

In the 1st Person : February 2005

NewMusicBox

John Corigliano at Home

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No matter how immersed in the new music community I've gotten, I always get a taste of the outside world at least twice a day when I ride the New York City subway to and from the American Music Center. Aside from frequently running into composers, musicians, and people who work in the biz on an almost daily basis, or the occasional spontaneous concert experience of musicians actually playing in the subways, the worlds of the subway and new music don't overlap.

Which is why it was as much a shock as a delight the first time I looked up from a book I was reading and noticed the smiling face of John Corigliano on an ad for Lehman College. Underneath the caption "Meeting of Minds," there he was, shown with one of his students and next to a superimposed Academy award. After the usual subway fare of foot pain and injury lawyers, it was so refreshing to see an ad that really celebrated a living American composer.

I've wanted to talk with John about his world view for *NewMusicBox* for a very long time and there were certainly a million and one other reasons for doing so—the upcoming premiere of his symphony for concert band which promises to be a major addition to the repertoire, his outspoken remarks about conductors and orchestras in this country, his less-than-adulatory take on many of the major awards even though he has won just about every award there is, his piece for two pianos in quarter tones from a few years back which pressed my particular buttons, and on and on—but there was something about that ad in the subway which took him once and for all out of "our world" and put him into "the world" for me.

During our talk, John repeatedly emphasized the importance of "the world" over "our world," challenging us always to see the bigger picture in order to be better composers, better listeners, and better citizens. I hope you will find it as inspirational as I have...

-FJO

The Composer and the Public

FJO: I've already seen you twice this week in an ad on the subway that shows you teaching a student at [Lehman College](#). It's weird. The ad is silly but it's also wonderful because it subliminally makes people aware that there actually are living composers in this country.

JC: Just last week, I was coming back from the airport and this cab driver looked at me and said, "I know you; you're famous. I've seen you; I know your picture." He couldn't identify where, so I said, "In the subway." And he said, "Now I remember." I really wanted to say that I'm the star of a soap and of course you know me from there, but I didn't do that. I think it's great. I love the graffiti on it. I really enjoyed the blackening out of my eyes and the arrows with various statements about my personal life that they suspect. I think it's good for composers to be in front of people. We don't get many chances. It's a nice thing. I wish the picture were better but I don't photograph well; I'm vain [*laughs*].

FJO: Do you think this cab driver has ever heard a note of your music?

JC: I doubt it. He just recognized the face. A lot of the world's sense is based on the recognizing of a face. That's what stardom's all about.

FJO: Could that somehow translate into him winding up in a record store buying one of your CDs or attending a concert that features your music?

JC: I don't know. Sometimes I've had weird experiences with cab drivers. One time I was in a cab and some piece was playing and I asked my friend, "What was that?" And the driver said, "It's [Schoenberg](#), for Christ's sake!" and continued driving. And I thought, "Wow, only in New York." He was really irritated that I didn't know what it was.

FJO: Do you think he knew who you were?

JC: No, but I think it was great. Who knows? Maybe he listens to all this. A lot of cab drivers listen to classical music. I love the idea that people are doing it because they enjoy it. Of course the real thing about so-called classical music is that a lot of people listen to it because they find it relaxing and feel comfortable with it. So when I say, "I write classical music," they say, "You write relaxing music," and I say, "No, it's not relaxing at all; sometimes it's very jarring." And they're surprised because a lot of the public thinks of classical music that way, or as something upscale. You see ads advertising an expensive car or a luxury hotel, and you'll have Vivaldi or Mozart playing in the background. "Buy gold," and you're bound to have the Vienna Philharmonic doing something pacifying. So the thought of what our music is all about is very distorted.

FJO: So do you feel comfortable calling yourself a "classical" music composer?

JC: I never have. It has no meaning because "classical" is a period of 75 years of music. And "symphonic"... What does that mean when you write chamber music? There really has never been a good word. I think that we need one and no one's found one in all these years.

FJO: The term "serious music," of course, is an insult to every other kind of music.

