

David Conte's *Elegy for Matthew*

Text and Program Notes

Singing City performed David's work in May of 2005 at the Irvine Auditorium on the campus of The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, as part of a concert entitled "Voices of Remembrance: Victims of Violence."

Elegy for Matthew

John Stirling Walker, 7 January, 1999

I.
Memory maketh martyrs of men;
And, though its sweet refrain,
Thousand-times as real as they themselves,
Tricks the ear, taunts the enemy, teases truth,
He, of whom we sing, he,
Envied of the angels,
Works his magic in hidden spheres
Silently.

II.
None have known
The tenderness of youth
Its fleeting fancy
Its passing pain
Its yearning touch, its noble fear, Its pride

Like one who gives it up
To hell-bent fury on a prairie cold
To hatred's dark, malignant blows
For nothing more
(For nothing less)
than the thought
Of love.

"Memory maketh martyrs of men." How do we remember those that have been taken from us? David Conte's *Elegy for Matthew*, with text by John Stirling Walker, attempts to deal with that issue. Matthew Shepherd was a young, gifted, openly gay college student from Wyoming who was brutally murdered in 1998.

The words, in a beautiful and highly poetic text by John Stirling Walker, present two contrasting responses to sudden death. In the first poem, the speaker struggles to grasp the fleeting and haunting memory of someone who has gone. The music echoes these sentiments, as the first section of the movement uses angular lines and the sharp rhythm of the ancient dance of death, the sarabande. There is always the sense of foreboding as the timpani repeats a pedal throughout much of the movement (not unlike Brahms in the second movement of the German *Requiem*, or Beethoven in the second movement of the 'Eroica' symphony). In the second section of the movement, the rich choral chords overwhelm the sinister pedal and the poem talks of the soul ascending into eternity. The poem and the movement end quietly as the spirit of the departed "works his magic in hidden spheres. Silently."

The second movement, which David Conte has suggested could represent the remembrance of a grieving mother, (like Brahms, in the soprano solo movement of the German *Requiem*) recounts the passing pleasures

that only the young can know. The music is a simple song of great sweetness, sung in canon by the choir. This sweetness is cut off by “hatred’s dark, malignant blows” as the choir sings dissonant outbursts punctuated by the orchestra. The movement ends simply and tenderly with “the thought of love.”

David Conte is Professor of Composition and Chair of the Composition Department at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and has written much vocal music for many acclaimed singers and ensembles. *Elegy for Matthew* was commissioned for the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus in 1999.