Cornell just two years before. So he graduated with his doctorate in ’77, and when Robert Palmer retired, Stucky got his job. He was very young, and when Husa went on leave I studied with Stucky for a year. He was a fine teacher. He actually supervised very directly my thesis on Copland, and he had just published his book on Lutoslawski. He must have been in his early 30s, maybe 33 or 34 when he came to Cornell as a teacher.

**FITZSOUSA**           And you were how old?

**CONTE**                 I was 22. I was at Cornell from the ages of 22 to 27 as a student, and then I stayed two more years in Ithaca as a teacher.

**FITZSOUSA**           Tell me more about Stucky as a teacher.

**CONTE**                 The thing I really liked about Stucky was that he had very practical common sense suggestions about pieces. I didn’t work with him long enough for us to get into any more deep kind of aesthetic discussions about my music, or where my music was at, or where it was going. But he had deeply practical suggestions and I felt like he respected what I was doing. He was encouraging. I certainly respected him.

**FITZSOUSA**           So in 1982 you lived and worked with Aaron Copland. Maybe first of all, you could describe what Aaron Copland was like when you met him?

**CONTE**                 The reason that I met Copland, was that at Cornell – which had really, I think, at that time a unique curriculum – composers had to write both a scholarly thesis, which was a lengthy paper of about 100 pages, and a composition – which is not true of all degree programs. So as a Master’s degree candidate, I had to write a Master’s thesis. I decided since I knew Copland’s works so well, and I had studied with his teacher, that I wanted to write about

Copland. I decided specifically because I thought of Copland as having defined certain aspects of the grammar of tonality in American music, what about the twelve-tone music? Because in the '70s the specter of twelve-tone music still hung over people. There was still this idea – people like Boulez were saying, “Webern is the only threshold.” Schoenberg had said, “It will be a prerequisite of all composers to enter a conservatory that they can show they can handle a twelve-tone row.” I wanted to answer those questions for myself, because I still felt that that approach to music, and that the music in itself, was somehow far my nature, but it seemed it was a fact of life I had to deal with. And I thought the easiest way to deal with it for me – or the most organic way – was to study Copland’s twelve-tone pieces.

And so I started with his first piece, which was the piano quartet from 1950, which is the first piece he wrote consciously using the twelve-tone technique. This is even before Stravinsky was really delving into it as deeply as he did around that time, or soon after. I did a very in-depth analysis of the piano quartet and Steve Stucky was my main guide – in other words, I underwent the analysis under his supervision, and I shared with him at every stage the development of it and my expressing of it in prose. When I finished it, I showed it to William Austin. William Austin had recently written the Grove Dictionary article on Copland, which is a very deep article and very insightful about Copland. Austin said, “Let’s send this to Copland.” So he gave me Copland’s address, and I mailed it to him. Within just a few weeks I got an answer from Copland, saying, “Thank you for your thesis, I’ve read it. You said many things with which I agree, but of which I was unaware, which impressed me all the more. If you’re ever in the New York area I would be happy to meet with you.” And he left me his phone number. So I called him on the telephone, and I said who I was. It turned out – again, this shows the power of what I call synchronicity of events happening at certain times – the Cornell Women’s Chorus (I was serving as their assistant conductor and accompanist) was going on a tour to New York within a few weeks. I wrote to Copland and said, “I’m going to be in New York in a few weeks.” I called him on the phone and he gave me very specifically the directions of how to get to his house from New York – I wrote them all down. This was in April of 1982.

I took a train to Peekskill, where he lived, and I went to his house and visited with him for several hours. For the first fifteen minutes we had a wonderful, lively conversation and he asked me many questions. And then he asked me a question he had already asked me, which startled me. And then he continued to do that for the rest of our visit, and I realized (I did not have that much experience with it) that he was suffering from some kind of Alzheimer’s, where he couldn’t remember what had just happened. This definitely threw me a bit into a panic, and I tried to deal with it as best I could. At that time, Copland had a secretary named David Walker, who had been with him since 1950 – the early ‘50s. He had answered the door, and he seemed like a really kind man. At the end of my visit I was taking the train back to New York when I thought, “This is really extraordinary, I’ve had this contact with Copland – this person I deeply admire.” And while I was there I learned that all of the sketch material for Copland’s pieces were

still at his house, and were being organized by his secretary to eventually be given to the Library of Congress. I was just at the point of choosing the subject for my doctoral thesis, and I decided I wanted to write it on *Inscape*, which was his last orchestral work, a twelve-tone work. And so when I got back to New York that night I had the very bold idea – I called Copland on the phone, knowing that he probably wouldn't remember everything that had happened. I said, "Mr. Copland, I was just at your house visiting, and I wanted to be in touch with David Walker, would you mind giving me his telephone number?" And he gave me his number. Because I realized, which is so often true, that secretaries actually run the world. If you want to get to people that you'd like to get to, you have to go through their handlers. So I called David Walker on the phone, and we had dinner the next night, and we became fast friends. He told me many, many things about Copland, and together we formulated the idea that he would approach Copland with the idea of my coming to the house to study his sketches at the house. He arranged it – David Walker arranged it.

So the summer of 1982, I ended up living at Copland's house several days a week. I had an apartment in New York and I travelled back and forth, but I lived at the house and I had access to all the sketches for all the pieces, and all the letters, which I had freedom to go through. I saw many letters between Bernstein and Copland, which most recently were published in the volume of Bernstein's complete letters. So I spent that summer reconstructing how he wrote that piece, because he had kept all his sketches and they were all dated, which was incredibly lucky. And I wrote a study that I think is actually quite unique – I've never seen another study like it – which was reconstructing the order of the ideas and how he composed the piece, starting from the sketches, going from the piano score to the full orchestra score, and I have photocopies of all of that. I learned a great deal, and a lot of interesting things happened with Copland. I wrote an article about it that was published in 2012, I collected all of my memories about what had happened. Also, the great biography by Howard Pollack on Copland – Howard, who had gone to Cornell, and had been a mentor of William Austin's, he wrote to me and said, "I'm writing this book, could you write down everything you remember about Copland?" I sat down one day and wrote down everything I remembered and sent it to him. He put a lot of it in his book, and then I wrote my own article many years later.

One outstanding memory I had was one afternoon singing through the *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* with Copland playing the piano – because I knew the pieces really well, and I had a lot of time. He was mostly alone at the house, and I said, "Could we go through these songs? I know them – could you play them, and I'll sing them?" And so he did. In the first song, *Nature, the Gentle Mother*, there's a chord progression that I really liked which was a series of ninth chords of the first inversion going down by a half-step. I pointed it out – I said, "I've always really loved that chord progression," and I explained what the progression was, and he seemed amused by my technical explanation. Then we went on and we sang through, and we got to song number eight, and the progression is there in that song as well. I said, "There is the progression

again,” and he said, “Oh, so it is.” And then song number eleven, *Going to heaven!* – it’s in that song – and I said, “There it is again!” and he said, “You know, a young man could lose a lot of friends that way.” It seems like a labor-saving device, but I would refer anyone who’s interested who’s reading this transcript to read my article, which is on my website, about all the things that happened with Copland. I couldn’t write about everything, but to be 26 years old and living in the house with the person who I so admired was really ... there was something surreal about it, actually. I remember one evening when he conducted *Appalachian Spring*, we had dinner after with Martha Graham and Copland, and I sat between them. That was a heady experience for a 26-year-old, and that was the summer that I lived in New York – it was really the only time I lived in New York for an extended period, which was also a great experience. I’ve always said I thought every cultivated, serious person should live in New York at least for a little while.

Copland wrote me a wonderful letter of recommendation also, which was one reason that I was able to get a lot of job interviews when I graduated.

**FITZSOUSA** Do you remember what he wrote? You quoted Boulanger so perfectly.

**CONTE** He had some reservations about my music, I think. Of course, I was very young. He said, “David Conte is one of the more gifted musicians of the younger generation, and he can be handled upon to handle professionally any project he undertakes. His music that I’ve seen strikes me as being imaginatively conceived, and his theses of my work were first-rate and penetrating in every respect.”

**FITZSOUSA** From these earlier years you’ve spoken about some of your first pieces, and your first published works, but can you recall what you might consider to be your first major compositions?

**CONTE** It’s actually a piece that I have yet to publish. It’s been engraved and I just haven’t – it was my doctoral thesis, which is a Requiem for men’s chorus and orchestra in memory of Nadia Boulanger. It’s called *Requiem Triptych*. I wrote it in 1982 for the Cornell Men’s Glee Club. I was their assistant conductor and then their conductor. They performed it at my recital. In ’88, after I’d lived in San Francisco, Chanticleer did it with Scott Foglesong playing the piano. It’s 25 minutes long, so it was my most serious work that was written – completed in 1982 – I would have been 26. I actually got to play it for Henri Dutilleux. When I was in Paris in 1982 on a choir tour to England with the Cornell Glee Club we did a concert with Dame Janet Baker, for which I played the piano. I went over to Fontainebleau, and Dutilleux was doing a masterclass. I ended up seeing him, and I asked him if I could show him some of my music and we went into a room – and I actually played the piece on the piano and sang through the whole thing, from beginning to end. He said after, “Votre composition a la grande ligne” – which means, “Your piece has the long line.” Which was Boulanger’s expression of “La grande

ligne”. She was always about – a piece of music had to have this kind of unbroken line of concentration of continuity and coherence. I took that as a high compliment, because I deeply loved Dutilleux’s music – to which Boulanger had actually introduced me in 1976. They were close friends – he didn’t actually study with her.

**FITZSOUSA**            So what brought you to San Francisco?

**CONTE**                Well, my family moved to California in 1984. I was still living in Ithaca, I graduated in 1983 but I was teaching at Cornell and at Colgate, and other area schools. I came out to visit my sister, who had moved to the Bay Area in 1982. I fell in love with San Francisco. I had been there before in high school, but ... most people can relate to getting graduate degrees and then trying to make the transition from school to professional life. I was avidly looking for a college teaching position. I had not considered living in the Bay Area, but on my vacation I kind of fell in love with it, and I thought I’d really like to live here. While I was at Cornell, one of my closest friends, a man named John Walker who became a librettist and poet with whom I wrote twelve works, was living in the Bay Area. He had spent his junior year at the Conservatory, and he told me to call Colleen Katzowitz, who was then the registrar. He said, “This woman basically runs the school.” And so I called her on the phone. She was this very nice, very bright Jewish lady from New York who’d been at the school for many years. I called her and told her who I was, and that I was visiting, and that I was thinking of relocating to the Bay Area, and were there any teaching opportunities at the Conservatory? She said, “Well tell me about your background.” So I told her my background, and she said, “You sound interesting. Send me your resume.” So I sent her my resume, and about two days later she called me back and she said, “I’ve shared your resume with our president and our dean, and they’d like to interview you.”

So I went out for an interview, and I remember vividly – this was when the school was on Ortega Street – I was walking across – I took the Muni from Berkeley where I was staying with my sister to 19th Avenue. I was walking across the street and I was looking at the school, and I suddenly had this feeling descend upon me. I had already gone through a half dozen job interviews between 1983 and ’85. This feeling descended upon me that this was the job that I was going to get, and so I went into a meeting with then president Milton Salkind, and Dick Howe, who was the dean. Elly Armer was there, David Garner, and Joan Gallegos, who taught musicianship and conducted the New Music Ensemble. And May Kurka, who was the director of the Preparatory Department. Now what happened was, it was again very fortunate timing. It was 1985 – Elinor Armer had founded the composition department I think just a few years before. John Adams had been there for ten years, he left in 1984. Sol Joseph, who taught counterpoint, and after whom the Recital Hall in our new building is named, was retiring. I remember meeting him. They thought they might need someone, so they interviewed me and I think a week later they offered me a job.

What was interesting about this was that when you apply for college teaching jobs, you have your resumé and you have all of your teachers helping you, and you get the college music society listings. I think over the course of those two years I applied to about twenty jobs. I was lucky I got interviews – I was a finalist for five different positions over the years at various places. I didn't get any of those jobs. This job I got really through my friend John Walker, and through Colleen Katzowitz. I was at the right place at the right time. They offered me a full-time position to teach musicianship and harmony – they hired me to teach counterpoint since Sol Joseph was leaving. I didn't teach composition right away. The department had about nine students at that time, and Elinor Armer and Alden Jenks were the two teachers. And then May Kurka, who was director of what we called then the Preparatory Department, she was particularly interested in my background in musicianship – my French training. So I was hired – I taught one Prep solfège class, and then all the other classes I mentioned. Manly Romero was my first private composition student – he was the first winner of the Hoeffler Prize, by the way. He was a bassoon major, and I had him in my theory class. He showed me a piano sonata he wrote which sounded very much like Rachmaninoff, which I thought showed a really impressive amount of aptitude for composition. He decided that he was going to switch his major to composition, so he was my first private student, and then after that I started teaching composition privately as well.

**FITZSOUSA**           What were your first impressions of the Conservatory as a school?

**CONTE**               Well, I actually became – over the twenty years that we were in the Sunset, even though I never liked the neighborhood and it always felt to me like the school was cut off in some ways from the real cultural activity of the city – I actually became attached to that area and I found that when we moved I missed it more than I thought I would. The school was friendly, it was unpretentious. There seemed to be a remarkable lack of politics. It did strike me as if it were growing out of being a community music school and really being a conservatory. This was 30 years ago now. There were of course some outstanding teachers and some very strong programs, but the school was very much still in formation to what it has become, which is really a first-rate major city conservatory. I felt very lucky to be in San Francisco, and I felt very at home there immediately. I also appreciated that I was given enormous freedom. I never had anyone really ask me what I was teaching or how I was teaching, and I was really left to do as I wanted. Looking back, I realize I was very, very fortunate.

**FITZSOUSA**           What were your impressions of the composition department when you started?

**CONTE**               Again, the department was really ... at that time we had about nine students. Every year a few students were being added. Certain things were present even from the beginning, for example there was a very healthy relationship between performers and composers at the school. The New Music Ensemble, which John Adams had directed, was a resource for our

composers. The Highsmith Competition was just started around that time. There was a culture of composition at the school, even from my beginning years, even though we didn't have a lot of students, and we didn't have the level of talent that we have now, there were bright lights. For example, the first year I taught there Dan Becker – who ended up becoming a faculty member and named chair – was finishing his Bachelor's degree.

**FITZSOUSA** And how have you seen the department change over the years? You're obviously chair now, and you've had a lot of influence over the department.

**CONTE** The department ... Elly has to be given immense credit for really forming the department and giving it a certain focus. She was chair I think for almost ten years. And Alden Jenks, who was teaching – I must say about Alden, he's a composer whose music I always really liked. Every piece of Alden's I've heard I've found had a certain vitality. He admitted to me at one point that he didn't really like teaching composition. And in fact he removed himself from teaching composition, and just continued teaching electronic music and some other things. But what happened was that Elly decided to go on leave in 1988, and she asked me – she said, "We need to find someone to replace me, and I have some ideas. What do you think?" I said, "Well, I've gotten to know Conrad Susa, and I think he might be great to have at this school." And so Conrad was interviewed, and then he was hired to replace Elly, which he did for one semester, and then when she came back, he never left. Part of it was that there was – Conrad coming into the school gave a certain energy to the department, and the numbers were growing, so we needed a third teacher. So for a certain number of years it was Elly, Conrad, and myself. Then I think when Conrad became chair the department really developed a certain focus. Conrad – partly in consultation with me – wanted to develop this idea of the composer at the piano being the center of the program. A turning point seemed to be around 2000, because I remember there were certain students who came in at that time, and there was a certain level to their work. And then from 2000 on, the number of applicants kept increasing and the level kept increasing. Today we have 30, so we went from 9 to 30 – we tripled the size of our department over those 30 years. By 2000 we had – at that time we had about 20 students, and that had steadily increased. And we've had as many as 34.