JC: It's wrong. First of all, a lot of music that's not so-called classical music is serious, and some of my pieces I hope are somewhat silly and funny and not serious in that sense of the word. It doesn't mean I don't write them seriously, but they're not always meant to have a threnody appeal. I don't think of that as a goal for everything.

FJO: In addition to what you were saying about the public perception of classical music being relaxing or upscale, it's all from the past.

JC: And European. European even more than the past. In fact, I wish our American orchestras and critics would stop thinking that classical music is so European. It's still haunting us. The heads of many orchestras are Europeans. The artistic administrators are very often Europeans. Certainly the audience looks towards that. And the critics respect a European composer. I find respect for a mediocre British composer, as opposed to a really good American, ridiculous because they automatically respect a composer if he's from England. He's gets kudos for that, for being an authentic composer and a really serious person, whereas Americans are judged rather savagely by the press. In England, it's quite the reverse. The English are very lucky because their critics love them because they come from their country. They're very loyal to their composers. It's a great thing. We don't have that.

FJO: It's shocking to me that an orchestra in America or a public classical music radio station, especially those that accept taxpayer dollars toward funding, can get away with not playing the music of composers from this country.

JC: I believe that the big institutions, like [Chicago](#) (where I was once composer-in-residence but now does a much narrower presentation of new music), have a responsibility to be wide. I think the small groups that organize can have very limited goals. [Bang on a Can](#) can do a certain kind of thing. And [Continuum](#) does this and so and so does that. They are small parts of a large picture, but the big institutions have a responsibility to be wide which is why I feel very positively about the conductors that do that sort of thing. There are conductors in the United States that have done that. [Leonard Slatkin](#) is the prime example. He has conducted [Boulez](#) and [Carter](#) all over the place, but he does everybody. He will do the widest range of music and I think that's so healthy. That's what we have to encourage.

FJO: Your music exists beyond these specialist ensembles you were just talking about. Most of the performances of your music are done by mainstream ensembles and soloists on programs with more standard repertoire rather than on specifically "new music" concerts.

JC: Although I wouldn't mind once in 25 or 30 years to have them put a piece of mine on a program. That would not upset me. The fact that I always support them financially, sending my checks in and all that, and always read about a whole different list of composers, I can't say that it always delights me. But I understand it, I really do. They are doing what they think is a supplement.

I was music director of [WBAI](#) radio. It was 1962 or '63. At that time, [Pacifica Radio](#) was mostly a music station. Eric Salzman had been there before me and I was the Music Director for two and a half years. My job there was not to do the Beethoven symphonies or the Brahms symphonies, but to supplement. And the reason for that was [WQXR](#) and [WNCN at that time](#), and [WNYC](#), but especially the first two, had major programming in the standard repertoire and they filled that out completely. So I went in and got the other stuff. [Charlotte Moorman](#) and all of that wild stuff she was doing with the cello and the electronics, or [Charles Wuorinen](#) and the [Group for Contemporary Music](#). Those are the people that I went after because I had to supplement the New York scene. So I do think that the smaller groups need to supplement very often. They're right to do that. It's the big institutions that have the responsibility to be wider than they sometimes are.

FJO: To take this back to you. Without question, most people would agree that in this country you're among the top five most famous composers alive today of new classical music (for lack of a better name).

JC: It's possible.

FJO: You're at the top. But in the world today, to the mainstream public out there which includes that cab driver you mentioned earlier, it's mostly irrelevant. What does it mean to be a living American composer? Can a composer be famous in this country?

JC: Can Beethoven be a composer and not a dog? When I was a kid, it was very different. It wasn't that long ago that immigrant families came over with a tradition of teaching classical music. The school system taught it when I was in school, in high school and in grade school. It's not done now. So where are these kids going to get the excitement about a music that's felt to be European and elitist and white in an age where the opposite of those things is really the goal of most kids who are interested in music? It's not going to happen unless we make it passionate and real and really believe in it. I'm always amazed at the vast numbers of young composers that are around today, really young composers. I'm talking about teenagers and people in their early 20s. These people are so accomplished and so good.

