

MEDIA CONTACT Sam Smith 415.503.6265 | ssmith@sfcm.edu

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CONRAD SUSA, DISTINGUISHED COMPOSER FOR VOICE AND STAGE, DIES

Conrad Susa, distinguished composer of vocal works for the stage and chorus, and professor of composition at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, died yesterday in his sleep at his home on Eureka Street in San Francisco. He was 78 years old.

After establishing himself as resident composer for the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, Susa enjoyed a distinguished career as composer for the stage and voice. *Transformations*, a recasting of Grimms' fairy tales by poet Anne Sexton, is one of the most widely produced U.S. operas in modern times. Among many other revivals, it was staged at the Wexford Festival in 2006. *The Dangerous Liaisons* was commissioned by San Francisco Opera. The 1994 world premiere featured an all-star cast, including Frederica von Stade, Renée Fleming, Judith Forst, Johanna Meier and Thomas Hampson. The work has since been revived at Washington Opera and DiCapo Opera Theater in New York.

His most celebrated choral works include *Carols and Lullabies: Christmas in the Southwest* (1992) and *A Christmas Garland*. Both collections are firmly rooted in the repertory

of choruses across the United States, appearing frequently in holiday concert programming. His settings of the poems of James Joyce, entitled *Chamber Music*, are a cornerstone of the American choral repertory.

Among his many honors are the George Gershwin Memorial Scholarship, the Gretchaninoff Prize, and two Ford Foundation Fellowships.

Susa's health declined after he broke both ankles in a bad fall in 2012. He is survived by his brother Lawrence, and his two children, Maegan Susa-Filo and Bradley Susa; and his brother Dennis, and his two children, Jill Susa-Stone and Dennis Susa, Jr.

Susa joined the composition faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music in 1988. In a distinguished teaching career spanning virtually a quarter century, he inspired students with his prodigious and varied output, colorful tales of an adventurous life zealously lived, and penetrating seminars on the music of Richard Wagner and Benjamin Britten. During a ten-year tenure as chair of composition, he instituted important changes to the curriculum and helped double the size of the department from 15 to 30 students. He was scheduled to teach about Wagner's *Ring* cycle at 1 p.m. on Friday afternoon.

In a recent interview for the Conservatory's Oral History Project, Susa said, "I think teaching teaches one about being human, and about the price of mortality. It's a lesson I'm still learning of course. Because it's always different from the way one grew up, and what one learned then isn't always relevant now. One has to learn new things. And you have to keep some kind of morality in it." (See below for details and excerpts from Susa's oral history interview.)

In a note of bereavement this morning to the Conservatory community, Dean **Mary Ellen Poole** observed, "Conrad would want us to remember him as the master of wise and witty oneliners, as a creature of the stage, as both a musical and a verbal poet."

David Conte, Susa's longtime friend and fellow Conservatory faculty composer, assisted Susa in his recovery following his injury. He was often seen chauffeuring him to the 50 Oak Street campus and escorting him to his classes. "For those of us in the profession, Conrad Susa is a shining example of artistic invention, independence and integrity," he said. "I firmly believe

that he was one of the most important American composers of opera and choral music in the last third of the 20th century."

When reached for comment, San Francisco Opera General Director **David Gockley** stated: "As an opera composer Conrad Susa had a very listenable voice. *Transformations* is a gem, and gave promise of a bright future consisting of many titles, too few of which were realized. We miss what he could have left us, while celebrating what he gave us."

Susa's works were most recently performed by the Conservatory's New Music series, BluePrint, which mounted a production of *The Love of Don Perlimplin* in 2010. Nicole Paiement, the Conservatory's Jean and Josette Deleage Chair of New Music, conducted the performances. Andrew Mogrelia led the Conservatory Orchestra in the West Coast premiere of his *The Blue Hour* in 2008.

Additional photos available upon request.

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YouTube Interviews: Vince Peterson '03, conductor of Choral Chameleon in New York and a former student of Susa, conducted interviews with Susa about his compositions available on YouTube. Excerpts are here:

- Conrad Susa Talks about His Music *Blood Red Roses* http://youtu.be/aMza4AlZ1-s
- Conrad Susa discusses *The Blue Hour* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LaFGduZho

An excerpt from *The Dangerous Liaisons* in a Great Performances PBS broadcast from San Francisco Opera House, with Renee Fleming and Thomas Hampson: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qUHduJN7H4

About Conrad Susa

Conrad Susa was resident composer for the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego and served as dramaturge for the O'Neill Center in Connecticut. He also wrote written numerous scores for documentary films and PBS television productions, choral and instrumental works and operas (Transformations, Black River and The Love of Don Perlimplín) commissioned by the Minnesota Opera Company, San Francisco Opera and Pepsico. He wrote a church opera (The Wise Women) for the American Guild of Organists and an opera (The Dangerous Liaisons) for San Francisco Opera. He served as staff pianist with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and as assistant editor of Musical America magazine. He won numerous awards, including Ford Foundation fellowships, National Endowment for the Arts grants and a National Endowment Consortium grant. Susa earned a B.F.A. from Carnegie Institute of Technology and received a M.S. from The Juilliard School, where he studied with William Bergsma, Vincent Persichetti and P.D.Q. Bach. https://my.sfcm.edu/web/sfcm//faculty/susa.aspx

