

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project

The 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

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CONTE
Depression and

My father started in music but because he was born in the

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 need a better 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

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

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 am 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

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 was clear that she was a tyrant, but she was very demanding and people either became tired or they just 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, "I want to study with you." She said, "I want you to come back, but you have to hurry up, because you're 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, "Wait for me." She said, "Do it." It was completely her idea to have one more year, try and do everything you can do in this third year that you can do in Paris. Apply for a Fulbright, and if you get it, go back as a Fulbright scholar for your senior year, and complete all of the coursework for your master's degree that you can do with it. And that's exactly what happened. The reason I got that Fulbright was because 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, "I 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

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 pianist." She was assuming that they would of course want to hire him. Her letters were really very shrewd about her recommendations. The thing about the Fulbrights was that you were supposed to have a master'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.

the American institutions. So I was a

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

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 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

composers. The Highsmith Competition was just started around that time. There was a culture of composition at the school, even from my beginning years,

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 very important. I think anything like

is now the academic affairs committee), the faculty executive committee, there was an admissions committee all of

still to attract students to the school, and the changes in administration in some ways really affect the continuity of the school. That was my perception. sure it did affect in ways, I just felt

CONTE Of course he 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

Even though we had a certain amount of social co

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 have probably liked her. He have liked studying with her. When we first met, she was of

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 not that different in age. We

CONTE I 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, have this former student really brilliant living the Bay Area and finishing up his graduate work at Berkeley. He thinks he wants to stay in the Bay Area and interested in teaching. Is there anything he can do at the 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 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 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. appreciated that enough freedom at this school where a faculty member like myself and sure

FITZSOUSA

David Tanenbaum?

CONTE

Of course again David is another example of a

important and was always very supportive. He often came through with some

shrewd person about taking a long view and a large view of the school, and all the dimensions of the school.

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

encouraging, and this is a hard job. 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

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. — 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 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,

which

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 office that was Dick Howe. 30 years old, only been in California not even a year, and I said, want to give this concert, and inviting these different He said, uh-huh, uh- And I said, the San Francisco Gay s Chorus. And he said, - It was just another group, it was not an issue. And I

said,

And

he

I am because I am gay to such an extent like the most important fact about me. I think
there is some of that in

FITZSOUSA In addition to teaching composition and other courses, you served as conductor of the Conservatory chorus and as _____ 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 one of the things most proud of. As Conrad used to say, the beginning was the breath. Without people being connected to the

not been able to find any reason to replace the films that I teach, to make certain points that trying to make. So if the class has become really popular, now that we have the TAC [Technology and Applied Composition] program even more directly relevant to our

expressive range is rather narrow which is a criticism, 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 it's a good question. I'll give 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 heard I really admire. Maybe it has to do with age even into the older pieces that I had not heard, like pieces of Dominick Argento not a young composer I really admire the work of Thomas Adès, and I hear that he'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*, that'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

choices of pitches of durations, which have to do with rhythm, and trying to be taken in by
being said I find so much of it speak to me. In opera

present, and we 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

FITZSOUSA It is interesting, you just said yourself that it is not an opera, but it is 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 is 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

CONTE

Yes, certainly. I

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

The Gift of the Magi is one of seven operas, and the most

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 is 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

CONTE Yeah, Marnie was also a student at the Conservatory. I always loved her singing. She a hig

pieces of music, and delighted when I can hear [them] I think any serious and authentic
artist will show influences. But easier than saying, this sounds like or

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

FITZSOUSA [redacted] From an aesthetic standpoint, do you think there has been a change in terms of the type of music that [redacted] in

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] 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, 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 an objective fact. And I have several friends who have been around that long, or who I think really know what talking about, who were witness to it, who all attested to this. The general level of technique was just very, very high. There really a single piece that have a certain professional quality. And really saying something. So 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 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 absolutely outstanding in that regard. not afraid to say it 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 give them as much money as someone else. But we really lose that many.

FITZSOUSA What do you think

music, which is something that tried to develop and tried to impart as a teacher. When
you get to