I facilitate the chair without voting in the [First Music](#) competition for the New York Youth Symphony. I have done that for years because I have seen so many competitions that have the same jury every year that get very political. This one always changes; no one ever does it twice. I go there because that way I can run it without voting or saying anything about the pieces and there are all these new people with new voices and completely different ideas. We've had every gamut of composer judging this. The same piece of music can be entered for several years in a row and that way it is ensured to be seen by different people. That's what I think is fair. What I found in these young people's work is an astounding diversity and craft that I don't remember when I was a young composer. And it's so strange because it's a field that seems to be dying around us. They can't sell records, even of Beethoven. Orchestras are going bankrupt and white hair predominates in the concert hall, and yet there are more young composers than ever before. That's a paradox and that's what people need to know more about. But, you see, that's the future. That's not living off another performance of Wagner, Beethoven, or another [Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto](#), which is frankly fairly boring. And that's what our field thinks it's all about: recreation as creation.

FJO: Maybe it's O.K. that the Beethoven symphonies aren't selling if people are buying the John Corigliano symphonies, or the latest [John Adams](#) or [Tania León](#) piece. Pick any composer you want...

JC: Yes, I agree with you. I like that. That's the way it used to be. The new has to dominate and then the old becomes an ancillary part of it. It's not a matter of the old composer dominating the culture in previous centuries. It's always been the new, but the old will be played also. That's healthy. But whether we can think of abstract concert music without any visualization in this day of total visualization as something that can capture the imagination of people, I don't know. Because we look and we hear, and everything has changed because of that: our computers, films, our pop songs have videos that make them really popular. Everything is seen. To do that with classical music is just too expensive. As you know, we get 2-track recordings of our music, not 64. A band of four people is going to have 64 tracks to play with. But a symphony orchestra of 108 with a chorus and soloists is only going to have 2. That's what we do. We can't afford to do more. So where can we do these videos? Where can we do the kind of work that will bring us into the mainstream? How can we afford it?

FJO: We say this is the only era where the past is dominating. But that's a big myth. The past isn't dominating at all. Pop culture is. As you said, most people think Beethoven is a dog because of some stupid movie that was really popular a few years back.

JC: Of course. Popular culture, unfortunately, has gotten further away from melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or compositional interest than it ever was. Again, looking back to when I was young, the popular culture was very mixed with musical theatre. Musical theatre at that time was rather sophisticated harmonically: [Rodgers](#), [Kern](#), [Gershwin](#), and other people were extremely good composers. And then their music was taken and sung by [Frank Sinatra](#) and the other pop people of the day. Today it's quite the opposite. [Sondheim](#) is art music. And what they bring on Broadway to be pop is basically a movie, an animation, or a rock show. [Elvis](#), I hear, is [coming back in the spring](#).

FJO: You have to admit there are rock groups and other groups around today who are creating music that is compositionally sophisticated.

JC: I do. There are groups that do things that are sophisticated. But they always have words and they always have certain lengths. They don't deal in big structures or complete abstraction like the building of a 25-minute piece without words, only music.

FJO: But there are groups who have...

JC: There might be, but I don't think that's the popular culture. I think that's like jazz. Jazz is not the popular culture. Jazz is in the same position in our culture as classical music. A very small minority of people really love it.

FJO: Of course what's happened now with rock music and other forms of so-called popular music is that it's so splintered into sub-genres. There are lots of alternative groups doing things within rock that are experimental but that's not what's selling millions of copies.

JC: That's what I'm saying. It's always going to be for a smaller group. And there's nothing wrong with that if we can afford to do it. As long as we can write a piece and get it performed and recorded and out there, it's fine. You don't need to have everybody know your name. I don't think it's necessary.

FJO: To riff on what you said about film and video, you've written film scores now for years.

JC: Not really. I've written only three. It's actually a very small amount. People think I write a lot for movies, but I don't and that's because I don't want to. I don't know what I would contribute. Most film composers do what they do so well. They're so good at what they do. I don't know why I would get in there.

FJO: But the film scores you have done have been so successful. You've even won an Oscar and were nominated for another one.

