

## *Melodic Transgressions*

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*Introduction of John Harbison '60*

*Arts First Medalist*

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WHEN I WAS a first-year undergraduate at Princeton in 1952, the course I most wanted to sign up for was a famous canonical hit called “Ren and Ref” (“Renaissance and Reformation”). It was taught by Professor E. H. Harbison, John’s father, who was known to be not only a fine historian and teacher, but also, in his private life, a composer and musician.

Later, that course took on a greater and intriguing symbolic meaning for me, and came to represent the unresolved dichotomy of Princeton – at least the Princeton of my own era: the fascination with, and indulgence in, stylized excess, juxtaposed with an equally powerful need for Presbyterian or Calvinistic self-purgation and constant moral scrupulousness. In the Renaissance part of Professor Harbison’s course, we encountered all those dubious, extravagant, amorous, venal, and aesthetic Medicean and Borgiasque cardinals and popes, who were then followed so swiftly by Savonarola’s sackcloth; by the Reformation’s Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin – people who generally disliked large outdoor parties and who reinvented the concept of “Arts Last.”

## *The Arts and Humanities*

Any institution that had the puritan Jonathan Edwards as one of its earliest presidents, Woodrow Wilson as its greatest recent public figure, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as its most famous unshakable literary icon was bound – at least in the 1950s – to have some form of deep psychic angst at its core. To jazz or not to jazz? That was at least *one* of the abiding dilemmas. And Professor Harbison, reigning over “Ren and Ref,” seemed to me to embody and nearly to resolve, in an especially gracious way, the university’s heritage of threatening antinomies: he was witty, but serious and demanding as a teacher; kind and even indulgent, but full of a certain sobriety; a slightly self-effacing historian in public and, apparently, an imaginative, expressive musician in private.

I do not want at all to suggest that John Harbison, who has generously agreed to share this weekend with us, had somehow (when he was growing up) to deal with the entire symbolic burden of Princeton’s rich but also dichotomous history. It is true that he and I were both there when the shadows of Woodrow Wilson, who had died only a little more than three decades earlier, and Fitzgerald, who had died barely a decade earlier, were very much in evidence. Nevertheless, John was already discovering alchemical ways to transmute Princeton’s paradoxes into something rich and strange, without having to re-enact for himself a dialectical drama of stark choice between extremes – a sort of *Harbison Agonistes* – and without simply seeking some easy but incoherent amalgam of the great variety of musical and other traditions that he realized might be accessible to him.

By the time John was twelve, he had formed his own jazz group; he had been listening to radio broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera every week; he was playing some Beethoven on the piano, coming in touch with New York musical comedy, and talking with Roger Sessions (who was then teaching at Princeton) about twentieth-century music.

His most significant musical exemplars were evident early in his life: Bach, especially the cantatas; Stravinsky; Thelonious Monk

## *Melodic Transgressions*

and other jazz greats such as Coltrane; figures from American popular music (Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Irving Berlin, Hammerstein); and opera, spanning at least Mozart and Verdi to Debussy's *Pelléas* and beyond.

In other words, from the beginning John did not so much struggle with, but rather absorbed and began to take as “given,” several traditions – several musical canons that he made his own, essentially because he was so strongly drawn to them, and riveted by them.

This is not to say that the going was always easy. At Harvard, in the face of an austere historical approach to the study of “classical” music (if one can use that term), John discovered that the then Music Department's conception of history stopped somewhere in the nineteenth century, and he had to make a special case for wanting to press further. Later, when he returned to Princeton to study composition, he ran into a different kind of orthodoxy, based on twelve-tone and atonal modernist traditions. John held out for a wider range that could include transgressions that were melodic in nature. This left him rather on the periphery of things at Princeton, and he still remembers the day when one of his classmates turned to him and said: “You're really just a tune man, aren't you?”

John *isn't* “just a tune man” any more than he is “just” anything else. He has his modernist severities, moments of jazzmania, of melodic arias and other arresting complexities. Most of all, he has the capacity to manage, with extraordinary ease of transition, the shifts and moves from one set of stylistic allusions to another in a way that is unsurpassed among contemporary composers.

All of these talents are nowhere more in evidence than in John's most recent major work, his opera *The Great Gatsby*, which premiered at the Metropolitan this past winter. Quite apart from its boldness and its insistence that the music (not the “plot,” so to speak) must carry the work, John clearly gathered up in this work a very great deal from his decades of immersion in so many dif-

## *The Arts and Humanities*

ferent kinds of art: returning to Fitzgerald, and *Gatsby*, with all their own internal contradictions and burdens; to jazz and swing and popular music; to the stringencies of modernist recitative, and the constraints of modernist arias. John, of course, concentrated in literature – not music – through most of his undergraduate time at Harvard; so it is not surprising that he should have used a quintessential American text, a Jazz Age text, and really a Princeton text, as the grounding for this major public entry into opera.

But if John's *Gatsby* gathers together and intertwines a great deal of the past, it also obviously looks outward in a new way to an open future. Over the course of his career, John has composed string quartets, symphonies, other operas, and a cantata, among much else. Like all formidable composers, he keeps coming back for yet another act, in an age that is less than hospitable to contemporary music. It takes not only talent and commitment, but no little courage and poise, to carry forward in this way. Happily, the world has often recognized John's capacities. He has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a MacArthur Fellow; in 1980, he won the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award for his *Piano Concerto*; and in 1987, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Flight into Egypt*. He has been composer-in-residence at any number of places, from CalArts to Aspen to the American Academy in Rome. In short, in his invariably modest, reflective, impassioned, but also intellectually disinterested way, he has, in effect, done it all. Harvard and Arts First are honored to have him here among us.