**FITZSOUSA** What changes have you made personally to the department?

**CONTE** The fact of the matter is that, because Conrad was elderly, and I think was a gifted visionary and the moral force behind the department – administratively he wasn't as interested. Because he and I were such close friends he allowed me to assist him. I wouldn't say I was the co-chair, but for the 10 years that Conrad was chair I was able to have a lot of input into the department and how it was evolving, even though I wasn't officially the chair. I was very behind the idea of the piano audition, and I was also, as my career developed and I was doing more and more guest teaching and guest lecturing, I was recruiting students from all over the

country. And then when I started teaching in Paris in 2010, that became really a very important aspect of the school of recruiting students from the EAMA program in Paris. So at present for example, of 30 students, 9 of them have attended the EAMA program.

**FITZSOUSA** Do you want to talk about EAMA, now that you've brought it up?

**CONTE** It was my dream, since I had spent formative years in Paris from the age of 19 to 22, and had gone back fairly regularly – when I learned that Phillip Lasser from the Juilliard School had started a program dedicated to keeping the teaching methods of Nadia Boulanger alive, I started sending students there. The first student I sent was Tom Conroy, who ended up teaching for us for a while. That was in 2001 or 2002, and I kept sending students to EAMA, and recommending them, or our students would discover it on their own. Phillip Lasser would always write me notes saying, “Thank you for sending us so many wonderful students, please continue to send us students.” In 2009 I encouraged two of our students to go – Joe Stillwell and Stefan Cwik, who are both now teaching at the school. I decided to go over there myself beforehand to be able to greet them, and I ended up visiting the school for the first time. I met Dr. Lasser, and later, the next year, he wrote to me asking if I would come and do a masterclass, since I had studied with Boulanger for three years. And so in 2010 I went and spent a week at EAMA, and after my first masterclass he invited me to join the faculty, which I have to say was – I didn't know if that was going to happen, but if someone had asked what I might wish out of the experience of being a visitor could happen, I would say that would be the ultimate result. I have to say, it was really generous of him to invite me. I remember he told me, “I really follow my instincts on these things. After hearing you speak, I realized we need to have you here as a permanent member of our faculty.” I've been wildly happy teaching there for the last five years.

**FITZSOUSA** What importance does that program have in the role of educating composers?

**CONTE** I personally think it's very important because Nadia Boulanger believed that there were certain aspects that the question of technique for a composer was something that transcended style and taste. So composers and artists of all kinds can argue about style or taste, or what they like or don't like, or what style this is in, or what trend this is following. But Boulanger was about something that was deeper than that; it was really a very pure approach to the grammar of musical language, and the teaching of that to people. In a culture like America that is so pluralistic, and so multi-faceted, and where the commercial impulse is so dominant, there are kind of esthetic camps of different schools of thought about this or that – EAMA is refreshingly above all that. And so it's a place where people can go and study and actually get certain insights into how to develop themselves and how to develop their technique so that they can express their ideas. So I think it's very important, and the proof is in the results, because the

composers who go there get so much out of it, and they seem to gain so much from it, and their music gets better. So I think it's very important. I don't think there's anything like it. And the ability to connect to Paris – the cultural energy that's in the city still, even if it's a kind of karmic energy, it's the history of the city. To be able to walk to school and pass Poulenc's house ... there's just no way to duplicate that other than to be in Paris, and it works its magic.

**FITZSOUSA**           And just to clarify that EAMA stands for the European American Musical Alliance.

**CONTE**                Yes.

**FITZSOUSA**           So we have a long list of colleagues – professors and staff from the Conservatory. I'm just going to ask you to share any memories or stories that you have of them. The first one is Milton Salkind, the president from 1966 to 1992.

**CONTE**                I'm happy to talk about all of those colleagues. I want to preface it by saying that I've worked at a lot of different institutions, and I've been a guest lecturer at a lot of institutions over 30 years, and I think that in general the San Francisco Conservatory is one of the least political institutions that I know of. Meaning that, as my teacher William Austin once said, "So often institutions are strangling the very life that they seek to serve." That is true, but something about the Conservatory that is really not the case very often. And I think that's a tribute to the school, and all the people who have been collected to teach there.

I met Milton at my job interview. Everyone understood about Milton was that he was so well liked by that segment of the San Francisco community that supported the arts. He was somebody that everyone liked, he knew all those people. He was a great friend builder, and he was able to raise money from those people to keep the Conservatory going. He was really very popular. Then he retired, and that transfer – for someone who had been president for nearly 30 years, that was a big deal, and the school made a mistake, which everyone acknowledges, in that they hired Stephen Brown, who had been the general manager of the Chicago Lyric Opera. I remember Dorothy Steinmetz, who was on the committee, saying that he lacked gravitas, even when we were interviewing – but he ended up being offered the job, and Colin Murdoch, who was then dean, who was an excellent dean, had also thrown his hat in the ring to be president. He was in a way passed over for this other person, who didn't even last 8 months. So after Stephen Brown left, who I really knew not at all – I think I had one conversation with him – Colin was appointed interim president, and then he ended up becoming the president. Many of the faculty who are still here from when Colin was dean remember that he was really an excellent dean. His great gift to the Conservatory was it did not really have a strong committee structure, so the faculty didn't have full ownership of the institution, and so he established committees and some of those committees still exist, though they've changed names. We had the curriculum committee (which

is now the academic affairs committee), the faculty executive committee, there was an admissions committee – all of these various committees didn't exist until Colin created them. So under Colin the school really transitioned from kind of a community music school consciousness to a real conservatory consciousness.

**FITZSOUSA** Do you have any personal memories of anything to do with Colin?

**CONTE** One thing I regretted, and I think this is maybe true of other people too, is that I had a lot of contact with Colin when he was dean, and then when he was president I had almost no contact. I think part of that was he was so focused on raising money for the building, which was a very long-term project – he started as president in 1989, maybe, or '90.

**FITZSOUSA** 1992.

**CONTE** Oh, '92. So it took 14 years to finally move into the new building, and that was his main focus. And that was a great gift that he gave to the school, definitely. I remember that he loved choral music, and when we were starting to have a chorus he asked if we would sing the Palestrina *Adoramus Te* at graduation, which we did. I appreciated that he appreciated that piece.

**FITZSOUSA** How about Dick Howe?

**CONTE** Dick Howe was the dean who hired me. He had brought certain important people to the Conservatory – Paul Hersh, I think Bonnie Hampton and Nathan Schwartz. I have to declare ignorance about why he left, but he was someone who was kind of let go, and I'm not sure exactly why. But I liked him.

**FITZSOUSA** Debbie Berman?

**CONTE** Debbie became dean after Colin became president. She was, I thought, a strong dean. In those years – I have to say I owe her a debt of gratitude, and I actually did get to express this to her in that in my younger years I was trying to build my career, and I kind of always put that first, before the school. She basically let me do that, but every now and then she would call me on whether or not I was maybe neglecting my duties a bit. She did it in such a way ... in some ways I feel like I grew up a little bit. I took a little bit more adult responsibility for my duties at the Conservatory because of the way Debbie dealt with me – she was firm but she was compassionate. I give her a lot of credit for that, I think she was really in many ways a strong dean. Why she left, I'm not sure. And that's an indication in some ways that some of us who were teaching at the school who were maybe less involved in the administrative politics – I always felt like I was continuing with my teaching, and supported in my teaching, and hoping

still to attract students to the school, and the changes in administration in some ways didn't really affect the continuity of the school. That was my perception. I'm sure it did affect in ways, I just felt they were ways I didn't really experience on a day to day basis.

**FITZSOUSA** Any particular stories in the instances that she called you out on things like that?

**CONTE** I remember she said to me one time – I said that I couldn't be present for something because I had some performance or some opportunity to do something, and she said, "Well, you know, I'm invited to do various things and site visits, and I just can't do them all because I realize that I can't always be absent as much as I am able to be." I don't know ... she was firm but tactful, I really appreciated that about her.

**FITZSOUSA** Charles Schwartz?

**CONTE** What was wonderful about Charles – he was an interim dean when we were searching after Debbie left, and he had a strong choral background so that was a very crucial period in the school's history. We had started the chorus in 1999, but it was not a requirement. When Charles was dean – and also Tim Bach had a major hand in this – the chorus became a requirement in 2003. It didn't pass unanimously, because you know, conservatories don't have a choral culture, necessarily, for complex reasons. But we really have attempted to build a choral culture at this school, and Charles was very supportive of that.

**FITZSOUSA** How about your colleagues in the composition department? Maybe starting with Elinor Armer?

**CONTE** Elly, as you know, is the true mother of the department. It's still for me one of her predominant character traits, is what I would call a kind of motherly concern, and guiding things in the way that a true mother does, and I'm very grateful for it. When I first got hired at 29, I was a bit of an arrogant upstart, and Elly and I butted horns some. When I look back on it now, I think a large part of it was that I wasn't always tactful in my criticisms about the way the school was doing things – the way we were teaching harmony, the way even we were teaching composition – I didn't have the natural tact that I hope I've developed over the years. I'm happy to say that after 30 years Elly and I have developed a wonderful working relationship, and I rely on her a great deal, and I'm so glad she's still teaching in the department. She seems to have no lack of energy, or there's been no diminishment of her energy for teaching.

**FITZSOUSA** How about Alden Jenks?

**CONTE** Of course he's always been a presence in electronic music. One thing I would say about Alden is that I was always very fond of his music. Whenever his pieces were played I always found them very well made, and just to my taste. And so I appreciated that. Alden did confess to me at one point that he didn't like teaching private composition, and he didn't think he was good at it, and the truth of the matter is that he took himself away from doing it once Conrad came on. Alden kind of transitioned out of teaching private composition, and he hasn't really taught it for many years.

**FITZSOUSA** He was here when you first came?

**CONTE** He was here when I first came, and he was a connection, as Elly was, but even more to John Adams, because I think he and John Adams were closer in the years that John was teaching here.

**FITZSOUSA** Tell us about Conrad Susa.

**CONTE** Conrad was a person that seemed destined to really impact the whole tone and direction of the school. I met Conrad in 1986. I heard a piece of music of his at a convention, which knocked me out, and I wrote him a fan letter. And then by an amazing synchronicity, my high school choir had commissioned me to write a piece in honor of my teacher, who had retired, and the man who replaced my teacher had just written his doctoral thesis on Conrad's music. So when I went out to conduct the choir and my piece, he said, "Oh, you live in San Francisco – you must know Conrad Susa." I didn't, so I got to know Conrad.

Those first two years of our friendship – between the time I met him and when he came to the Conservatory – he helped me a great deal. I showed him all of my music, he recommended me to E.C. Schirmer, my publisher, who he had been with for many years. That was a wonderful thing he did for me, and it was something he offered to do without even knowing me very well. What I always said about Conrad is that because we were so important to each other, he did professionally this very big thing for me, and I returned the favor two years later when I helped bring him to the Conservatory. How that happened was (I feel like I've already said this) Elinor Armer was going to go on a leave, and we needed to hire someone to replace her. I talked to her about it, and I recommended Conrad. Conrad came to teach, and then he never left. Then – he was actually on a part-time contract from 1988 until 1998, when he finally became full-time. It was very lucky, because in 1998 he was diagnosed with kidney cancer and he had a major operation – literally within weeks of receiving his full-time health benefits. That was kind of the beginning of a decline in Conrad's health, which was in 1998. But Conrad – at a certain point he stopped driving, and because he lived not far from me I drove him to school for fifteen years. At first, three days a week, and then later two days a week. We also had lunch almost every one of those days when we were teaching.

Even though we had a certain amount of social contact outside of the school, our main contact was really through the school. In these lunches we would be able to discuss teaching, pedagogy, our own work, and I hope one day to write something more extensive about Conrad, because I think it probably is fair to say that in that last 25 years of his life, I was one of his very closest friends, and certainly one of the people that he talked to the most deeply about his work and about music in general. Conrad, when he became chair, instituted the Composer at the Piano, which is something that we discussed a great deal together, and I was completely behind it. But I have to say, Conrad had a very concrete idea about – this is what we’re going to do, this is what we’re going to call it, this is how it’s going to go, and the quality of our applicants rose immediately, as soon as we instituted that requirement, which I think was in about 2000.

**FITZSOUSA**           And what was that requirement?

**CONTE**               That all composition applicants would have to do a piano audition. And that all undergraduates would take in their first two years of study, something called the Composer at the Piano, where they would have a private lesson with a teacher, but they would be working simultaneously on developing their skills at the piano. And then they would do a jury at the end of their freshman year, and a jury at the end of their sophomore year. I’ve tried to compile statistics – I think what we do is quite unique. I’m not aware of any other program that does exactly what we do, in terms of having a very prescribed curriculum that’s built around the piano.

**FITZSOUSA**           Can you describe Conrad’s personality?

**CONTE**               He had never taught anywhere until he was in his 50s when he came to the Conservatory. He had been a dramaturg at the O’Neill Center in Connecticut, so he had critiqued works in progress, but he had not really been a teacher – he had not done classroom teaching at all. And so he was a person who came to the life of teaching later in life, and it seemed to work well for him because he had a lifetime of experience. Our teaching styles contrasted in certain ways. He said one time something really brilliant, because sometimes we would share students, where I would have a student and often I would think, “Well maybe this person should work with Conrad for a while after working with me.” He said, “You get them off the beach, and get them to put their shoes on, and I get them to take their shoes off.” The idea being that his approach in some ways was deeply intuitive, of which I like to think mine is, but I had such a high level of technical training, in Paris especially, that in working with students it often occurs to me to try and help them solve their problems – to prescribe pretty directly what they might do. And that was not Conrad’s approach.

Our relationship, as close as it was, had many difficulties and many challenges. It started in the beginning that he respected Nadia Boulanger, but he never would have been able to study with her. He wouldn't have probably liked her. He wouldn't have liked studying with her. When we first met, she was of course very important to me. I'd finished studying with her in 1978, and we met eight years later. I gave him a book about her – a series of interviews – and after he read the book what he said to me was, "If I'd known how hard it was for you, I'd have been a lot nicer to you." So many things Conrad said were both funny and offensive. As I look back – and I may change my mind – Conrad was raised in a certain time – he was twenty years older – that he bridled and rebelled against certain kinds of strong technical training, it was counter to his nature. Whereas I still believe that that kind of training can save a lot of time for people, and help focus their development. You could say that Conrad and I were alike in that we both had this strong choral background, and strong piano background, and that we'd had these very strong public school music experiences – he in Pennsylvania and I in Ohio – and that we somehow developed as musicians in certain ways that were very similar. But then of course we had these differences where I went off to Paris to study and he went to New York and started to work very early on in the theater – writing music for plays and then eventually operas. He was definitely a role model for me in writing operas. I met Conrad in 1986, and I wrote my first opera in 1996. I was very close to him during the creation of *Dangerous Liaisons*, which was the last opera he wrote. In fact, my first opera was with the same librettist, Phillip Littell, that Conrad had worked with on *Dangerous Liaisons*.

His personality was he had a wicked sense of humor – he liked to tell home truths to people. This actually was appreciated – he liked to tell people things that no one else would dare say to them, that could end up being very helpful, because he thought, "Enough of this nonsense, this person needs to be told." Without going into detail, he helped me in several aspects of my personal life where certain living situations I was in he thought I should change them, or certain relationships. He would say one thing that seemed to really get to the core of the matter and I guess I had the good sense to listen to him. I should also add that I showed him every piece of music that I wrote between 1986 and 1996. And I could still go through any piece and remember exactly his suggestions – and I think I took about eighty percent of them. So that shows how valuable ... I know that I'm a better composer because I had that kind of apprenticeship with Conrad. I don't list him as a teacher, but in fact he really was a kind of teacher.