JC: Yeah, but those are very special projects. *Altered States* was directed by [Ken Russell](#). It had 10 to 12 minute scenes with no dialog, purely sounds and picture. At that time, the kind of techniques that I was involved in were not being used in film, except *2001* that was using somebody's recordings of [Ligeti](#). Nobody was really doing that. I came in because Ken Russell went to a concert and heard my Clarinet Concerto and said, "I want you to write the wildest thing you can do for *Altered States*." And, again, *The Red Violin* is a very different kind of picture. I grew up with my father as a violinist. That tradition that I've had all my life was a thing to write about. A movie in which the main character was a piece of wood that had to come to life and be a violin over three hundred years, that makes sense. But I don't see any point in my doing other kinds of films because I don't think I'd do it better than people who are wonderful at it. My former student is [Elliot Goldenthal](#). Boy, he can write a film score. I wouldn't be able to touch it.

Opera and the Role of Art

FJO: I was rewatching *The Ghosts of Versailles* the last couple of nights. It had been years since I had seen it. Just like *The Red Violin*, *Ghosts* is engaging in a dialog with the past. That seems to be a characteristic of a lot of your music. I never realized before that in the libretto the attempt to save [Marie Antoinette](#) involved taking her to America. Of course, it doesn't happen. Finally she's at peace and resigned to her fate since the past is ultimately over and life needs to go on. I think that's ultimately what so much of your music is also about.

JC: Don't forget that the story of *Ghosts of Versailles* was made up. We made it up, [Bill Hoffman](#) and I, precisely because we wanted to say certain things. I think one of the important things had to do with art of the past and change. The very plot of *Ghosts of Versailles* deals with that in the sense that it confronts the [French Revolution](#) from another viewpoint. The French Revolution is the ultimate modernist statement. Destroy everything. Don't build on the past. There is no past. That kind of violent revolution

where you chop everyone's head off and build something totally new is very much like a certain kind of philosophy of musical expression: you don't look back, you only build new.

But there are other kinds of revolutions. The revolution that happened in the Soviet Union, for example. Leningrad becoming St. Petersburg without thousands of people having their heads cut off. They looked to the past and renamed the city because of the greatness of the past and now they want to be a contemporary city and move on. It's a view of art and life that I think Bill and I share. You should embrace the past and understand it, deal with it and go forward. *The Ghosts* is most misunderstood when people hear refractions of the classical world and say, "Oh, that's like Mozart." In fact, 90 percent of the piece is quite wild, often not tonal, and the illusions and refractions of the past were built into the plot. So I asked Bill: "Can you give me a world of no time? I want to go into the past, into the world of Figaro and the characters of [Beaumarchais](#). But I don't want to be stuck there like in [The Rake's Progress](#). I don't want the piece set in 1792. I don't want to be limited to neo-classicism and box myself in. What I really want is a world of smoke. Can we look to the past and suddenly jump into it and be there? Can we co-exist with the past and this world of no time?" And this took months and months of talking. And he said, "Well, I can give you two things that could do this. One is a world of dreams and the other is a world of ghosts. Both of them have no period and both of them can go anywhere."

From that *The Ghosts of Versailles* evolved from a dramatic solution to a musical problem. I used to love neo-classicism—and my early works reflect that—but I didn't want that kind of classicism. I wanted a refracted classicism against a world very much of our time so that one could co-exist and take a telescope and suddenly be time traveling. The solution was ghosts as an idea. We plotted out the French Revolution as a metaphor for the kind of change we didn't like that had been whitewashed—this always happens when people win things, history is rewritten. Interestingly, the views on the French Revolution by the French now are very different. In fact, they had the trials of Marie Antoinette and Louis on television verbatim—we, by the way, have the verbatim [trial of Marie Antoinette](#) in our opera—and the French people overwhelmingly felt that the whole thing was unjust. This is a big change from the lockstep situation of, "Revolution is wonderful." There are some terrible things about that kind of revolution: the destruction, the inability to grow from what was and grow forward, and in a sense going backwards in many ways because they had to start from nothing. Starting from nothing is very good because you're not inhibited by the past. But starting by understanding the past and then being able to go into future is even better. It's everything. It's the past. It's the present. And then you must think to the future. Now getting caught in the past, that's a problem, and I know composers and artists who are caught, but you don't have to be. And in this day and age, the whole idea of information and multiplicity of inputs is tremendously important because the 21st century is the Age of Information. We can go to this computer and we can access any music or any art or anything else from any part of the world, from any generation from the beginning of recorded time to the present. How can we then box ourselves in so that we do this but not that. It's so limiting. The way of inclusion rather than fundamentalist exclusion is the way for me. *The Ghosts* is all about that. On the other hand, it isn't preaching that, so people don't even know that.

