



## Del Tredici, David (b. 1937)

by Paul Attinello

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Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer and pianist David Del Tredici, known for his famous "Alice" works and neo-Romantic style, has also written music concerned with gay experience.

Del Tredici was born on March 16, 1937, in Cloverdale, near Los Angeles. He was a child prodigy at the piano. He made a solo debut with the San Francisco Symphony in 1954, and continued as a concert pianist until 1960.

He enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley in 1955, initially studying piano. His first composition, *Soliloquy* (1958), written at the summer Aspen Festival, caused Darius Milhaud to encourage him to become a composer. On his return to Berkeley, Del Tredici studied composition, receiving his B.A. in 1959. He went on to Princeton to study with Roger Sessions and Earl Kim, receiving an M.F.A. in 1964.

Del Tredici's compositional ability met with a wealth of early recognition. In 1966 he received a Guggenheim fellowship and spent the summer as composer-in-residence at the Marlboro Festival. Aaron Copland invited him to composition seminars at Tanglewood.

Del Tredici has taught at a number of institutions, including Harvard (1966-1972), the State University of New York at Buffalo (1972-1973), Boston University (1973-1984), the City University of New York (1984 to the present), and Yale (1999), as well as at the Manhattan School (1991-1993) and Juilliard (1993-1996).

In 1980, Del Tredici was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *In Memory of a Summer Day*, one of his "Alice" works for soprano and orchestra. He has received commissions from American and European orchestras, and from the Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations, and was composer-in-residence for the New York Philharmonic (1988-1990).

Until 1967, most of his works were in an atonal style, and many were based on texts by James Joyce. Since then, he has written almost exclusively in tonal styles and has been a strong proponent of tonal music.

For a long time, Del Tredici's fame rested on his series of vocal and instrumental works based on Lewis Carroll's Alice books, notably *Pop-Pourri* (1968, revised 1973), *An Alice Symphony* (1969, revised 1976), the popular Bicentennial commission *Final Alice* (1975), the four-movement *Child Alice* (1981), and his first opera, *Dum Dee Tweedle* (1995). Many of these works are remarkable for their idyllic sensuality, but an overlay of dissonant harmonies and the use of unexpected instruments give the neo-Romantic sound a postmodern edge.

Del Tredici detached himself from Carroll to write three large, dissonant works for orchestra, *March to Tonality* (1985), *Tattoo* (1986), and the threatening *Steps* (1990). However, the real turn in his career came in 1996, when he attended a workshop in gay sexuality and self-acceptance held by Body Electric, a national organization devoted to such workshops.

During that workshop, he set two overtly gay poems for voice and piano. This led to the composition of a number of songs based on gay texts and experiences. For instance, a setting of Paul Monette's "Here" was dedicated to Del Tredici's lover Paul Arcomano, who died of AIDS in 1993; a setting of Allen Ginsberg's "Personals Ad" was dedicated to gay activist Jody Dalton, director of Composers Recordings Inc.; and a setting of Thom Gunn's "Memory Unsettled" was dedicated to Del Tredici's mother, who died in 2000, and who had accepted her son's life choices.

These songs became the core of the cantata *Gay Life* (1996-2001, premiered by the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas in May 2001). A related collection is *Brother* (1997-2001), a song cycle created with drag performance artist John Kelly, which premiered at P.S. 122 in New York in May 2001.

Since 1996, Del Tredici has made a number of changes in his life, which have been not only discussed in public interviews but also reflected in his compositions. He has written more than fifty songs on texts by American poets, including the monodrama *Dracula* (1999) based on a text by gay poet Alfred Corn.

Del Tredici met his life partner Ray Warman in 1999; the couple held their commitment ceremony in 2000.

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### **About the Author**

**Paul Attinello** teaches in the Department of Music at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne; he formerly taught at the University of Hong Kong. He has published in a number of journals, anthologies, and encyclopedias, including *Queering the Pitch*, the first collection of gay and lesbian musicology. He established and edited the Newsletter of the Gay & Lesbian Study Group of the American Musicological Society, and was also co-founder of the Society of Gay & Lesbian Composers in San Francisco.