I already had a doctorate in composition when I met him, and I had written a certain amount of music, but Conrad really had a huge impact on me in terms of the way I thought about music. One thing he did for me that was very generous was a piece that I wrote that's still performed a lot called *Invocation and Dance* – it was one of the first pieces of mine that he heard and he really loved the piece, it was one of the reasons he recommended me to E.C. Schirmer. I had orchestrated it for a certain ensemble, and then I had an opportunity to orchestrate it for a different ensemble. I had three weeks to do it, and Conrad said, "I think this is a better ensemble

than the one you had.” This was in a wonderful concert with pieces by Lou Harrison, a ballet that was commissioned by Mark Morris in memory of Liberace, and the orchestra was strings, percussion, harp, and pianos. My original version had had kind of a group of winds. I wanted to do this, but I didn’t think I had time, and he said, “I’ll orchestrate the first movement, the Invocation. You orchestrate the Dance.” Which was incredibly generous. So he orchestrated the Invocation, and he took melodies that I had in the soprano register and put them in the bass register – he moved things around, he created certain kinds of pedals and layering of sounds. It’s a very straight-forward piece, but that was a huge composition lesson. I recommend that if a composer’s lucky enough to have an older, more experienced composer offer to orchestrate their work – for me, I never thought about orchestration the same way again after Conrad did that. That was an example of his generosity, and I was flattered because I think he really did like the piece. The piece is built on a D pedal, and the text is, “Undulate around the world.” He said, “You have this massive D, this undulation, the death that is circling the entire world.” He actually brought that out more in the piece than it had existed before. So my relationship with Conrad was very important, and very complex. Like I said, I probably will write about it someday because I think it’s interesting and probably important. As I’ve often said, and this is the last thing that I’ll say about Conrad at the moment, is that I do think he’s the most important American composer of choral music and opera in the last third of the 20th century.

**FITZSOUSA**            How about David Garner?

**CONTE**                David Garner is such an interesting personality. He was, again, present at my interview, and we taught musicianship together. I got to know him fairly well at the very beginning of my time in San Francisco, and then for many years we did not have much social contact. But I remember from the very beginning being really impressed with his music. I thought he was a wonderful composer, and I knew he was a strong teacher – he was very popular. And he had gone to the Conservatory – he was a graduate of our composition department. And he was an active composer, but he wasn’t teaching composition, so it’s been nice to see David – he definitely paid his dues; he was chair of the musicianship department, he taught harmony and musicianship for many years, and then as our department kept growing I think it was Conrad who had the idea – we needed to expand our department. There was me, and Elly and Conrad – where was the logical place to look? We thought about David, and so we started David out teaching a few students, and he was so successful as a composition teacher. The other thing I appreciate about David is he is very interested in vocal music and in poetry, and it strengthens that dimension of our department, and of course Conrad was that way – I am that way – all of our composers of course write vocal music, but you could say that our department really in some ways has a certain focus on it that I think is hard to find in other academic departments.

**FITZSOUSA**            Dan Becker?

**CONTE** Dan was a student when I started teaching. He was not my composition student, but I think he did a little bit of ear training and theory with me at one point. Of course we're not that different in age. We became good friends and then he went to Yale. He did stay in touch with me, and I think he always knew that as he used to say, he was going to do time on the East Coast, but that he wanted to come back to the West Coast – he had grown up mostly in Los Angeles. And so when Dan came back – I think it was in the mid '90s – I helped him get a foot in the door teaching in what we used to call the Preparatory Department, teaching composition to the Pre-college kids. He was really good at it, and then one of the times when I took a sabbatical I arranged for Dan to cover for me. So again, Dan kind of very naturally evolved to become a part of the composition department. Not long after David Garner ... I may have this reversed, I think that David Garner started teaching before Dan, I'm not sure. But they started teaching around the same time, so then the department had five teachers, and the five of us taught together for at least about twelve years. Within that time the department got bigger and bigger, and then Dan became chair, and he was a very good chair. I think one of the best things that he did was he encouraged the entrepreneurial side of the composers in helping them – as he had done; he formed his own composers collective when he was at Yale. He was in that sense a good musical citizen, and he built some good bridges between the community and the Conservatory.

Dan and I always had an open and honest relationship in that he had in many ways a different approach to composition. He used to say that we were like Lennon and McCartney – that I was Paul McCartney and he was John Lennon. Meaning that he was a little bit more adventurous, less conventional – the Paul McCartney would be someone who could turn out tunes to order, and was more organized and more extroverted, perhaps – Dan being more introverted. And I think that that balance did work for a time in our department, in that we stressed in some ways somewhat different approaches to composition, and they complimented each other. And we sometimes shared students – they would go back and forth. Dan's also very interested in ideas – in philosophy and in religion, even, and spirituality. We had many, many deep conversations about that. It's not something you talk to everyone about, but that was part of our relationship that we talked about those things. In fact I mentioned John Walker, my writing partner, who had been a student here. He and Dan Becker were very close friends. In fact, that's how I first knew about Dan, was through John. John, who was a deep and devoted student of many different spiritual streams in the culture, many of them controversial, many of them seemingly contradictory. He was also a clairvoyant. Dan was one of the few people that understood that about John. He believed that he was, as I did, and that was a comfort to me in a way because John Walker was a friend who very few people understood. But I knew that on some level Dan did understand John, they had known each other when they were 20 years old.

**FITZSOUSA** And then the most recent member of the faculty is Mason Bates.

**CONTE** I'm trying to remember the exact year that I was in the backseat of a car on a trip somewhere out of town, and John Corigliano called me on my cellphone. Conrad had introduced me to John because they were very close friends in New York – I had met John in 1987. John said, "I have this former student who's really brilliant who's living the Bay Area and finishing up his graduate work at Berkeley. He thinks he wants to stay in the Bay Area and he's interested in teaching. Is there anything he can do at the Conservatory?" So I had lunch with Mason, and the thing I liked immediately about him was even though he in many ways I think was trying to consciously work in areas you might say are cutting edge, or somewhat experimental, he had a very solid musical background as a boy choral singer in an Episcopal boy's school, and then as a pianist. To me, he seemed to have really solid musical chops, and I felt he could maybe fit in well in our department. The first thing we did was I set up that he should come into the composition seminar for three sessions and talk about his work, and talk about working with electronics especially. And then John Spitzer, who also we should mention – John Spitzer was chair of the music history department, and he and I had been at Cornell together – he also was interested in what Mason was doing. John decided to offer Mason a class, and so for a couple of years Mason was doing one day a week a class. And then when Conrad died in 2013, we were looking to add to the composition faculty, and we did go through a whole search but it turned out that it was very practical to have Mason. And Mason was at that point interested, so he's now been teaching for three years for us, and I think he adds a wonderful dimension to the department.

**CONTE** I should say at this point – I want to just throw this in. I've appreciated that there's enough freedom at this school where a faculty member like myself – and I'm sure it's happened with other faculty – if there's someone good that you know about, or that is recommended to you, or that you have personal knowledge of, that you want to bring into the community – it's possible to do it. Of course, there's a process, and a person has to run a gauntlet, but I felt really lucky that over the years I've been able to help people get their foot in the door teaching here. Almost all of them have been outstanding, and even though I'm not an administrator, it's something that I've felt lucky to be able to do. And the fact that I had the freedom to do it, and that the school as I said was not political in a more traditional way, allowed that to happen, has I think made the school a better place.

**FITZSOUSA** Could you talk about Scott Foglesong?

**CONTE** Scott was one of the first people I met in my first year teaching – we met at the coffee machine. He found out I was a composer, and he said, "I'd like to play something of yours." I had written a sonata for two pianos at Cornell, and I suggested to him – "What about this?" And he decided to program it on one of his recitals. So it was the first piece of mine that was played at the Conservatory, and it was my first time I'd performed publicly in San Francisco. It was in the spring of 1986, and the recording still exists. I listened to it recently and I

couldn't believe how good it was – I had forgotten. I don't play that well anymore, and of course Scott – he's always just been an immensely gifted pianist. So that was the beginning of our friendship. At that time Scott was living in the Sunset where the school was, but he really wanted to move. And I was living in Oakland and I wanted to move – so we decided we would try and find a house together, and we actually did. We were housemates for almost two years, and during that time we continued to work on various projects.

I've always thought that Scott was one of the most phenomenally talented musicians that I've ever met, and it's been great to see him grow into his role at the Conservatory – becoming department chair, and now doing more lecturing. So he also has taken a real interest in the composers, and he's commissioned some of our students to write pieces for him, and he comes to the concerts. In the past I used to do more formally – if he would ever come to a department concert I would ask him to write a critique for me, which he did and used to send me. This was just between the two of us – he would send me his critiques of the pieces. I was always amazed at how often I would agree with him – not always, but he seemed to be able to put his finger on the strengths and weaknesses, and the various way that I've always found was really valuable and instructive. Of course he works a lot with our students as a teacher of keyboard skills and analysis, and advanced musicianship, so I feel he's very much a part of the composition department.

**FITZSOUSA**            How about Mack McCray?

**CONTE**                Mack of course was here when I arrived. Mack is what you would call a character. He always had a lot of personality, he had a certain kind of sense of humor that he would share in faculty meetings. I know he deeply loved the school, and he also was very interested in composers, and there were some occasions where he actually asked some of our students to write pieces for him. Outstanding in my memories of Mack are two performances – one was the Gershwin Concerto in F, it was just a wonderful concert and I remember the program: they did the Copland *El Salon Mexico*, the Barber *Second Essay*, and the Gershwin *Concerto* – it was an all American program with David Ramadanoff conducting. Mack played that piece really well. And then in one of his recitals he played the Beethoven *Pastoral Sonata* just absolutely beautifully. I always had a feeling that Mack, having been active in the new music scene in the '60s and '70s, felt that our department was too tame, and too traditional, and too conservative. I think he really did think that, and he may still think that. Of course I didn't agree, because I thought particularly for young composers, they need to get a certain grounding. If they don't get it when they're young, they're never going to get it. So my own approach has been I suppose much more traditional, but I sometimes felt that maybe he didn't appreciate completely the depth of what we were trying to do for our students. But we had some great conversations about Sibelius, and I was always trying to figure out why he didn't like Hindemith and Ginastera.

**FITZSOUSA** David Tanenbaum?

**CONTE** Of course again – David is another example of a faculty member who’s deeply committed to composers, and to creating new music. I became aware very quickly on coming to the Conservatory that the guitar program was one of the strongest in the school, and continues to be one of the strongest in the world. I was commissioned to write a guitar duo in 1988 called *Of A Summer Evening*. I asked David for help with it, and he actually went through and edited it for publication. And he made some wonderful suggestions – he suggested that one whole passage be done in harmonics, which wouldn’t have occurred to me. I think his editing made the piece much better, and that was a very concrete thing we did together. Of course there have been all of the guitar projects with the composition department. And David also was a great supporter of the choral program, which I really appreciated.

**FITZSOUSA** Hermann le Roux?

**CONTE** Hermann le Roux was chair of the voice department, and also very supportive of composers. He did have a kind of choral program going which didn’t have real continuity. It was called the Cantata Singers, and he created this ensemble which was very flexible. They could do chamber choral works, they could do larger choral works, they could do Bach *Cantatas*, they could do pieces by students. They could do operas – so in fact *The Gift of the Magi* was my second opera I wrote for the Conservatory, and it was within the rubric of the Cantata Singers that it was first produced for two pianos in 1997. He was very supportive of that project.

**FITZSOUSA** Jodi Levitz?

**CONTE** Jodi and Bettina [Mussumeli] came I think in 2001 – the very beginning of the millennium. Jodi of course – right away she was supportive of the Viola Project, which she worked on more closely with Dan [Becker]. But then her quartet commissioned me to write a string quartet that they premiered in 2010. Jodi was the person I worked with the most closely – I would go in to see her and she would play through the part and suggest bowings. I see Jodi – she’s such a gifted teacher, but she’s also a gifted administrator. She’s a natural leader, and she’s been very important in the school. She’s been on important committees, and she’s a wonderful colleague.

**FITZSOUSA** Tim Bach?

**CONTE** Tim Bach used to run the ensemble program, and he did all the scheduling, which was very difficult. I appreciated Tim especially for his support of the chorus, because again this wasn’t something that everyone wanted to have, but Tim thought it was

important and was always very supportive. He often came through with some money to hire players, and he would help me find accompanists. He also served as interim dean for one year, and I personally liked him in that capacity. He's another person who was here before me.

**FITZSOUSA** Cathy Cook?

**CONTE** Cathy Cook I knew years before she became a teacher through mutual friends. I really have appreciated about Cathy that she has continued to have a singing career while she's been a teacher. She asked me to write a song cycle for her in 2008 – my *Rossetti Songs* – again, another example of a faculty member who's interested in new music and supports it. She was chair for the last six years or so – our biannual art song competition, she's always very supportive.

**FITZSOUSA** Ragnar Bolin?

**CONTE** Ragnar I knew because I was very close to Vance George, who was Ragnar's predecessor as conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus. When Ragnar came in I was lucky to meet him fairly soon after that. He had programmed some of my music with the Symphony Chorus and then he was brought into the Conservatory to start a chamber music choir I think in 2010, and I've been his composer in residence for his professional group for the last two years. It's great to have him as another link to the Symphony.

**FITZSOUSA** And Scott Sandmeier – the current conductor of our orchestra?

**CONTE** I've really enjoyed having Scott on the faculty because we both have this deep French background – Scott having taught for ten years in Paris and been a student there. Scott has taken a real leadership role in expanding opportunities for composers. Also, when we first met he shared with me that he wanted the orchestra to play less music and rehearse it more, which I'm in favor of. In other words, going more for depth, rather than breadth, so the students can have an experience of achieving a certain level of mastery. I really enjoy our conversations about repertoire and about music. He's been a great support to the composition department.

**FITZSOUSA** Somebody you've mentioned already, but if you have anything more to say about is John McCarthy.

**CONTE** John McCarthy was director of the Pre-college department. How John and I worked together was if a really gifted young composer came along who was in the Pre-college division, he would send them my way. So even though I wasn't formerly teaching very much in the Pre-college, every now and then I would have a student. For example, my student Tristan Yang, who has been studying with me for six years, was someone John McCarthy recommended.

He continued to do that both before and after. He's also a member of the Bohemian Club, as I am, and so I see him there.

**FITZSOUSA** Julie Karres?

**CONTE** Julie was the receptionist. The thing about the old school was that the building was mostly on two levels. There was a basement that had some practice rooms, but whenever you went to the school you would run into everyone. You couldn't really be in the building and not see who else was in the building, you would just cross paths with them. It was not a vertical building, it was more of a horizontal building. Julie was the receptionist – the person who greeted everyone when they came. She was a Baha'i, so she belonged to an unusual religious sect, if you want to call it that. She was a heavy smoker, and there was a time when she wasn't allowed to smoke. When I first came, you could smoke in some places inside buildings. She was a real personality. If they were going to make a situation comedy of the Conservatory, Julie would have to be one of the main characters, as the receptionist.

**FITZSOUSA** Just going back to a few more people to talk about. Is there anything else you wanted to say about John Spitzer?