FJO: When I first saw *Ghosts*, years ago when the [Met](#) premiere was televised, I kept dwelling on the fact that the Met hadn't done a new opera in 25 years. So when I saw you using Figaro and Cherubino, characters that were comfortable to the Met crowd, I was dismissive of it without really paying attention to it. But hearing and seeing it now, I get it. It's not safe. You're actually implicating the institutions and the audiences for classical music through these ghosts. It's a metaphor for classical music becoming a celebration of ghosts.

JC: It absolutely is and it's scary. We have to wake up people. We have to make them see their blindness. And, of course, I think the only way to do that is through the music. I believe that replaying the old music, no matter how grand it may be done, is not going to do that. On the other hand, you don't abolish that. The [Eroica Symphony](#) is such a great piece that you have to hear it and you have to hear it live. We can't dismiss these things. You must understand the importance of the past. But if you don't

realize the importance of the present and the future, you don't nourish that—and our art form does not—then it's like a tree that grows no new shoots. Without new shoots the tree dies.

FJO: In terms of experimentation, there have been things you have done that have been wildly experimental, even in *The Ghosts of Versailles*. I think it's the first time that a production commissioned by the Met had a synthesizer in the orchestra.

JC: Don't forget the fifty **kazoos**! It is a very adventurous piece and that's why I bristle when somebody can remember only the Alberti bass and the fragments that come into it from the past because that's not the central point; that's the periphery of the piece. What's really upsetting is that its adventurousness was not noticed by a lot of people because of exactly the prejudices you came to it with. And now it languishes in a sense. It is there as a very wonderful thing that happened but no one's doing it.

FJO: And it's your only opera.

JC: And it will continue to be. Why would I write another opera? I had a successful opera, not only critically successful but it sold out every performance it ever had. It was brought back the following season. It was done in **Chicago**. It was done in **Hannover** and sold out every performance. And yet every opera producer will say to me, "Write me an opera." And I'll say, "What about *The Ghosts*?" and they'll say, "That's the Met's opera. We don't want that." What's the point of writing an opera? If you write something that's successful and it doesn't matter. It was twelve years of work. And this opera was successful, and yet the European companies didn't even travel to Hannover from Munich or Berlin to see it. And why? Because what it stands for, an anti-modernist view, was not something that at that time was particularly well thought of in Europe. That's changing now, that rigidity. It was thought of as a piece that was reactionary when I think it's actually a pretty forward-looking piece.

FJO: And now of course seeing somebody ordering people's heads chopped off has some new really visceral connotations.

JC: Yeah, it does. And maybe we need to look at the idea of that kind of change as savage, as not always necessary. And maybe we should question the people who do not question. Why is there one way? Why has music advanced so that we cannot look at the past? Even science learns from the past. What is it with the art form that you have to abolish the past in order to say, "I exist." It's all egocentrism.

FJO: In a way art is just reflecting the larger society. Politically we're so polarized.

JC: We're in a terrible era politically, there's no question about it. One of the problems in art is in reflecting optimism and the fact that we find it very hard to do. The worst part of our political situation is that we find it very hard to have the same kind of feelings about either ourselves, our country or our world that **Aaron** [Copland] had in the '40s. It's very hard. During and after World War II, there was a feeling that America did the right thing. He could write a piece like *Appalachian Spring* because there was that belief there. But Aaron stopped writing at a certain point. He was really disillusioned about the world, our country, and a lot of other things. And I think it's very hard not to be.

