



Susa, Conrad (b. 1935)

by Paul Attinello

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American composer Conrad Susa is best known for his operas and choral music, some of which is informed by his experience as a gay man.

Conrad Stephen Susa was born in the town of Springdale, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh, on April 26, 1935. His family was Slovak, and there was a great deal of amateur music making at home, especially choral music. He studied music at Carnegie Institute of Technology (now Carnegie Mellon University) and at Juilliard, where his teachers included William Bergsma and Vincent Persichetti.

From the beginning of his career, Susa has been involved with dramatic music, as indicated by his work as composer-in-residence for the Old Globe Theater in San Diego (1959-1994), music director of the APA-Phoenix Repertory Company in New York (1961-1968), and music director of the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut (1969-1971). He has also been dramaturge for the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut (1986 to ca 1990).

Susa has won various prizes, including a George Gershwin Memorial Scholarship, two Ford Foundation Fellowships, a Gretchaninoff Prize, and a National Endowment for the Arts grant.

In 1972 he moved from New York to San Francisco; he joined the composition department at the San Francisco Conservatory in 1988, where he became Chair in 2000.

Susa's compositions are mainly tonal, and reflect a love of Baroque counterpoint and a joy in the polyphony of voices. In addition to many film and television scores and instrumental works, Susa has written a number of vocal works, both stage and choral.

Susa is the first composer ever commissioned by a gay men's chorus. The New York Gay Men's Chorus (together with Susa's publisher G. Schirmer) commissioned *Chanticleer's Carol* (1982), an antiphonal work whose cries of "Awake!" are accompanied by brass, including an offstage trumpet.

He has since had numerous commissions by the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA) and its members, including the San Francisco, Boston, Minneapolis, and San Diego choruses.

Susa's first opera, *Transformations* (1973), was among the most famous commissions by the theatrically innovative Minnesota Opera, and has become one of the most widely performed American operas.

Its staging of Anne Sexton's radical reinterpretations of fairy tales expands the gender roles of the originals, including cross-gender casting (approved by Sexton) and a lesbian seduction. The composer's libretto works in a story of Sexton's creative and personal growth as a subplot, and the musical numbers parody a range of popular music styles.

Two of Susa's operas, *Black River* (1975, revised 1981) and *The Love of Don Perlimplin* (1984), were written

to libretti by the composer's then partner Richard Street; the latter is based on a text by Federico García Lorca.

Two later operas, *The Wise Woman* (1994) and *The Dangerous Liaisons* (1994, revised 1996-1997, after the Laclos novel), use libretti by gay songwriter Philip Littell; the former was commissioned by the American Guild of Organists, the latter by the San Francisco Opera.

Dirge from Cymbeline (1991) for men's chorus with offstage trumpet was written in memory of Susa's lover Nikos, who died of AIDS.

Susa has written other pieces occasioned by gay deaths. The first song of *The Cricket Sings* (1985), a GALA commission for the Seattle Men's Chorus, is a memorial for a young man who died of cancer.

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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.