**CONTE** John Spitzer and I had been at Cornell together. He was finishing his doctorate when I started mine. I remember he wrote it on Turkish music. He was a very brilliant and quirky guy. It seemed amazing to me that he ended up at the Conservatory after 25 years. We also had lots of conversations about music, and about opera in particular. I appreciated that he came to see all of my operas, and he always had interesting things to say about them, and was interested in my thoughts about opera. That's a great interest of his. Cornell is an unusual place, and it's a wonderful place. There's been a presence of Cornell at the school with myself, with John Spitzer, with now Rebecca Plack, with Alex Brose, who was director of admissions and did very good work in that job, and then he became director of development, or advancement – he's now at Aspen. He had been a student at Cornell after me, but I had had contact with him as a younger student. If I remember right, I did recommend him for the job – I was one of his references. So he was yet another person I felt lucky to be able to help come to the Conservatory.

**FITZSOUSA** Dorothy Steinmetz?

**CONTE** Dorothy was head of our general education, and she was a Berkeley PhD and a very cultured, sensitive, interesting person. In a way, like Nick Hohmann, it really agreed with her to be teaching liberal arts courses at a conservatory. She invited me to come in and speak to her poetry classes about setting poetry to music, which I appreciated. Nick Hohmann also – it's well known that Nick Hohmann's Western Civilization course is one of the courses that every student who takes it remembers more than any other course. And Nick is a very

shrewd person about taking a long view and a large view of the school, and all the dimensions of the school. He's very suited to his job, he really loves teaching young musicians liberal arts.

**FITZSOUSA** David, could you tell us a little bit about your experience with our president, David Stull?

**CONTE** Yes. When David came, of course I had heard about him because he had been a forceful presence as an administrator. He was at Oberlin for fourteen years, and because I grew up in Cleveland I've always been aware of Oberlin, and I have many friends and colleagues in Cleveland. I also was aware that there were other very prestigious institutions who were interested in him to be their president. Then I heard that he had decided to come to San Francisco, and it immediately set me thinking that he must understand something very deeply about the character of the city, and about the potential that the city has, and the potential that the Conservatory has, which is because of where it's located. It has always been one of the Conservatory's greatest strengths. Even when the school was weaker, or not as strong as it is now, being in San Francisco, which is such a wonderfully diverse and colorful city, and such a strong city for the arts, we were able to overcome some of our shortcomings. I think most have been addressed, to a great extent, by David Stull. Our previous president, Colin, did a wonderful thing working tirelessly to raise the funds to build our new building, and overseeing the move, which was hugely important. I think David Stull wouldn't have been able to do what he is doing, and what he has done, if we weren't located in the Civic Center.

So I was delighted when David came, and he gave a talk outlining his seven year plan – the plan the Board had hired him to implement – and I thought it sounded very exciting and just what the school needed. After we moved into our new building we were in a sort of holding pattern because it was a big adjustment. But there was a feeling on a part of some of us ... we moved in 2006, and around 2010 or '11 the school was not really looking forward in a way that it could. So David really seemed to be the right person at the right time. On a personal note, because he's from Ohio, which is where I'm from, and I still have strong roots in Ohio, as I explained, and he had strong roots in Cleveland, which is my hometown, we had a lot in common right away and it was easy to talk to him about various things. Also, I really appreciated, and I often thought that David's wife needed some kind of medal because that first year that he was here, he was here simply every evening. He went to every concert. He even went to student concerts, and I thought, his family is not seeing him very much! I think that was a very wise thing to do, but I think he was genuinely interested in learning what the school was about. I very much appreciated his presence.

I would say, in contrast to some aspects of the previous administration (which had good points, absolutely) I know I'm not alone in feeling that this new administration is much more demonstrative in their appreciation. They go out of their way to praise new work, to be

encouraging, and this is a hard job. It's really demanding, and I really appreciate that. I think that David is managing to create a whole new kind of Conservatory, in a way that is going to make us ultimately different from any other kind of Conservatory. I think that's a great thing, and the way we're going to be different is a reflection of the city in which the Conservatory is situated, and that's how it should be. In some ways it makes it very local, but since San Francisco is a city that really does have – not only national, but international influence – all you have to do is look at the New York Times. You can't see a daily issue of the New York Times without the Bay Area being prominently featured. So I'm delighted with David Stull's work. I always told him that I would be his loyal lieutenant for any tasks he wants accomplished. I haven't seen anything to change my mind about that.

I think we were very lucky to find Kate Sheeran. Her background as both a performer and advocate for new music, along with her experience as a Conservatory administrator at Mannes, has been an ideal combination of qualities for us. Her vast contacts in the realm of new music composition have enabled her to invite many important guests to the Conservatory. And of course I've especially appreciated her support of the Composition Department.

Bob Fitzpatrick made immense contributions during his brief year and a half tenure as Acting Dean, especially with regard to getting us through our WASC accreditation process. His experience at Curtis was a very valuable "measuring stick" for us during what has been a period of rapid growth and expansion of our mission. And personally his connection to the cultural and musical life of Paris has meant a great deal to me. He gave wonderful tours of various Paris neighborhoods especially for our SFCM students who've been studying at EAMA in Paris during the past several summers.

The thing about the old school – a very nice feeling developed in the old school when we knew we were moving. It's as if you were one big family, and you knew you were too big to fit in your house, but it was only temporary and in a little while you were all going to be moving into a much bigger, more spacious, much better house. So I have images of people sitting on people's laps a lot, and classrooms being really crowded. We all knew – we were taking more students, and getting better and better students, but we all knew that we were moving into a building that was going to be twice the size of the building we were in. In those last four years or so on Ortega Street, it was like being in a big family, with all the kinds of creature comforts and messiness and intimacy of a big family. It definitely changed, and I think it dissipated somewhat, but it was not lost when we moved.

The move was so important, because the distance between the Sunset and Civic Center in good traffic is no more than twelve minutes, but psychologically it was a huge distance. In one meeting Conrad Susa stood up and said, "The Conservatory is not at present a destination." Meaning, no one was going to be headed to the Conservatory. We had to relocate to an area that

was near a lot of other destinations. And so there was a lot of conversation about where we should move – people considered moving to the Presidio, they considered moving south of Market to the Yerba Buena area, and then of course Civic Center. We were just lucky when the building came up that we rebuilt and occupied it. I think it made an enormous difference when we moved – for example, the whole sense of student deportment, of how people dressed to attend recitals and to play on stage – it would not be unusual to see people go on stage in their tennis shoes. It's not that that never happens, but moving downtown we had to grow up, because we were much more visible, and we were rubbing shoulders with the Opera and the Symphony and all the other important cultural institutions. It was a kind of a coming of age for the school. It changed the school profoundly, for the better.

**FITZSOUSA**           What are some of the ways that you've seen the Conservatory is different, or is becoming more individual from other conservatories in the country?

**CONTE**                One thing that is unique about San Francisco is its size and the concentration of talent, and the way the city is laid out. It's similar to New York, except it's smaller. It's similar to Paris, and maybe similar to London in some ways. The scale of San Francisco is a much more human scale than any of those other cities, and it's always been possible for people to gather around a project or an idea, and actually make it happen. In my observation, it's much easier to make anything happen in San Francisco than anywhere else that I've ever observed. If somebody says, "I want to start a new opera company" – "I want to start a new chamber ensemble" – "I want to start a new art song concert series" – those things just happen in San Francisco more easily. And so our school was already doing that, but David has drawn on that in creating the TAC [Technology and Applied Composition] program, and now the new jazz program, and forging relationships with institutions that are already here. In TAC for example, you have Sony, Pixar, Lucas Film, Skywalker, and all of that. We've already been drawing on that. And then with the jazz program we have the Jazz Center [SF Jazz] of course. So I think David has enormous energy, he's very extroverted, and it takes someone with that kind of energy to completely harness the forces that are out there to make things happen. The kinds of programs that we're having, like the TAC program, is unique in that the students are getting a very solid traditional conservatory education to the extent that they have time to do it, along with the specialized education that they're getting. And then they have immediate access to all these industry professionals locally. Jazz I think is going to end up doing a lot of the same things, although we have to see, of course.

**FITZSOUSA**           Speaking of our TAC program, could you speak a little bit about the new dean of that program?

**CONTE**                MaryClare Brzytwa, when she arrived David Stull obviously had immense confidence in her because he brought her from Oberlin, and he said, "Create this program,"

which is a very daunting task, and she's a fairly young woman. It was decided that as chair of the Composition Department I would be involved on a committee with other people to help advise how this new curriculum would be developed, and how it would interface with the existing concert music composition program. In our very first meeting, I discovered that MaryClare grew up just three blocks away from where I grew up. She's from the exact same community, she went to the same high school, our mothers even knew of each other a bit. Of course that's a wonderful personal connection, but I've worked very closely with MaryClare, and I've come to really respect her. She's very tough, but also very fair. I think she has real vision. Like Elly [Armer], she's a bit of a mother hen with the students, in that the students absorb all of her attention. She's aware of every one of them and what they're doing. She kind of has the big view about their general education and their general development. It's been great to work with her, we've had absolutely nothing but a completely harmonious and a very productive relationship.

**FITZOUSA** Can you talk about how your life as a gay man has intersected with your life working at the Conservatory, and being a composer?

**CONTE** Well of course in 1985 when I moved here, San Francisco had already long had the reputation of being a center of gay life. Having grown up in the Midwest, and then going to Paris when I was 19, I had not dealt with my homosexuality. I was confused about it. This is talking about the years 1970 to 1978. In fact, I remember the last night I was in Paris I gave a party at my house for all of my friends before I was going to go back to the States, and Jay Gottlieb, who's a really wonderful American pianist who's lived in Paris for many years and still lives there, brought over all these disco tapes. I had never heard disco music, and I was kind of electrified by it. Little did I know, when I went back to the States, that disco music was going to be an important part of not only coming out, but also reconnecting to popular music after spending three years with Nadia Boulanger, where I wasn't thinking at all about popular music – and that it was going to influence my own compositions. And so at Cornell is where I came out, which is a great place to come out. But all of this is to say that when I lived in Paris, which is a major city, I was not out. When I was in Ithaca, which is a small college town, is when I did come out. So moving to San Francisco – I had never lived in a big city that had a large gay population, where there was a large group of gay peers, and a whole community. So in some ways, it was like coming out all over again.

The big thing that I experienced right away was that it became a non-issue. The way this was spelled out to me was at the Conservatory, because when I first arrived in San Francisco I'd written works for the Cornell Glee Club and the Harvard Glee Club had done my works. I was commissioned by the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus to write a piece – which I did write, *Invocation and Dance*, which was performed. Then I decided that I wanted to do a recital of my music at the Conservatory. This was a 14 minute piece for chorus and chamber orchestra. It was definitely a piece that I wanted performed, and so I was going to have guest performers

performing in this concert. I learned, of course, that if you were inviting guests from outside of the school you had to go to the dean and tell them, or get approval. So I went into the dean's office – that was Dick Howe. I'm 30 years old, I've only been in California not even a year, and I said, "I want to give this concert, and I'm inviting these different performers." He said, "Yes, uh-huh, uh-huh." And I said, "And the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus." And he said, "Uh-huh." It was just another group, it was not an issue. And I didn't know if it would be. For example, even now the gay men's choruses aren't allowed to perform in Catholic churches. The San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus was the first gay men's chorus, and people know the history that they formed after the deaths of Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone – they spontaneously were singing on the steps of City Hall, and they formed into a chorus and went on a tour. In every city they went to, choruses sprung up – they were the seed, the grandfather of the whole gay choral movement, which I have worked with a lot over the years.

So that was wonderful at the school, and I think some of the other gay faculty – and I don't have to out them necessarily – but people who had been here a lot longer than me, appreciated that I brought the Gay Men's Chorus to the school. Because again, the school was out in the Sunset. San Francisco's west of Twin Peaks was more conservative, and that was a very nice thing to connect up with all of that. And over the years I brought them back to sing, and the Golden Gate Men's Chorus also. The fact of the matter is that for complex reasons, but they are explainable reasons, the arts in America are so very gay that to be gay in the arts can be an advantage. It doesn't necessarily mean that it is, but if having that fact in common with other people, with other working artists, leads to certain kinds of friendships, and friendships lead to the exchange of information, it's a very lucky thing. Even living at Copland's house, as I did – which I ended up living there for legitimate reasons, to write a thesis – but Copland was gay and I am gay. I was able to fit into that house more easily – the whole household was filled with gay men who worked for Copland. His secretary, the gardener, the cook, the cook's boyfriend. Not that a straight man wouldn't be welcome, probably, and Copland was a very discreet person, but I often felt I was really lucky that I got to have most of my adult professional life in San Francisco.

**FITZSOUSA** Have you seen in any way how the culture for gay students has changed since you've been at the Conservatory? As you said, it was already a non-issue when you arrived.

**CONTE** If you can believe it, we used to have, in the old building – it was called Dress Day, and the men would wear dresses. Not just gay men, but straight men. It was this quirky thing. I think that we've always had a certain number of gay students – you might think we'd have more given that we're in San Francisco. I don't think we've ever had a gay student union. If we had, I didn't know about it. But the gay community has changed a lot, in that it's not as ghettoized. In some ways it's become more integrated, and other ways it's become more separate. It's just one of those paradoxes. It has to do with the rise of identity politics. "I am who

I am because I am gay to such an extent – it’s like the most important fact about me.” I think there is some of that in the culture now, but at the same time because it’s more accepted a person can be gay and can move in the culture, including the culture of the Conservatory. Again, it’s a non-issue, and that’s great.

**FITZSOUSA**            Would you say that there are any special challenges faced by composers who work within an academic setting?

**CONTE**                I think there absolutely are, but I think a conservatory is a different matter. You have to ask yourself, what’s the difference between a big city conservatory – because there really are very few conservatories that aren’t in big cities. One is Oberlin, which is less than an hour’s drive to Cleveland, which has one of the major orchestras in the world. So most conservatories are right in the center of big cities. The academic composition department – I also felt really lucky to be at a conservatory because there’s such an emphasis on performing, and on cultivating relations between performers and composers. We don’t have tenure, which I think is a great advantage because if someone isn’t working out it’s good to be able to get rid of them. At the same time, if someone is working out, they don’t have the pressure to achieve certain things professionally in order to secure their tenure. Because the Conservatory is in a big city it means if you’re a composer and you’re teaching at a conservatory rather than a university, you’re automatically connected up to the big city high culture. That’s a big advantage. If you’re at Ann Arbor, which is a great school of music – not quite a conservatory – you’re still in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It’s not far from Detroit, but it’s not like you’re in San Francisco.

I’ve made a real conscious effort, particularly in recent years, to write more music for my colleagues, like all the chamber music I’ve written recently – some of those pieces were directly inspired by wanting to work with instrumental colleagues I have who I’d not worked with yet. That’s a built-in advantage of teaching at a conservatory. I think for me personally, teaching has never been a disadvantage. With some people it is, but it depends on your temperament. If teaching is about organizing your knowledge, and if you are able to organize your knowledge in a way that’s stimulating to you and helps you connect with other music, and be inspired by other music in order to feel your own creativity, it’s great. I’ve never felt like I didn’t have enough time to compose, because teaching two or three days a week, even having a pretty intense schedule, still leaves enough time for composing. And you can’t face an empty page every day. The other thing is that if you have talented students like I do, they are inspiring. They definitely inspire me. I have taken real care, I think, to recruit a certain kind of student. I know the kind of student I can work with best, and the kind I can help the most. I’ve been lucky because I’ve been doing it a long time, that I don’t have to teach people I don’t want to teach, or I don’t think I really can teach as well as others. So I’m in this ideal situation where my studio is filled with people that are incredibly talented and stimulating, and it’s just such a pleasure. Boulanger told a story about a student of hers who told her that one of his teachers – it may have been his piano

teacher, said – “It’s so humiliating and depressing to be reduced to teaching.” The student said, “Well, you don’t have to be humiliated and depressed anymore, because I’m leaving!” Boulanger said, “You were very bad to say that, but you are also very right that if you teach because you have to, it poisons your life.” I’ve never taught because I had to.