I think art can reflect tragedy. My **first symphony** is about my friends who died from AIDS. There's no question that it should be able to reflect this. But there has to be more for it to be really rich. We have to have a sense of joy, enthusiasm, exuberance, especially from 20-year-olds. It's really awful to hear threnody and elegy, one after another, from young people when you expect a sense of exuberance and joy. I think in these times it's very hard for people to find that, but I think you have to try. Without that, there's no core. Everything is turning into the negative.

FJO: But even you, when you were first making a name for yourself as a young composer, wrote a piece called *Elegy*.

JC: Sure. And an elegy is valid. All is valid, except angst is not the only way. Art is not only about angst. I was really thrilled when [Paul Moravec](#) won a [Pulitzer](#) for a piece that was a complete exuberance. I was startled when I heard it, because I didn't hear it until after it won and my view about a Pulitzer Prize-winning piece is that it's usually very serious and very somber. I've never in my life ever seen a Pulitzer Prize go to a piece that is effervescent, not for the last 40 years.

FJO: And certainly [your own piece that won the Pulitzer](#) wasn't.

JC: It's a very serious piece. And I believe in that. But I was kind of thrilled to see that the Pulitzer recognized somebody who was writing from another viewpoint. I think that it's very important for us to have that rich experience in art and not to think of art in this romantic twisted view that art is only about anguish and angst. It isn't. The best works of art of the 18th century were often comedies.

Pulitzers vs. Grawemeyers

FJO: When you won the [Pulitzer Prize](#) you [spoke out](#) quite a bit about the "Pulitzer cabal"...

JC: I think the Pulitzer doomed itself sometime ago. The Pulitzer honored pieces like *Appalachian Spring*, the [Barber](#) Piano Concerto, [Gian Carlo Menotti's](#) *The Saint of Bleeker Street*. These are the pieces that really reached out to large audiences. Then it got narrower and narrower and narrower and narrower to the point where the pieces that have won really don't get performed that much. And you would think the reverse would have happened. I think that's because of bad choices and a kind of political problem that happens when people, very often the same people, run a jury too often. I think that the way to solve that is the way that [Mr. Grawemeyer](#) solved it. When I won the [Grawemeyer](#), I went down and I spoke to him—he was still alive then—and he was very candid with me about the way that he made the selection. He said, "They're too political, these other awards. So what we're doing is different. We have a music jury of five quality professionals: a composer, a critic, a conductor." Major people. And these people look at the Grawemeyer applications and they select from those. Each one selects up to three or four pieces that they think are worthy of the Grawemeyer. And then the next person selects them, but that doesn't negate the other person's choices. The sum total of those now goes to a lay jury that hears anonymously and picks the winner. It is impossible to be political that way. Of course, when you look at the people who've won the Grawemeyer, the diversity is staggering.

FJO: Well, three prizes over the last decade have gone to violin concertos though which seems a little unusual.

JC: Yeah, but look at the difference between the people that wrote them. You've got Boulez winning a Grawemeyer. You've got [Aaron Kernis](#), [Joan Tower](#), [plus some] strange people you've never heard of, even if you've heard of a lot. It's completely and absolutely worldwide. It's not just American. And the winners are quite extraordinary and the pieces that won are pieces that are being played all over the world. It's a much more successful way of dealing with award giving. I don't think that the Pulitzer should be given the way it is. I think the competition should be anonymous. I think completely different people would win it if the names were taken off because a lot of it is done on relationships and names.

FJO: But now they're [trying to change](#) the Pulitzer Prize or at least some of the perceptions about it.

JC: Instead of a real corrective, they said, "O.K., let's just pull everything in, so we'll be more populist." I think they're going [too far the other way](#). I think what happened is that they felt bankrupt. They felt that they were [too alienated from the world](#). They said, "Let's include film music and jazz and everything else." And it's going to be a mess, I think.

FJO: American film music already has an award for excellence, the Academy Award for best film score.

