

Conte bio

Bio - from the New Groves Dictionary

Conte, David

American composer, conductor, choral clinician, and student of Nadia Boulanger. Born December 20, 1955 in Denver Colorado of musical parents, Conte's father played trumpet in the Air Force Academy Band; his mother sang under Robert Shaw in the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, and observing those rehearsals was among his earliest musical experiences. Conte studied piano and choral singing in the Lakewood (OH) public schools, where he was mentored by B. Neil Davis, before attending Bowling Green State University (OH), majoring in composition. After his studies with Boulanger as a Fulbright Scholar, and subsequent graduation from Bowling Green (Bachelor of Music, 1978; composition with Wallace DePue), he attended Cornell University (Master of Fine Arts; 1981, Doctor of Musical Arts; 1983; Composition with Karel Husa, Steven Stucky, and Robert Palmer; conducting with Thomas Sokol). Conte worked with Aaron Copland in 1982 preparing a thesis on his manuscript sketches. Since 1985 he has been Professor of Composition and Conservatory Chorus conductor at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and Chair of the Composition Department since 2014. In 1987 he received an exclusive publishing contract from E. C. Schirmer Music Company, where he has published over 150 works in multiple genres. He joined

the composition faculty of the European American Musical Alliance in Paris in 2010; was appointed to the board of the American Composer's Forum in 2010; and Composer In Residence with Cappella SF, a professional chamber choir based in San Francisco, in 2014.

Conte has been regularly commissioned to compose music in multiple genres, including six operas and two film scores. He has received commissions from the San Francisco Symphony, the Oakland Symphony (1994, 1995, 2001), the Stockton Symphony, the Dayton Philharmonic, and the Atlantic Classical Orchestra, the American Guild of Organists (2004, 2009, 2024, 2025), the Gerbode Foundation (for his opera *America Tropical*). In 2007 he received the American Choral Director's Associations' Brock Commission, one of the highest honors bestowed upon a composer of choral music in America. His choral commissions include three works for Chanticleer, and works for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, Harvard University, Cornell University, Notre Dame University, among many others. Conte's first opera, *The Dreamers* (Philip Littell, librettist) received notice at its 1996 premiere, resulting in a commission from the Oakland Symphony to extract from it a cantata, *The Journey* (2001). *The Gift of the Magi* (second opera; Nicholas Giardini, librettist) has received over 25 productions since its 1997 premiere in the United States, Canada, and Europe. His film scores include music for PBS documentary, *Orozco: Man of Fire* (2006), and *Ballets Russes* (2005). Prominent orchestral works include "Fantasy for Orchestra", and "A Copland Portrait". His organ compositions have received wide acceptance, especially "Soliloquy", and

“Pastorale and Toccata.” Conte’s work is recorded on the Teldec, Delos, Albany, and Arsis labels.

September Sun – program notes

September Sun for SATB and string orchestra was commissioned in memory of those who perished on September 11, 2001, by St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, New York City, William Trafka, Director of Music. The work was premiered on September 15th, 2002.

The composer writes:

Soon after the events of 9/11, my dear friend and colleague William Trafka, Director of Music at St. Bartholomew's Church in New York, asked me to compose a memorial piece to be performed at the one-year Anniversary. Having recently completed with poet John Stirling Walker another memorial piece (Elegy for Matthew - in memory of Matthew Shepard), I turned again to him for a text. "O Sun" (the second movement of "September Sun") was written in a week in May of 2002; the rest of the work was composed in about three weeks

the following July. The work was premiered at St. Bart's in September, 2002.

"September Sun" is cast in four movements: I. Prelude (strings alone); II. "O Sun" (for a cappella chorus); III. "In New York" (for chorus and strings); and IV. Postlude (musically identical to the Prelude). Remembering that Barber's "Adagio for Strings" had been played at President Roosevelt's funeral, I attempted to create a similar mood for this occasion of national mourning in my Prelude and Postlude. The second movement, "O Sun," is in a loose rondo form, with a plaintive refrain of the words "O Sun" alternating with the text. Just before the final refrain, the words "Just as God's love shown on good and bad alike.." are set as a fugue. The third movement, "In New York," is a relentless Allegro, meant to depict the tension and fury of that day. The music of this movement suddenly becomes slow and reflective, setting the words "Tell me then, O glorious Sun.." for unison chorus over a gently pulsating ostinato of repeated notes in the strings. This leads directly into the final Postlude, thus concluding the work with the elegiac tone of the opening.

- David Conte

The poet writes:

The text for *September Sun* began with the unforgettable experience of being in New York with a Danish philosophy professor on the day before the attacks, when we sat together in a travel agency trying to get a flight out that night or the next morning. He was in the country for a speaking tour I had helped arrange, and had to interrupt it suddenly to attend his father-in-law's funeral back in Denmark. We flew out together the night of Monday the tenth, he back to Aarhus, I to Wyoming, where I was living at the time. My awareness of the attacks began with the sound of the gasps of fellow teachers (the next morning I was substitute teaching second grade in a public school on the quiet Wyoming prairie) who were watching the television in a classroom adjacent to mine. The professor and I had driven around the World Trade Center on Sunday night--it was his first visit to the United States--talking about the role of America in the world and the way it is perceived by its enemies. The experience led to a poem *Great Towers*, which I was later asked to read at a poetry conference in Switzerland. When David told me about the St. Bartholomew commission, I offered that text, but the commissioners found its somewhat Old-Testament-prophetic tone too jarring for a memorial. I then composed an acrostic for the work based on the sentence "God dwells in joy in the midst of sorrow" that gave expression, instead, to the feeling of grace I later felt descending on New York when, on one of my frequent

visits, I noticed beams of sunlight falling on buildings downtown in a way that became possible as a consequence of the tragedy's having removed the obstacle the towers had presented to the sun's rays.

John Stirling Walker

September Sun by John Stirling Walker

I.

*Grace, ceaseless and abounding,
Overwhelms us;
Descends, by way of*

*Death. Sweet, tragic death
Waited upon the rising Sun that
Enveloped, in its warmth, with its rays,
Lives, that morning,
Lived in expectation.
(Sweet, tragic life!)*

*Innocent lives, it took, those
Not so blessed, too, perhaps...yet...*

*Just as God's love shone
On good and bad alike, back then,
You shine, O Sun, you shine...*

II.

*In
New York*

*Tens of thousands of hundreds
Hurry, to
Embark upon the*

*Market's seas, and the
Intrigues of their fury.
Dynamism moves and
Shakes them.
Tell me then,*

*O, glorious Sun, how it
Felt to witness*

*So many of your dynamic sons and daughters
Offering their innocence on the altar of old
Reparations...did you
Repair to that island of yours,
O Sun, that island*

Where your grief becomes our grace?