**FITZSOUSA**            How would you describe your teaching style?

**CONTE**                I like to teach by questioning. Of course there’s classroom teaching and one-on-one teaching, but classroom teaching – I like to ask constant questions and see what people are thinking. I admit that sometimes I have to work to get to the heart of the question, or to have real clarity. I’m trying to share with the class that I have a certain perception, and I want to see if they can enter into that perception, or I’m trying to figure out what it is that they’re perceiving, so I need to ask the question in a certain way that will get them to reveal what they’re perceiving. I don’t like to lecture for long periods of time without having conversational interaction. I also have learned that if you really love your subject and you’re enthusiastic about it, you can end up being overcome by an inspiration, and it may seem like a digression, but when it happens you should always let it happen. Over the many years where I’ve done that, I’ve had so many students tell me the things they remember the most that I said came from those moments. As far as one-on-one teaching – I learned this partly from Conrad – but when students bring in a piece of music, I’m trying to listen to it to make sure that all of their choices have a certain inevitability and accountability. And if ever my attention is distracted and I feel it’s not doing that, I have to go back and I question, “Why am I being distracted from what I think is the argument of the piece?” And then I’m able to figure out – this is why – make a suggestion for an alternative, and hopefully the suggestion exemplifies a general principle – not just my opinion, because I like this note better than that note. And then in doing that, you can make every suggestion of a revision built on a general principle as much as possible. It seems to work. Now, if I wasn’t sympathetic to the student’s music, or if I didn’t think they were really using their faculties as composers – meaning their ear and their memory – I’m simply not interested. Over the years I did have students who I could tell weren’t engaged – their ears simply weren’t engaged in a way that is to me what composing is. A couple of times it didn’t work out. I’ve had not that many, you could say failures, of where there was simply not the right chemistry between student and teacher. Over thirty years it’s happened maybe three or four times. And when it has happened it’s been very instructive. Some of those times it was probably my fault, because I wasn’t tactful. But I’ve been gratified in that at least two of those cases I had the students tell me several years later that they were wrong and I was right. I don’t know if they were just sucking up to me, but I think they expressed it with sincerity – they couldn’t really understand what I was trying to tell them.

**FITZSOUSA**            How would you say students are different today than they were when you first started at the Conservatory, and how have your relationships with your students changed?

**CONTE** In some ways they're much smarter. Obviously, the students are better than they've been because the reputation of the school has risen and risen, and we're drawing better and better students. And so while there have always been talented students, I would say the overall level is much, much higher. Much higher. So there's that change. But I would say, students of this generation in some ways are smarter – they are more precocious, they've been exposed to more. All the downsides of how technology and the coarsening of the culture have affected people are minimized with musicians, it seems. Because they've chosen to be musicians – to be creative artists, composers, performers – they already have a certain discipline, they've trained their memories in a certain way. They've been immunized, I like to say, against some of the shallowness and coarseness that's in the present culture. The students in some ways are more advanced. Frankly, I'll often ask myself – I'll look at a student's work and I'll think, "Has this student achieved a certain level of integration and depth in their compositional expression that I think I had at their age? Sometimes not – though in most cases, because I was a bit of a late bloomer, the students are actually beyond where I was when I was that age. So I think I'm trying to encourage the students to go for more depth than breadth, because in this culture there's so much product and so much information that having breadth doesn't really mean what it used to mean. It's far better, it seems, to know a few things really, really deeply and completely, than to know a little bit about a lot of things, and I don't think that's ever been as much of a danger as it is right now. Conrad said something once that I've quoted many times. He said, "Composers are of two kinds: they either need to hear less and imagine more, or imagine less and hear more." And I would say right now there are many, many more composers who need to imagine less and hear more, because the actual training of the ear, where you're really hearing what you want, is underdeveloped. And so the imagination – there's a lot of encouragement to develop the imagination – but there's less encouragement to develop the ear. What's best is if the two are working together exactly. So that's what I try and do for my students, is to connect those two things.

As far as how students are different for me – I know that I am a much better teacher than I was ten years ago. I just know more, I have more experience, and am more certain about how things go. I think students appreciate having a teacher – hopefully it doesn't come off as arrogant – who says, "This is the way it is. Maybe you'll not agree with me until five years from now, but I'm telling you I am convinced this is what's right." At least you have something to push against. I'm not being equivocal, I'm not being indecisive, I'm saying, "This is how it is." I know for me I like that from a teacher, even if I end up disagreeing with them.

**FITZSOUSA** What's an instance where you've had to tell somebody that?

**CONTE** Well, I think every time you suggest to someone – "You know, it really would be better if you don't have the same bass note from the weak beat to the strong beat." It

just is better. And they say, “But I like it the other way!” And sometimes they might convince you that you’re just not hearing something that they’re trying to do, but I have to say that that doesn’t happen very often for me. It has happened, absolutely, but again – what does a teacher have to offer? They have experience, and hopefully they have wisdom and discernment, and a smart young person knows that. I love what Russell Saunders said, who taught my former partner David Higgs at Eastman – one of his students was talking to him and trying to defend something, and he said, “Well, why don’t you study with yourself?”

The Asians – and I’ve learned this teaching at the Conservatory because we have so many Asian students – they have a sense of what I call the vertical relationship between student and teacher, or parent and child. It’s not a horizontal relationship pedagogically. It can be somewhat horizontal perhaps, in terms of personal relationship, but when it comes to student, teacher, the teacher is above the student – it doesn’t mean that they’re better, that’s just the way it goes. In that sense it’s a parent, child – and of course it’s different, there are people that are older, some students who are exceptionally mature, but that’s the natural order of things. It’s very hard to find a person of great achievement, whether it’s in music or any other field, who didn’t have a really important mentor. Even reading Shostakovich’s memoirs, which I’ve been reading recently – he’s talking about Alexander [Glazunov] ... Stravinsky talking about [Nikolai] Rimsky[-Korsakov], Copland talking about Boulanger, Barber talking about [Rosario] Scalero ... it’s obvious. Auden talking about Tolkien, who was his teacher at Oxford.

**FITZSOUSA**            Let’s talk about the Conservatory orchestra, and what your relationship has been with it. How has it changed over the years, and how have the composers interacted with the orchestra?

**CONTE**                To start at the very end, it was wonderful that John Adams, who has been around since 1974, and who recently heard our Highsmith piece – Michael Kropf’s piece that won – one of the first things he said to me about it was, “The orchestra is so playing so well now.” The orchestra is much, much better than it ever was. Sometimes it slides back a bit. When I first came to this school we didn’t have enough strings. For many, many years now we’ve had enough strings. My own relationship with the orchestra – in 1993 I wrote a piece for them. I took a sabbatical because I felt I needed to write a big orchestra piece, because I really hadn’t written one. I wrote the piece *The Mask of the Red Death* for the Conservatory orchestra, which they played in ’93, I wrote it mostly in ’92. Denis de Coteau was the conductor then, he was the conductor of the San Francisco Ballet orchestra. I still have that recording. They played my piece *A Copland Portrait* in 2013 ... it was a completely different orchestra. It’s just gotten better and better. Alasdair Neal did great work with the orchestra over a number of years – he was the principal guest, and is a very good orchestra trainer. And I think Scott [Sandmeier] is the ideal person right now for the orchestra.

**FITZSOUSA** And composer opportunities today, versus 10, 20, years ago?

**CONTE** It gets better and better all the time, because part of this has to do with the five of us in particular set the structure and place, and we continue to build on it. Elly, myself, Conrad, David Garner, Dan Becker – we were always looking for ways to build into the structure of the school opportunities for the composers. Interdepartmental projects, like The Viola Project. I started the vocal projects, the choral composition and the art song. The orchestra – and this was very much in Dan’s mind when he was chair – to make sure that we maintain our connection to the orchestra with readings, and of course the Highsmith. I’ve told Scott that ideally the goal would be to have a whole concert of student pieces by an orchestra. We’re some years away from that, but definitely Scott gets that. It will probably be some kind of alumni orchestra – it will be some kind of hybrid ensemble made up of area students and alumni, and some professionals. The fact of the matter is that if a student writes orchestral music in this city, they have other opportunities besides the Conservatory orchestra. It happens all the time, there are all of these community orchestras and metropolitan orchestras that are really quite good.

**FITZSOUSA** The New Music Ensemble has done a number of concerts for composers over the years. How has that ensemble changed?

**CONTE** John Adams founded it. I don’t know anything about those years – I’ve heard about it, that his programming was very creative and he did lots of things the first time. Then Joan Gallegos, may she rest in peace, took it over. Joan was a completely dedicated professional, but a conductor of limited ability – one has to say that. So when Nicole Paiement came in 2000, or I think 1999, around that time, she put a real focus into the New Music Ensemble. So for many, many years it served the composition department, and it served the faculty composers. All of the teachers have had their music played. In my case, my opera was recorded by the New Music Ensemble – *The Gift of the Magi* – with Nicole. I think that one of the drawbacks was that – what we’re trying to do now is create ensemble opportunities for the composers that are more based on what’s in the repertoire. The idea of having this ensemble of one of everything is somewhat artificial. You realize that immediately when you say, “OK, we have one of every instrument. What are the pieces in the repertoire that you can look to as models?” There are hardly any, and it doesn’t really help develop certain kinds of orchestration techniques that the composers need to develop, in terms of balancing instruments, of writing for different kinds of configurations that have evolved over time to be natural configurations for composition. We’re doing that more now. We had the Pierre Ensemble. I’ve told Scott, “We need a chamber orchestra. If we’re going to have strings we need a small – at least 3, 2, 2, 2, 1 – some kind of string choir. There are tons of pieces to look at. So the New Music Ensemble doesn’t really exist now as it did. But it for many years served as it served, and there’s a kind of structure in place that will remain.

**FITZSOUSA** In addition to teaching composition and other courses, you've served as conductor of the Conservatory chorus – and as you've said, implemented that as a requirement for all undergraduates. Could you elaborate on the history of that ensemble?

**CONTE** I would have to say, it's one of the things I'm most proud of. As Conrad used to say, "In the beginning was the breath. Without people being connected to the breath, they can't become complete musicians." Everyone needs to sing, and doing ensemble singing is so important. Over the 14 years that I did the chorus we had some high points, but the goal was to expose every undergraduate and all the composers who had it as a requirement to certain parts of the choral repertoire. The fact of the matter is, the choral repertoire is the largest repertoire there is. It's centuries and centuries of high-quality music in every era. When I think of some of the high points – when we did the Stravinsky Mass we were able to do some of the pieces that have small chamber ensembles like Stravinsky's Mass. We did a really good performance of the Faure *Requiem* because we have strong violas and cellos here, and the orchestra is all lower strings and the harp and organ. We did Conrad's *Carols and Lullabies* for his 70th birthday concert. We did the Bloch *Sacred Service*. We had to bring in extra people for that, but that was also a high point. Something that was really good for the chorus was to have a composer conducting, because I was able to connect it to the composition department, so the composers were writing and singing choral music. I often picked my repertoire to make sure it was of relevance, and of interest to composers. Since I stopped doing it, it's lost a bit of its focus. I'm not criticizing, but if one person has a lot of energy and this kind of design, it's inevitable that happens. But I'm hoping we can keep it up, because it's a really valuable part of the school curriculum.

**FITZSOUSA** You teach a class on music for film, which is a favorite class among composers and performers alike. Can you discuss your interest in this subject, and the value of this course for a conservatory student?

**CONTE** I'm trying to remember when I first taught that class. Maybe 2003 or '4. I've taught it eight or nine times. I love teaching it, and I was grateful – I think I first taught it when John Spitzer was chair. He encouraged a class about film music. My father was an usher in a theater as a high school student. He was born in 1932 and he grew up going to the movies. He started taking all of us to movies when we were really, really young, so I've always been an avid film-goer. I've always paid a lot of attention to music in movies. Movies are the storytelling media of our time. I finally got to do two films, but I had already taught film music a couple of times before I did the two films that I did, which was in 2005 and 2006. I try and emphasize in the class that writing film music means to write character-driven music, just like writing with a text. The function of the music is to animate the scene that it's accompanying, and it can have various kinds of relations to the scene, which are similar to contrapuntal relations. It can be an oblique relationship, or a parallel relationship, or a contrary relationship. It can be telling you something that you can't see. I've taught the same six or seven films since I've taught it, and I've

not been able to find any reason to replace the films that I teach, to make certain points that I'm trying to make. So if the class has become really popular, now that we have the TAC [Technology and Applied Composition] program it's even more directly relevant to our people. I taught it two years in a row, and I'll probably teach it next year again. It's a very fun class to teach.

**FITZSOUSA**           What has been your experience having your own music performed at the Conservatory by students and faculty?

**CONTE**                Mostly it's been great. The pieces I've written for our instrumental faculty, and our voice faculty, like Cathy ... the first piece was with Scott Foglesong, and then over the years, working with members of the guitar department. I'm thinking chronologically. I always had to bring choruses in to do choral pieces, but then I would do my own music with our chorus too, but anything that was bigger, that had instruments or was longer, because I had such good relations with so many area choruses that was always nice to bring them into the Conservatory. For the students as well. The school orchestra, of course, playing my piece. I have to say – I've been here 30 years, there are still a number of faculty I think it would be really fun to work with. I'd like to write something else for Scott Foglesong sometime. I wrote him a piece in 1987, so that's almost 30 years ago. The resources are kind of bottomless when it comes to writing for people in the community.

**FITZSOUSA**           Something to go back to – after you started at the Conservatory you went to London and lived and did research there. Can you talk about that time?

**CONTE**                In the summers since 1985 – I spent the summer of '87 in Seattle because of a boyfriend I had there, but I was also writing a piece there. In '89 I went to England ... Vaughan Williams, who is one of my favorite composers, had taught a class at Cornell and they established a Vaughan Williams fellowship. When it was established they decided to start it at Cornell, and so my close friend Byron Adams was the first Vaughan Williams fellow. This fellowship was for an American scholar, or American musician, to go to England and live at Charter House School, where Vaughan Williams had been a student, which is about an hour from London, and then travel to London and have access to Vaughan Williams's manuscripts at the British Library. So in 1989, which is I think the third or fourth year of that program, I got that fellowship. So I went to England and it was wonderful. I ended up writing about the *Three Shakespeare Songs*, which are Vaughan Williams's last a cappella choral works. To be able to get back to Europe regularly for extended periods of time was for me something that I almost have to try and build into my routine. So that was in '89 and I did that. Starting in '91, I taught in Fontainebleau, which is where I had been a student. I didn't really like teaching there, so I didn't go back. Finally, in 2010 I went over to Paris to teach at EAMA, where I've been teaching ever since.

**FITZSOUSA** What was it about Fontainebleau that didn't work out?

**CONTE** When Boulanger died, she didn't make any plans for her successor. It got taken over by Narcis Bonet, who was a wonderful man and probably her logical successor, but there was all kinds of political fighting. Then he was displaced, and the school tried to take a new direction. They hired a director, who was the person who hired me – Jean-Pierre Marty, who I met the day I met Conrad, because they had been friends in New York. He hired Philip Manoury, and Tristan Murail to teach composition – he was trying to do the cutting-edge things that were happening in France, but still keep some connection to the Boulanger tradition. It wasn't really very focused. Also, living in Fontainebleau, as my friend Bryon [Adams] says (who teaches at U.C. Riverside – he ended up succeeding me when I decided not to go back, I arranged for him to take my place) – he said, “Living in Fontainebleau is like being in Riverside with a palace.” It's a charming town, but in the days when Boulanger was teaching there, it was so intense to be there that one didn't mind; but at that point it felt very isolating. And I was teaching solfège there, and theory – I wasn't teaching composition. Which I enjoyed doing. I also conducted the Chorale.