About the San Francisco Conservatory of Music

Founded in 1917, the San Francisco Conservatory of Music is the oldest conservatory in the American West and has earned an international reputation for producing musicians of the highest caliber. Notable alumni include Yehudi Menuhin, Isaac Stern, Jeffrey Kahane, Aaron Jay Kernis and Robin Sutherland, among others. The Conservatory

offers its approximately 400 collegiate students fully accredited bachelor's and master's degree programs in composition and instrumental and vocal performance. Its Preparatory Division provides exceptionally high standards of musical excellence and personal attention to more than 580 younger students. The Conservatory's faculty and students give nearly 500 public performances each year, most of which are offered to the public at no charge. Its community outreach programs serve over 1,600 school children and over 11,000 members of the wider community who are otherwise unable to hear live performances. The Conservatory's Civic Center facility is an architectural and acoustical masterwork, and the Caroline H. Hume Concert Hall was lauded by *The New York Times* as the "most enticing classical-music setting" in the San Francisco Bay Area. For more information, visit www.sfcm.edu.

Excerpt from entry "Susa, Conrad (Stephen)" in the American Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2013) by Byron Adams

(b Springdale, PA, 26 April 1935—21 November 2013). Composer, dramaturge, and teacher. Susa studied at Carnegie Mellon University, where his teachers included NIKOLAI LOPATNIKOFF. After graduation, he was appointed staff pianist for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (1957–8). He earned a master's degree at the Juilliard School of Music, studying with WILLIAM BERGSMA and VINCENT PERSICHETTI. Susa moved to San Francisco in 1972 and began to compose extensively for television and theater. A prolific and versatile composer, Susa has created over two hundred theater scores. He was music director for the Association of Producing Artists (APA); composer-in-residence for the Old Globe Theater, San Diego (1959–94); and dramaturg for the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theater Center, New London, Connecticut. He has collaborated with such directors as John Housman and Jack O'Brien, creating music for productions presented by APA, Old Globe, and American Conservatory Theater (San Francisco), and for theaters in Los Angeles, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Bermuda, and elsewhere. A distinguished teacher, Susa is a member of the composition department at the San Francisco Conservatory (1988–). Among his honors are the George Gershwin Memorial Scholarship, the Gretchaninoff Prize, and two Ford Foundation Fellowships.

Susa composes in a style characterized by an inimitable adaptation of tonality, coruscating instrumental and vocal timbres, and polyphonic textures. The wide emotional range of his music is exemplified in his five operas. Transformations (1973), based on a contemporary re-telling of Grimm's fairy tales by poet Ann Sexton, is one of the most widely performed American operas. Black River: a Wisconsin Idyll (1975, rev. 1981, 1993) is a surrealistic tragedy set in late 19th-century rural America. The Love of Don Perlimplin (1984), adapted from Lorca's play, explores the conflicting demands of love and honor. The Wise Women (1994) is both a Christmas mystery play and a witty parable. The Dangerous Liaisons (1994, rev. 1997) is a masterly study of desire and self-deception cast as a grand opera.

Oral History Project: The San Francisco Conservatory of Music recently completed a series of interviews with Conrad Susa as part of a new Oral History Project launched by the Archives of the Conservatory Library. Listen to an excerpt from the transcript on the Conservatory's website. http://my.sfcm.edu/web/sfcm/oralhistories.

Below are quotes excerpted from Conrad Susa's Oral History (the complete transcript will be available in early 2014):

Of his early education (grade school):

"I loved to work, I had the energy, and I loved to study, and I loved learning."

"I became an altar boy, and I have to say, as far as my musical life goes it really began with the performing of chant and the Latin language that I had for ten years."

Teaching:

"I've been a very happy person teaching."

"I think teaching teaches one about being human, and about the price of mortality. It's a lesson I'm still learning of course. Because it's always different from the way one grew up, and what one learned then isn't always relevant now. One has to learn new things. And you have to keep some kind of morality in it. Some kind of justice, or rightness, or something so you're not just constantly caving in to what's fashionable. Teaching school is that like the winds of fashion blow in and out of education all the time."

The Conservatory:

"The San Francisco Conservatory is a remarkable school. It has brilliant people teaching, and it's turned out brilliant students who are unhappy with one thing or another, just as you're supposed to be. And one hopes they grow up and look back and say, "I was taught to be unhappy so that I improve myself."

"I thought back to my first encounter with the Conservatory, which is when I moved here. They had a wonderful Saturday afternoon marathon on the radio. All these kids playing the piano all day long and other instruments. I was working on - I don't know what - so I was at my desk and just listening to this endless stream of music, all from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. That passed, then some years later there was the Sing Along Messiah. We were listening to it, and I discovered that they were listening to it across the street and had their windows open, so I turned on my volume and opened up my windows, and the neighbors turned up their volume and opened their windows, so the street was full of Messiah and we were all singing. It was glorious, I had never come into a town where the populous was singing Handel's Messiah. I thought, "How great, that a stupendous masterpiece of that kind would also prove to be that popular."

His own compositions:

"I wanted my music to be used, not admired. I wanted to provide people with music that they would like to sing. They would like to go back to. They'd say, "Let's do that ... let's do that again ... let's do it next year." I did not crave fame. Money is nice, and when I made money I loved it, but it wasn't my goal. My goal was to write music that people would like to sing."

"I don't know if there is any way to have a career except to write good music. I think the career is something that takes you along, I don't think you can create it."

"I've had an extremely good and pleasant life being a composer."