**FITZSOUSA** Obviously while you've been at the Conservatory you've remained an incredibly active composer. Can you talk about how your compositional style has been shaped over the years?

**CONTE** I got my first commission in 1985, which was a thrilling thing for me. I wrote all the music I wrote in grad school that I wanted to write, and in some cases had to write, but then when I started, I got that very first situation where someone was paying me to write music. It was the first piece I wrote in California – a choral piece called *The Waking*, which I did with the school choir here a number of times. I started to get commissions; one thing would lead to another. Of course in the beginning, they were choral commissions, because I became known for doing that. Then I got three commissions from Pacific Serenades, which is a chamber music series in Los Angeles. I wrote my guitar duo and piano quintet for them. I felt like as a composer I wanted to be useful, and works that I had written that were becoming known were leading other people to ask me to write other works. That felt organic and right. Every now and then I would feel a real need to write a work that no one was asking for, so for a number of years I wanted to write an opera, and then I got an opportunity – I got a really wonderful commission to write my first opera, *The Dreamers*, and I discovered in doing that that in some ways it was the thing I loved doing the most. It was not hard for me – I worked hard, but it was not hard work, that was what I always said about it.

*The Gift of the Magi* was an idea I had completely on my own, no one asked for it, and it was the next year. Luckily the Conservatory was there, I had an institution to write it for. It wasn't

technically commissioned. Also, I've tried to bring a certain level of craft and consciousness to everything I've written, and I knew that I wanted to expand – I felt like, as a composer, I could write in any genre. I wanted to develop my abilities that were undeveloped, which was in instrumental music, chamber music, and orchestral music, and then in opera. I've written in all those genres, and as I said before, partly I was inspired by my students who were writing all kinds of wonderful pieces in genres that I hadn't really written that much in. And so I made a conscious effort to make sure that by a certain age – now I'm 60 – that I have representative works in every genre. The only thing I don't have is a concerto, and I do have a couple of opportunities – I'm not sure which ones are going to pan out, and which ones I'll follow. Having a contract with a publisher, which I was lucky to get in 1987 when I was 31, changed everything as well. Then everything that I wrote was going to be published, and it had to be of a certain standard. I was really a late bloomer in that sense. I was composing regularly on commission, and having pieces published starting at age 29. So my whole 20s, I was either in school and writing whatever music I was writing – I didn't write that much music. I was doing a lot of other things – conducting, teaching, learning. Whereas, some of my students – a lot of our students get certain kind of traction, and get people asking them to write pieces, when while they're still students – in their early 20s, which is great.

My style – I'm not saying that I'm on this level, but I relate to three composers: Chopin, Ravel, and Copland – in this way, and this is what Ned Rorem said about these three composers. I think it's actually true of Ned Rorem as well – he said, “They sprang full from the head of their muse.” Meaning that from their earliest music, their personality was present in a certain way. I feel that way about myself. I hope that I've become a better composer, but I feel like fairly young I found a way of expressing myself, and I've expanded and deepened it I hope. The way that someone could wear the clothes at 60 that they wore at 20, as long as it wasn't widely inappropriate. That's not true of everybody, I'm not saying it's better or worse, and composers that utterly transformed themselves, it's very interesting. But I think I've developed my ability, and I've consciously done it, to write longer and longer pieces, because the ability to write big pieces is something that takes a special kind of focus and skill – opera being the prime example. The longest piece I've written is two hours and ten minutes long – my first opera. Chamber works that can be 30-35 minutes, 25 minutes – I've written lots of short pieces, lots of choral pieces that were between 3 and 5 minutes long. That's how you learn to write big pieces too.

**FITZSOUSA** Which other composers have influenced you, besides the ones you mentioned?

**CONTE** I have my list, again, because I'm a teacher, I guess – the ten most important composers, and my own favorites, which intersect somewhat. Chopin was hugely important to me – something about the poetical approach to composing, about the harmonic world, the certain sense of melody. Gershwin was important when I was young, but I think his

expressive range is rather narrow – which isn't a criticism, it's just who he is. Going in order – Ravel, and Poulenc – those two French composers I just love above all. I think that Debussy is probably a greater composer than both of them, but I just love those two composers more. Copland was hugely important, and Vaughn Williams. More recent composers, even when I was in grad school – Steve Reich was very important to me, and I think he really influenced me. I can look at five or six pieces that were written between 1982 and 1990 that are very influenced by Reich. And then I was influenced by Conrad.

**FITZSOUSA**           What of the current or recent generation of active composers – whose works do you most admire?

**CONTE**                I have to start with – I don't know if I need to name names with my own students – but that's a good question. It's a short list. Conrad is dead, but Conrad was a composer that I deeply admired, and I continue to learn from. I admire the music of my colleague Rob Kyr. I maybe admire it more than love it, but there's a lot to admire about it. Some pieces of my colleague Byron Adams I think are first-rate pieces. Some pieces of James MacMillan that I've heard I really admire. Maybe it has to do with age – even into the '90s, pieces that I had not heard, like pieces of Dominick Argento – that's not a young composer – I really admire the work of Thomas Adès, and I hear that it's a major voice, and a major creative mind. But I haven't felt drawn to listen repeatedly to anything. It may seem odd, but I feel like if I listened for the fiftieth time to the Ravel *Concerto for the Left Hand*, there's something new in it for me. I of course love the music of [Henri] Dutilleux, and I heard premiers of a lot of Dutilleux works, and he came to the Conservatory three times, but now he is dead also. My teacher Husa, I think he's just an absolutely brilliant composer, and some of his works were really important to me as a student. I have not kept up with his work, though.

**FITZSOUSA**           What is the climate like for major orchestras and opera companies commissioning composers these days? The people that are getting those commissions, the people that are being written about in the New York Times and major newspapers, and having profiles done about them, and the hype. Do you have anything to say about that?

**CONTE**                I think it's healthy. I think if I'm not so immediately enthusiastic about their work I have to figure out why. You have to take each of the genres one at a time. Orchestral music: orchestral music is one of those places where a really smart person can learn to orchestrate very well by following certain laws of acoustics, and also by studying literally the layout and design of the orchestration of other pieces, and they can create what you might call “wonderful noises.” I don't mean that prerogatively, necessarily, but I hear a lot of orchestra music that is extremely well-orchestrated and is imaginative, but it's rhetorically not very interesting. Because again, I think the composers have not developed their memory. So if I'm listening primarily on the level of “musical argument” of tones and their manipulation, and

choices of pitches – of durations, which have to do with rhythm, and I’m trying to be taken in by what’s being said – I find so much of it doesn’t speak to me. In opera it’s more complex, because opera is wanting to reach a mass audience – it’s competing with film. There’s a high prestige to opera, it’s a collaborative medium. The art of libretto writing is something not really taught.

There are many things about – the whole use of super titles has done real damage to the writing of librettos in English. I’m not against super titles, but I think it’s done some real damage. All of that’s to say is – I don’t think we have a school of orchestral composition in the United States, and we do not have a school of opera. We might have lots of operas being written, but a school meaning something that’s built on a body of work that has developed certain conventions that are unique to the language and the culture of the time. Also, you have this problem about vocal music, because either you have two extremes – you have composers who write vocal music, and know how to write prettily for the voice so it sings well enough, but doesn’t have much depth, or composers who don’t know how to write for the voice at all. There are more of those. It’s going to take some time for all of this to come out in the wash, as it were. But I think that what’s always going to drive the creation of new works has to do obviously – you’re going to have to have performers, conductors, singers, players, who like what a composer is doing and want to commission that composer to write pieces for them. I’ve been on enough boards and arts panels to know that a lot of these things are management driven, and that the people who work in management, while they may be well-meaning and often do important work – they actually aren’t very knowledgeable and often their considerations about what they think should be put forward, or what should be developed, are based on commercial impulses, or based on ascetically naïve perceptions. I actually would love to be knocked out by some new piece that is getting a lot of attention, and I quite frankly have not been. I’m trying to explain why, and that’s the best that I can do. That’s the reason that I don’t feel malnourished, is that there’s so much nourishment to be gotten from lots of works, and some of them were written not that long ago – over the last 20 years – like anything by Dutilleux, to name just one composer, that has a certain nourishment, that I don’t feel, “I’m not getting any nourishment because the latest thing isn’t speaking to me.” I don’t think we’re in a golden age. There’s lots of product, there’s lots of work being done, but the quality of it I think is not uniformly high. I think it used to be in film – in paying close attention to film, I think there are less really great films being made every year. There’s amazing things being done on television, as we know – particularly writing – the quality of writing that’s going on – and all of the other production values of music. And so it’s all shifting. I think it’s great for composers, that there’s so much work for them. But I’ve had a number of experiences with new works that I recall were transformative, where they kind of knocked me out, and it’s been a while since I’ve had one of those.

September 3, 2016

**FITZSOUSA** Today is September 3, 2016, and I'm with David Conte at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, continuing to talk about his life, and the Conservatory since he's been here. Something I wanted to ask you, David, is that you have a list of important composers in Western art music, and this list differs from your favorite composers. I was wondering if you could talk about those two things, and the distinction between them?

**CONTE** Sure. These things are of course arbitrary, but it's good to have a discipline to push against. Which is why, if someone asks the question, "Who are the ten most important composers in Western art music?" I have my own list that I've thought very hard about. I start with Bach – I'm not saying there aren't great composers before Bach; one thinks immediately of Monteverdi, and Couperin, Palestrina, and Byrd – lots of them. But I guess I don't feel qualified ... I don't have the deep sense that I have about how the lineage works with those composers, in the same way that I do about the ten that I mention, starting with Bach. For me, those composers are Bach, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, Debussy, Stravinsky. Part of that has to do with having a consciousness about lineage. And these things can change over time. My five favorite composers are not on the list. Ravel is an interesting case – he's one of my five favorites, and one might say Ravel is not as influential as Debussy. That's probably still true, but for example, if you think as I do that a composer like Stephen Sondheim is a hugely important – I think the most important American composer in the last third of the 20th century – one of his chief influences was Ravel. 30, 40 years from now, it could be that Ravel emerges. I think it's unlikely he would ever replace Debussy, because of course he's younger than Debussy and he himself is indebted to Debussy, but these things do change and evolve. But when you're talking about spans of centuries, how much they'll really evolve, I don't know.

William Austen said in his book, *Music in the 20th Century*, he thought it was likely that there would never be a single composer again who would influence the course of music the way Debussy did, which had to do with changes in the culture, and technology, and dissemination of music. There's simply too many branches and different streams going on for there to be a kind of unity. Unity was very important to him, and it's very important to me. It isn't something that is as easy to achieve, and maybe it's not even possible to achieve now, but I firmly believe that the reason we don't have as many masterpieces right now in all forms of art, is that you can't really have masterpieces without having schools. The school of the Renaissance, Madrigal, the school of the Classical Symphony, the school of Verismo Opera. For example, the American musical definitely has a school, and I think has produced masterpieces. But we don't really have schools now, because in order to have a school a culture has to have a unified view of itself in the

present, and we don't have that. Just witnessing the presidential election is all the proof we need – the country is far from unified. I do think Austin, in his last pages of *Music in the 20th Century*, talks about Stravinsky, who was still alive when the work was published in 1966, and how Stravinsky represents a possible unity – how he bridged the major cultures of France, Germany, and Italy. He bridged school and church and concert hall, and the world of Russia with the world of Western Europe and America. There are all kinds of ways that Stravinsky was able to make those connections, and envision a possible unity. That's still very appealing to me, and I believe my work is trying to do that – I'm not sure it would be clear to very many people that it does do that, but that's my intention.

**FITZSOUSA**            So going back to these ten – what gets them on the list? Their influence – in terms of how music has grown since?

**CONTE**                In the case of Bach, you could say he was a great consolidator. He brought to the greatest height the conventions of his day. As Boulanger said about Bach, "He doesn't submit to conventions, he chooses them and then he transcends them." So there seems to be no question that Bach developed a kind of tectonic architectural blueprint about how pieces of music unfold that was the main blueprint for hundreds of years. Debussy changed the game, but he didn't take away the Bach blueprint – he expanded it. Of course Debussy knew the works of Bach, and he was reacting against some of those things in some ways. Bach is on that list for that reason. As Stravinsky said, "He was the greatest composer who ever lived." Handel is I think underrated, because if you think opera is as important as I do, Handel is so important. He had immense technique ... the fugue at the end of *Messiah* – the Amen fugue – is as good as any fugue anyone ever wrote. He maybe didn't write as many great fugues as Bach, but that fugue is toweringly great. In a sense, he was a truly dramatic composer, and he's very important for that reason. And then Mozart invented the piano concerto – he invented many of the conventions of opera that still exist, and his music for me, there's a spooky quality to it because it seems so white-hot with invention and inspiration. It makes him a difficult model for composers, because there's something mysterious about how he achieves his unity.

Beethoven, obviously, is just an immense composer who brought the classic conventions that Mozart and Haydn were working on – he brought them to a certain height, and opened them up and expanded them. Brahms, likewise – a composer like Brahms has work of such high quality in so many genres. Tchaikovsky, also underrated, but in some ways for me he's even greater than Brahms, which many people would not agree with because he succeeded in opera and his symphonies ... I personally love his symphonies more than Brahms's symphonies – I'm not saying they're necessarily greater – but the achievement in opera and in ballet, which is immense. You could make an argument that in the 20th century, the greatest masterworks are actually for the ballet and not for the symphony. Not everybody would agree with that. Then Verdi ... I remember seeing *Falstaff* recently, and in that last scene which is the double fugue, I

just burst into tears because the idea that this composer, at the top of his form in every way, in his 80s, just proves what a master he was. Again, if you think opera is important, Verdi represents a different stream. Wagner – I skipped over him – for me, he’s the most important figure in the 19th century in any art form. I only know well a couple of operas – I don’t know them all – but knowing *The Ring*, *Tristan*, and *Parsifal*, and the *Wesendonck Lieder* – that achievement is unsurpassed, and the unity Wagner brought to literature, set design – to all the elements that go into opera – makes him an immense, creative force. Equal to a Goethe, or a Shakespeare. Debussy I’ve already talked about, and then you have Stravinsky, who I think is the representative composer of the 20th century for me. It’s fascinating to look at composers like Britten, or Shostakovich, who are great – those composers seem to be more and more important, and perhaps 50 years from now you’d have to expand your list to add those. I think Britten for me is more likely than Shostakovich, but maybe it’s just a question of my own personal taste.

My own five favorite composers have to do with one thing that I always stress to my students, and try to understand with them, is that their openness to whatever I have to say is going to be based on what I call touch-stone experiences. They have to have had some kind of transformative experiences with works of art, which mean that they have as a goal for themselves to duplicate those experiences, or mask them, to enter into that level of commitment and consciousness. So my five favorites have given me those experiences in some ways more deeply personal than others. I have to start with Chopin, who one might say is a narrow composer because he mostly only wrote for the piano, and he didn’t live very long. He didn’t write a huge number of works, but the achievement of the greatest works is something that marked me from such a young age, particularly the *Ballads* – the *Preludes*. I think as a harmonist he was hugely original. His influence on both Tchaikovsky and Verdi is not completely understood.

**FITZSOUSA**           What about Chopin’s piano concerto – his writing for the orchestra?

**CONTE**                I just listened recently, after not hearing it for many years, to the E minor concerto, which I think is just such a beautiful work, and quite original. One would have to say, his idea of what the orchestra was in relation to the piano was very different, and it wasn’t in some ways as ambitious, but the piano writing is so splendid that it still seems like it’s the best kind of orchestral writing for his kind of concerto. I don’t know the F minor as well as the E minor concerto. I’m not even sure if the recording I heard ... somebody recently told me that someone re-orchestrated those concertos, and I’m not sure ... I don’t know my history well enough to know if the versions that are being played today are actually revised orchestrations of Chopin’s ... I just don’t know. But I think Chopin was personally and socially uncomfortable with the orchestra. He was much more of an intimate, salon musician, in the best sense. Faure is similar.

**FITZSOUSA**           So after Chopin....

**CONTE** After Chopin, going chronologically, you have Ravel ... there are maybe half a dozen works that are just so perfect, and so moving. The piano trio, the two piano concertos, *Daphnis and Chloe*, works like that. And I keep learning more Ravel – even the three choral pieces are just perfection. I feel like I understand how Ravel wrote his music. I skipped Vaughn Williams, who was actually older than Ravel, and studied with Ravel. Vaughn Williams – I admire his feelings for the social role of the composer. I think his symphonies are among the great symphonies of the 20th century, and so his career is very interesting. He really wrote every kind of music – he wrote an immense amount of choral music, which is very high quality. The symphonies are very high quality. He did the English hymnal – the Episcopal hymnal that was published around 1910 – sometime around the First World War. I think he has a control over big form that is unmatched. He had a huge memory of some kind, I feel that in his symphonies and in his large choral works. He's influenced me very deeply. Then you have Poulenc, who I think is a very underrated composer. Of all the composers, I feel like I understand how he wrote his music better than anybody else. He's the greatest composer of art song in the 20th century certainly – 300 songs. I've conducted a lot of his choral music, there are just so many works of his that I deeply love. And then Copland, who I knew personally, but of course Copland's music I heard when I was so young. I think it expresses the very soul of this country, the same way that Chopin expresses Poland, and Ravel expresses France. Given how diverse this country is, the older I get, the more unique his achievement seems. While I don't think he was as technically accomplished a composer as Barber, for me he's still the greater composer because his music is actually more personal, and more original.

The youngest composer on that list is Copland, who died in 1990. He didn't write any music at 1972 – or very little. That's 50 years ago, almost. 45 years ago.

**FITZSOUSA** Since we're talking about great music, and lists, you also have a list of your five greatest operas that you've shared with me before.

**CONTE** Well, it recently became expanded. *Othello* has always been, to me – I saw it three times when I was in my early 20s in Paris, and it so marked me. I think it's maybe the greatest opera ever written. *Tristan and Isolde*, *Carmen*, *Jenufa*.... My favorite Puccini opera is *Madama Butterfly*, although I think there's a certain moral aspect to the story that is a bit troubling. But the music is so beautiful, and it's so effective on stage. Maybe I would add – it's not an opera, but *Sunday in the Park with George* by Sondheim is a hugely important work to me. I think *Sweeney Todd* is a greater work, but I love *Sunday in the Park* more. I think it's just the most moving work ever written about being an artist. There are so many other great operas, but it's interesting that of all genres, there have been thousands of operas and the repertoire is so very small. It's because it's so very hard to write one that actually holds the stage, and holds the stage through its music.

**FITZSOUSA** It's interesting, you just said yourself that it's not an opera, but it's the only work that you chose in English. What about English language opera?

**CONTE** I think that English language opera is very troubling. With Britten, there's no question. The thing about Britten's operas is that they hold the stage so incredibly. Sometimes just listening to them, certain aspects seem almost a bit routine in terms of his musical invention, but he had some kind of instinct about the theater that was unmatched. Although, having written operas myself, there's some aspects of some librettos that I'm uncomfortable with. Conrad and I talked about this a lot, and he of course revered Britten, but I remember him quoting to me, saying, "What can you say about a libretto that says "of human relationships" – I think in English, the conventions of the music are different. One breaks into song and dance at certain moments, and as Sondheim has said about musicals in general, he feels need to have rhyme. Often rhyme in opera in English strikes listeners as being contrived. I don't know if that will ever be proven that that shouldn't be the case, given that in Italian everything rhymes and nobody thinks about it at all. Unless English listeners know Italian, they're not listening to the opera in the same way. They're not listening to the color of language in the same way.

For my own librettos, I favor rhythm because it's pulled music out of me in a certain way. But I've had various people say to me that the problem with rhyming is that it makes the characters seem the same. But I think that's a problem with a kind of realism. Film is such a realistic medium ... there are lots of different kinds of films, but American audiences look at opera in much the same way as film, which is actually somehow willing to accept ... I don't think they question very deeply, now that they're reading all the librettos with supertitles, how many operas are written as screenplays rather than real operas. The difference being that music isn't driving the story. The music is accompanying the words. Even if the words are set well with good prosody, which is not always the case – partly because American composers are so often disconnected from the music they haven't written songs or choral music – they'll get commissioned to write a big opera, and having very little experience with vocal music – they're not singers themselves – we don't have a school of American opera, in my view. I'm not up with everything that's happening. I've seen a fair number of the newest operas – not all. I think Menotti was starting to establish a kind of school. Of course he wasn't really American, but his libretto for *Amahl and the Night Visitors* is fantastic. I think there's a couple of works that will always be done by smaller companies, and by college opera workshops. His operas were produced on Broadway in the beginning. There was something that was trying to take hold there, but it didn't really bear fruit. There are lots of reasons why – very complex cultural reasons. We have so many media platforms ... we've always had them, but more and more now. Opera is just one other one.

**FITZSOUSA** Opera has always been a social art form, in many ways. People going to the theater ... the language question is interesting because of course, historically, operas were often just performed in the language of the country they were being performed in, regardless of what they were originally written in. You were having Mozart operas that were originally in Italian ... Figaro being performed in German in Germany, and vice versa. Of course, there weren't as many English operas at that point. In the 20th century a lot of English operas became prominent. And then, like you said, supertitles – which is very recent, only in the last 25 years.

**CONTE** I think it's had a real effect on opera that's not been acknowledged. I'm glad to have them, I think they're great to have, but I think they have stunted the growth of the true art of libretto writing in English. And it really is the composer's job to get the libretto they need. They often don't know what to demand of their librettist. If you read Strauss's accounts, Puccini's accounts, and Mozart's accounts, they were in control of the whole situation. Conrad once said to me, "Language isn't as important as emotion, or drama." There's truth to that. It could be that my ear just wants to have a tone in the language that is above the ordinary. I'm sometimes stunned by the lines that are set to music in English in operas. There doesn't necessarily have to be a rigorous poetry "in" opera, but there has to be a poetry "of" an opera. The things that people are saying have a poetical intention, or some kind of poetical tone to them. Rather than being people just talking as they ordinarily would talk ... why do they need to sing them? Auden said, "Singers only need to sing if they're a little mad!" Meaning crazy. It was his way of saying there needs to be heightened emotion being expressed for singing to be justified. At the same time, I was so moved when I first saw the *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* ... I don't know if many people know that film, which is really a filmed opera. Everything is sung. The very first scene is in a gas station, and the gas station attendant is fixing cars ... something about the way it was written is just miraculous. I know Conrad did not like that film.

**FITZSOUSA** Who was the composer?

**CONTE** Michel Legrand, who was a Boulanger student. It's a jazz score, there's no question, but Michel Legrand was a highly trained musician, so his jazz has a certain polish to it. Again, he's not American, so he's assimilating American jazz as a French person. But I admired that. And even in *Yentl*, which Michel Legrand wrote the music for – he didn't write the words. I'm not sure who wrote the words to the *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. I was amazed at how good those songs were. I think *Yentl* is a really underrated movie, actually.

**FITZSOUSA** Going back to your career, you've spoken a lot about your own works. Is there a specific piece or commission that you found to be very significant and important for you – either because of what it was, the people it was written for, or because of the impact it had on your own growth and development as a composer?

**CONTE** Yes, certainly. I'd like to think I never let a work go into publication that doesn't have a certain standard. Conrad and I talked about this a lot, because when I first met Conrad I had just written my work *Invocation and Dance*. I had an opportunity to re-orchestrate it, and I maybe spoke about this before, but I didn't have time to do it, really. He said, "Well I'll do one movement, and you do the other." That was one of the most pedagogically valuable experiences of my life. It meant a lot to me when he heard the work, he said, "This is one of the great new works." It was a work that seemed to strike a nerve, and I remember it got performed maybe half a dozen times in different cities. It was written for a gay men's chorus, and it was in response to the AIDS crisis. It was obliquely referring to it, because the text is by Walt Whitman – his elegy for Abraham Lincoln. It was talking about death, and its place in the cycle with life on Earth. So I revised that piece – I had to revise it a lot. I did a version for mixed chorus, after doing it for men's chorus. I spent a lot of time on a lot of details, getting it exactly right before I published it. So that was an important piece. And then my *Piano Fantasy* that I wrote right after that for Scott Foglesong is I think one of my strongest works. It's not a long work, it's only ten minutes. A very important work to me was *September Sun*, the 9/11 piece which is about twenty minutes long. And I wrote quite quickly, I just felt I achieved a kind of poise in the work.

**FITZSOUZA** How did that piece come about?

**CONTE** That was commissioned by St. Bart's church in New York, who had commissioned several other works before. And of course the music director who was an old friend of mine, William Trafka, had seen the second plane go into the Trade Towers. And there were members of the congregation of St. Bart's who died, the firefighters and so forth, and they wanted to commission a memorial piece. It's really quite an interesting story. I had written just two years before that *Elegy for Matthew* for Matthew Shepherd, on a poem by John Walker, with whom I wrote eleven works, including three stage works. And Bill Trafka wanted John to write the text, and he wrote a text called "Great Towers," which was quite an amazing poem but it was, as John said, it had a kind of Old Testament consciousness. It was referring to Ishmael and Isaac. It was looking at the events of 9/11 in a very large historical context of how it had come about, and the conductor said, "This is not the kind of text we want. We want a true memorial piece." And so John actually sat down and wrote his second poem in about an hour. And the reason I mentioned this is because John was a poet who worked quite often with the acrostic technique, where he would develop some kind of poetical idea and use the first letter of the sentence of that idea for the first line of each text. And he ended up writing the second poem in the same acrostic that he'd written the first one on. It's the kind of technique that Bach would have in *The Art of the Fugue*. I mean, the line was "God dwells in joy in the midst of sorrow." And he wrote this one poem, *Great Towers*, which had a certain tone; and then he wrote another poem, *September Sun*, which actually was my title for the poem on the very same acrostic. And it was done the year after to the day, I think, the anniversary of 9/11 in 2002. And they've been

doing it every five years, in fact they're doing it this week, and I'm going to New York to hear it because it's the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11.

*The Gift of the Magi* is one of seven operas, and it's the most successful for a number of reasons. I think it's a strong work. It's kind of an American verismo piece; it's not, you know, about any deep social issue. I've seen it done many times, and I've seen it done in shambles. And even when it's done in shambles, the work, it's as if it's like a battleship that comes sailing into port filled with holes. Which is to quote Pauline Kale, she said that about the film *The Way We Were*, which she thought had a lot of problems. I don't think the opera has a lot of problems, but it's a hard piece, it's much harder than it seems. And even when players get off from each other by beats and measures, somehow—again the lesson I learned is that the story line is so basic and so simple that the audience never loses the thread of what's happening, and they're able to identify with the characters and what it is that they want. And the great lesson in that piece for me was that it's based on a short story that's five pages long, which was turned into an opera that's an hour long. And how opera composers, or potential or budding, aspiring opera composers often have to learn the hard way that text expands music so many times over, and that the great librettos are often very short; twenty pages, thirty pages yield a two hour opera or longer. And the other thing with any dramatic work, if it's based on a famous story that everyone knows—it's a risk to do a new opera. People actually go to see new operas I think more for the subject than for the composer. Unless they're a devotee of Britten or Janáček. But nowadays I don't know if really a composer will bring the audience into an opera house. It's going to be what the opera's about. And so that was actually the only opera of the seven that's based on a pre-existing literary source.

Copland called opera “la forme fatale” in French, meaning “the fatal art form,” because very great composers have attempted it and failed, including Copland. And he was very discouraged about *The Tender Land*, and he wrote a children's opera that is almost never done. For a practical composer like Copland to spend two years on a work and then to have it not really succeed in terms of it becoming part of the repertory in the way that his ballets did and other pieces that he wrote—a lot of his music did—was a great disappointment. I don't know. It's just not something everyone—even great composers can't necessarily tell a story or write music that creates characters, for lots of different, interesting reasons. But of course people are very drawn to do it, because to write an opera and to have it hold the stage and have an opera enter the repertory is really, it's kind of a miracle when it happens. It just doesn't happen very often.

**FITZSOUSA** You also wrote a work that was performed at President Obama's inauguration. Do you want to talk about that experience?

**CONTE** Oh, yes. Yeah, there were some interesting things that happened in connection to that. It's not a major, you know, it's a three minute piece. It's called *An*

*Exhortation*, which means literally “words to inspire people to take action,” to do something. And though I had certain reservations about Obama when he first ran, I was always impressed with his oratorical skills, and I thought he had a sense of language that not a lot of presidents had. Even someone like Bill Clinton, who I really admire and admired, didn’t speak in a way where I thought anything he said, any speech he made, could be set to music. But I always suspected that was true of Obama, and when he won—because I am a member of the Bohemian Club, which has many members who are interestingly connected to important political people—I learned that Diane Feinstein was to be chair of the inaugural committee and decided what performers were going to be at the inauguration. And she said, “Well, we have to have the San Francisco Girls Chorus and San Francisco Boys Chorus.” And I had written music they’d performed, both of those groups, and when I found that out that they would be going to sing, I just went home that night and I got online and I Googled “Obama’s speeches,” and it was just a few days after his victory speech. And I read through it, and at the very end there were about two stanzas of words that seemed to me—I hardly changed them; I arranged them in kind of an order—and I sat down and I sat the text in an hour and a half or something, quite quickly. And so I did get to go to the inauguration and it was performed, and some interesting stuff happened. Because I love politics and I was seated behind the platform where all of the past presidents and the past first ladies and all the senators and important people were seated on this stage, I saw them all arrive, and it was very interesting to observe how they interacted with each other. It was a wonderful experience.

**FITZSOUSA** So maybe you could talk a little bit about some people that you’ve collaborated with, writers and conductors and performers. You’ve spoken already about John Walker, so maybe that would be a good place to start?

**CONTE** John Walker was a very important person to me, because he was somebody I met at Cornell when he was nineteen and I was twenty-four, twenty-five. We didn’t work together in terms of collaborating until 1999, which is many years later. We met in 1981. But had always told me that I somehow taught him something about music, about how music worked and about the grammar and language and expressive power of music, that he felt I understood uniquely in the same way he understood words. And that we had a similar commitment in that way. And so it really was by chance that many years later when I got the commission to write the piece in memory of Matthew Shepherd that John happened to be visiting me. And he sat down, and he wrote the poem that I ended up setting. And then we both felt it really was more his leadership; that he would get inspired to write either works of poetry or in some cases libretti about certain events, things that were happening that he thought were significant. In addition to Matthew Shepherd, he got very interested in Andy Warhol, and we got to know Isabelle Dufresne, who was in the factory and was Salvador Dali’s muse and mistress. She had written a book called *Famous for 15 Minutes: My Years with Andy Warhol*, and we met her and she agreed to give John permission to adapt her book into a libretto, which we did at the

Conservatory in a workshop production in 2007. Then Martin Luther King, the fortieth anniversary of his death—he had written a poem actually a few years before, but when that year came around he showed me the poem again and I thought Chanticleer might be interested in it, and they were. And so they commissioned me to write *The Homecoming*, which was in memory of Martin Luther King. And *Stonewall*, the events of Stonewall in 1969. So, you know, a lot of different works. I think that some of his poetry and some of his verse is more understandable than others, and it's very esoteric, and it seems to me it may be that in this time it's not something that's going to be readily understood. And of course I have no way of knowing; it may be that it will never be understood. I don't know. I knew that I was sufficiently moved by it, and I believed in his ideas and his visions enough to set his words and his libretti, and so forth. He died, sadly, in 2011. But as I said, we wrote eleven works together. And he was the reason that I came to the Conservatory, because he'd been a student here. So he somehow was very important.

**FITZSOUSA** Another writer you've worked with is Nicholas Giardini.

**CONTE** So Nick Giardini was, when I was fortunate enough along with my sister to buy a house in San Francisco, it had a rental apartment and he was the tenant. And he became a close friend. And he is a doctor—he's a physician, but he also has ambitions as a writer, and he's highly knowledgeable about opera and devoted to it. When I decided to write *The Gift of the Magi*, I thought I would just ask him to write a synopsis for me. And he read the story and he wrote a very strong, interesting synopsis where he invented two new characters and gave them kind of a structural role in the story. He saw all of the operatic potential there was in the work. And so we wrote that work, and we wrote a choral symphony called *Eos* together, three years later in 2000. *Magi* was 1997, and *Eos* was 2000, which was commissioned by the Boston Gay Men's Chorus, and it was meant to be kind of a gay choral symphony. Again, the structure of the work—he somehow has a deep understanding of structure, dramatic structure. And I was able to create a twenty-five minute work in sections, but really in a way without pause; I was able to find a design in it, and create a design and a kind of unity in it. And I've asked Nick—Nick is so astute and knowledgeable about the art song repertory that I've asked him to be a judge, as a kind of poet for our at song composition competitions. And I think he's been a wonderful judge. Very discerning.

**FITZSOUSA** And another librettist you've worked with is Philip Littell.

**CONTE** Yeah. So Philip Littell, people who know opera will know him because he wrote the librettos for *The Dangerous Liaisons* for Conrad in *The Streetcar Named Desire*, for Andre Previn. So I met Philip through Conrad, and I was very close to Conrad while he was creating *The Dangerous Liaisons*, and I got to know Philip and they had a workshop at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego where they read the libretto as a play, and that taught me to always

do that with my libretti, to have them read by actors and see how they work on stage and see if there is important stage business that isn't clear that needs to be clarified. And I was so taken with Philip's libretto and his skill with language. And so when I got my first opera commission, the Sonoma City Opera was commissioning a work for the sesquicentennial of what really ended up being the founding of the state of California, which happened in Sonoma in 1846. And they were soliciting proposals, and so I asked Philip to write me a number—an aria—which he did, called *Whisky and Wine*, which I set and recorded and that got us the commission. And I think he did some of his finest work in *The Dreamers*, which was a libretto for me. But again it's very challenging to write an original libretto not based on a pre-existing literary subject or dramatic subject, be it a play or a novel or a short story. But I think it's a very strong work actually, and I keep trying to turn my attention to reviving it in some way. I arranged a kind of concert suite cantata out of twenty-five minutes of the opera, called *The Journey*, which was done by some choruses and orchestras around. I'm looking at maybe in the near future trying to mount that again.

**FITZSOUSA**            Another person you've worked with extensively is Jeffrey Thomas.

**CONTE**                So Jeffrey Thomas played keyboard in the pit orchestra of *The Dreamers*. And Jeffrey's very interesting in that he's one of those rare autodidacts—he actually doesn't have a degree from any institution, although he attended Oberlin and Juilliard. I met him through *The Dreamers*, and then when *The Gift of the Magi* was ready to go up the conductor who was going to conduct it died, and Jeffrey stepped in and it was the first opera he ever conducted. I think he's a brilliant conductor. He conducted my opera *Firebird Motel* and recorded it, and has performed my music regularly. And I think he's really one of the best conductors that I've ever known. And I'm glad that he's now doing more and more work at the Conservatory.

**FITZSOUSA**            John Churchwell?

**CONTE**                John is a recent music friend who—this is what happens for someone as a composer working in a place like a conservatory, and working in our conservatory—you end up meeting people through colleagues, through alumni. And so Brian Thorsett, who is also another artist that I've worked with a lot, was a student at the Conservatory; he had asked to see my songs and I sent them to him, and then he gave me the idea to write my *American Death Ballads*. He sent me one text and it led me to research others, you know, older texts on American subjects. And he is the person who introduced me to John Churchwell, and they performed and recorded that piece. So that's a recent musical friend.

**FITZSOUSA**            And Marnie Breckenridge?

**CONTE** Yeah, Marnie was also a student at the Conservatory. I always loved her singing. She's a highly intelligent singer. She has a very flexible voice—in a way my favorite kind of singer in that she has a really wide expressive range; she has control of her vibrato, she can use it or not use it; she has very good low notes, she has very good high notes. And I always thought she would be an ideal Della in *The Gift of the Magi*, and it was done by the Trinity Lyric Opera, and they did a DVD of it. And then when I wrote my Anne Sexton songs I thought she'd be an ideal interpreter, and she recorded those as well.

**FITZSOUSA** Can you discuss your experience with music critics, and maybe any general thoughts you might have about music criticism? You know, the difference in roles in different cities you've lived in and worked in, or any stories particularly?

**CONTE** Well, most of the criticism of my work has taken place not so much in newspapers as in journals, like in *Opera News*, *The American Record Guide*, *Fanfare*, those kinds of publications. Also in the trade journals, like reviews of choral music in the *Choral Journal* and the *Journal of Anglican Musicians* and those kinds of things. You know, I've been lucky, I've mostly gotten good reviews. My very first review was a really bad review, which I would say was a traumatic experience, but I got over it. I think that the state of music criticism is not necessarily high evolved, although it's always great when someone makes a really intelligent review and seems to understand, you know, the virtues of a work, and I've been lucky to have a couple of those. I was lucky to spend an evening with Virgil Thompson, I still think he's an incredibly shrewd critic. And I don't know if we have a Virgil Thompson right now. There's certainly some fine minds who are writing criticism. You know, critics need to contribute to appreciation and perspective on something, and that means they have to have a kind of deep cultural knowledge and also be very connected to the time they're in and the communities they're in. I don't know. Ned Rorem told me once, he said, "A bad review can ruin your breakfast, but it should never ruin your lunch." And he certainly, Ned—who was a very close friend for many years—received a huge range of reviews. He once bragged to me, he said, "Yes, I was reviewed, someone called me 'the worst composer in America.'" And he was kind of proud of that. I learned from him—he thought it was more important to be reviewed, whether it was good or bad. And I think there's some truth to that, the record that something has happened.

I think one thing that has bothered me the most about critics is when they don't report on the reception of the work, on the part of the performers and on the part of the audience. They may say, "I was puzzled by the audience's rapturously enthusiastic reception of this new work, which I didn't understand or didn't think was very good." For example, the bad review I had was for *Invocation and Dance*, which got a standing ovation and they had to encore the second movement, which was not reported. And I think that's significant—how often does that happen? It just doesn't happen very often with a new work. And I understood his criticisms, but I thought they were quite shallow. It's very important to me, for example, to acknowledge influences in

pieces of music, and I'm delighted when I can hear [them]—I think any serious and authentic artist will show influences. But nothing's easier than saying, "Oh, this sounds like this" or "sounds like that," without really considering how deeply it's been assimilated or combined or recombined, to say something new. I was asked, by the way, to do some criticism, and I declined. Because it seems—not that I don't have plenty of opinions, but I think for a composer, I'd always remembered how Conrad Susa said that Virgil Thompson was New York's most feared composer and most performed critic.

**FITZSOUSA**            Certainly a conflict of interests, when you're so tied into an artistic community, as a creative figure and also as a critic. Of course historically, like Schumann and composers like that wrote for these journals. But I think today it's a little bit different.

**CONTE**                That's absolutely true. Yeah, writing journals...you know, now we have blogs, and writing journals—I think one has to be careful. I don't mean just politically; of course it's not necessarily good form to be very publicly critical of a living colleague. With students it might be different, if you're trying to steer students in one direction or another. I was really impressed with Mark Morris, who I did know a bit, the great choreographer who was asked on an NPR interview about his opinion of various colleagues, you know, in choreography. And he said, "My policy is I don't comment on my living colleagues." And he didn't really need to. I think a composer's best answer to critics is their music itself. What does their music represent? What's the character and quality of one's music?

**FITZSOUSA**            How have you seen the new music scene in the Bay Area change in your time here?

**CONTE**                You know, in some way I feel that I'm not in the middle of a certain part of what the new music scene is. And part of that is perhaps part of my own taste, about what music I like. What I would say has always been true about the Bay Area—and in many ways it gets more and more true—is the vast number of ensembles; the kind of entrepreneurial spirit particularly in chamber music of groups forming, also of new opera companies, new choruses, new orchestras. Also the fact that in the Bay Area we have so many good metropolitan orchestras after the San Francisco Symphony, and so many of them are devoted to playing new music. What's really clear to me, for example, is that—well, I'm a Midwesterner at heart, and I love Cleveland, and in some ways I love many things about it more than San Francisco, and I think it has the world's greatest orchestra. If I were to live there, there wouldn't be the kind of work there that there is in the Bay Area. There is simply a lot of work for a composer. For example, I have no problem recruiting students to come to our school for that reason. To answer in a more general way, the general culture for composers in the Bay Area is among the very best in the world. And it can be proven that it is. And so I think the general tone, the support for composers and the interest in composers and the openness is the same as it's always been, in a sense. And

maybe my perception of that is influenced by that fact that I've been based at the Conservatory for all thirty-one of the years I've lived here. And so I've seen how the Conservatory has gotten stronger, and ever more involved; it's always had a history of supporting composers and being involved in the creation of new work, but never more than now.

**FITZSOUSA** From an aesthetic standpoint, do you think there has been a change in terms of the type of music that's in vogue, whether that's to be more experimental, or to be more mainstream or popular?

**CONTE** I think there's room for so much, but I think just given the pluralistic nature of the culture now, it's just inevitable, given the character of the culture at present, that there's going to be a lot of—how can I say it? I think in some ways things that are driving the creation of music are extra-musical. Of course music wants to relate to the world that it's surrounded by. But in terms of things being driven by commercial impulses, by political impulses; particularly, you know, trying, “Well, we want to reach audiences, so how can we reach this minority audience or that minority audience and do something that's relevant to them, so that we can get them in the door.” I don't know, in some ways that might be the reverse of how it should happen, with genuine art growing out of a cultural community. There's a kind of slumming, you might say, that goes on. I don't think that can really produce great art. I think it rarely happens, that it does.

**FITZSOUSA** What direction would you like to see the Conservatory's composition department go in the future?

**CONTE** That's a great question. I think it is going in the direction that I would like to see. I think it is the best direction, but that doesn't mean that it is. But I'm lucky enough at my age to be chair of the department; I've been doing it for three years and I intend to do it for at least two more, and maybe after that it would be time for someone else to get a chance to lead the department. But I've tried to lead the department in a certain direction. And as I explained earlier, because I was so close to Conrad, who was chair for the longest—I can't even remember how many years, I think it's at least ten, maybe twelve—because we were so close I was able to have an influence on the shape of the department without actually being in charge, as it were.

And then now, I'm more directly responsible for its aesthetic direction. I think composition is a serious matter; I think that composition is a craft, and the time to learn one's craft is when you're young, and to not be distracted by questions of what's fashionable, what's popular, what's relevant. What's relevant is a basic approach to technique that transcends style and taste—that is immune to those superficial things. And so what that really means is insisting that composers have a certain level of musicianship. It all comes from that. There's no hiding lack of musicianship. And so in some ways it means the Conservatory will try and be a center for a

certain traditional training that has existed for hundreds of years, that has been so weakened and diluted and distracted by so many things. And at the core of our training is that we want our composers to be excellent musicians: they need to be able to hear, to read, to memorize; to understand the styles of various periods of music; to be musically literate, to sing, to play. I think our general education department is really very good here, you know, in terms of the students having a general culture, at least curiosity about [it]—there's not time to add on endlessly—but knowledge of the visual arts, of literature, of poetry, of film, all those things.

So I think the direction the composition department is going will be expressed by the quality of work of the students. And the quality of the work of the students has never been higher, there's no question in my opinion. For example, the choral composition competition we had last year, where we had I think fifteen pieces—it was the highest quality we ever had since 1999 when I started that project. And that's an objective fact. And I have several friends who have been around that long, or who I think really know what they're talking about, who were witness to it, who all attested to this. The general level of technique was just very, very high. There wasn't really a single piece that didn't have a certain professional quality. And that's really saying something. So that's what I want for the department. And I think that we will draw students who want that for themselves, and we will not draw students who want something else. And so far, you know, we have enough good applicants so that the class that comes in every year is a strong class. I think as a department we're far, far better than many departments, and I say that objectively. If you had to do a kind of measurement of what makes a strong composition department, and you made a list of things, and maybe one of the first being the community feeling, a community of support for people to be able to develop and to be supported—I think we're absolutely outstanding in that regard. I'm not afraid to say it—it's an easy sell, in some ways. All we need is more money, if we had more money. But you know, in all honesty, we do lose a few students because we can't give them as much money as someone else. But we really don't lose that many.

**FITZSOUSA**           What do you think about the work that you've done as a composer and a teacher? Obviously you've achieved a great number of things over your career; what do you think about that and the work that you still want to do? What do you envision your legacy being—what would you like it to be, and how do you see it?

**CONTE**               That's another great question. Well, I think in order to even be a composition teacher at a conservatory and to be chair of a department, that composer needs to be able to write in all genres. They may excel in some more than others. But I would want, when my catalog is complete—and it's over a hundred works—it has offerings in every category. It has far more in choral music than anything else, but I think that versatility is important, and the way that vocal music informs instrumental music, and vice versa. I would want to be remembered for my insights and sensitivities to setting text, and to creating character through

music, which is something that I've tried to develop and I've tried to impart as a teacher. When you get to be the age that I am, I'm certainly aware that it is my time to write larger works. And that takes time. There has to be the opportunities to do them. I sometimes think of other composers that I admire a lot, like, say, Herbert Howells, who's English—he comes to mind first. I think some of these composers didn't necessarily write a lot of long, big works. And I have a fair number, the seven operas of course you know; three of them are over two hours long, and the others are like an hour long, and those are long works. And I think it's hard to write long works and big works, and it's something you have to in a sense be trained in or train yourself to do. And I think in my later years it's something that I want to keep focusing on. But of course the writing of short works is what leads to the writing of long works. I have a strategy I've developed that if I don't have anything to do that's pressing at the moment, or the opportunities I'm looking for aren't presenting themselves—just keep writing songs. Keep setting text, keep setting different kinds of poetry, keep connected to the vocal impulse. And I think as a teacher, you know, that's also important, because I love teaching and it's something that came very naturally to me and I've done my whole life, as I've explained, since I was eighteen years old. So it's rewarding to have had a lot of really great students, and to be getting better and better ones all the time.