JC: Not only does film music have an award, but film music is a very different thing. You're writing for a director. I've done this. Film music is not developmental, it's a minute and twenty seconds of this, thirty seconds of that. And what happens at the very end of that road is often the product of the director censoring and changing and making you change things you wrote. It is not your vision at all. It can't be. It's not about you. You are a service to a film. Jazz is a performance-based art form. The composition is overlaid by improvisation. So what is the composition? What is the layered improvisation? How does that work? Again, it's another thing that there should be a Pulitzer for, maybe, but not the same Pulitzer. I'm glad I won it because when I grew up the Pulitzer was the award that every composer wanted and I was like that too. You become a great composer when you win a Pulitzer. But I think that now it's a completely meaningless award. By opening it up that way, it's done a lot of damage. I don't think anybody has asked important composers what they think of this. I think that the Pulitzer people might call a bunch of people and ask, "What do you think is wrong with our system? What would you do to change that?" I would be happy to speak with them if they wanted me to. Who elects a jury often does determine the result.

What is Style?

FJO: You said that you won't write another opera, but you continue to write for orchestra which is another problematic arena for new music.

JC: Well, it gets performed a lot more.

FJO: But there's also a ton of political maneuvering: having to deal with rehearsals—maybe there are only two rehearsals—or the ego of the conductor. Some will champion your work. Others couldn't care less. Then there are administrators and marketing departments who, anytime they see a name they don't recognize—and now many of them can't even identify some of the standard repertoire names.

JC: It's very difficult, but it exists and I was a part of it. I've done a lot of it, but at this point in my life, I don't want to write for the orchestra. It's not what I want to do. I don't know what I want to do right now. I'm looking for a place where I could write music with my particular kind of intelligence and thought. I don't have a real direction. I did finish this band piece and it has been a very good experience because I had never really written a big piece for concert band. This is a monster piece and, in addition, I was able to do stuff that I could never do with an orchestra because the bands rehearse. Because it's not "See it on Tuesday, play it on Thursday." In fact, it's quite a different deal. They rehearse months ahead of time. So I was able to do a 40-minute piece that's totally spatial, in which people have to relate to each other for all that time, and you can't do that with an orchestra where they have two rehearsals dedicated to you. So it gave me an opportunity to do something new. That's what I'm looking for. And when I find it, I'll go for another commission. Until then, I'll think about what I want to do because just doing it isn't right. I don't just write; I have to have a reason to write. I don't have one right now. And I don't think I need to, either. I just finished a big piece. I need to read some books, go to some plays, travel, take care of myself, meditate a little, become a more relaxed person, and then compose something. It really is important. I think composers tend to compose a piece to the double bar and then the next day start the next piece. I think they need to separate them a little bit and go out in the world and experience things in life, because

it helps the music. It helps you change. And unless you change, the music stays the same and you're writing the same thing over and over again. Part of it is experiencing things, new things, things that you never thought of politically, artistically, visually, dramatically, sensually: [like] food or another area of the world. I'm going to Argentina. I've never been down there. I want to see what it's like in that southern half of South America. And I'll come back refreshed. Maybe I'll think of something; maybe I won't. But it's nice to open it up.

FJO: In terms of composers who finish a piece and then start another piece, there's often pressure. Whether it's from a publisher, a manager, whomever, other people who help that composer and whose careers are tied in to that composer's accomplishments...

JC: Not really. [My publisher](#) doesn't pressure me. I don't think that anybody needs our stuff until we need it.

FJO: But there is sometimes a pressure to write something in the style of what you've written before. A painter has an exhibition that sells out and two years pass and it's time for your next show at the gallery and there's inevitably a gallery dealer saying, "Do some more of those." And if your style is completely different, the dealer might say, "What's going on here?" You defeat that in your own work to great success by being a chameleon, by creating a poly-stylistic vocabulary that's able to embrace so many different elements. You never write the same piece a second time.

JC: I always conceive a piece as a different set of challenges. I always ask, "Why are you writing this piece?" But I have to say one thing about style. It's a word that can be used many ways. [My music] is not poly-stylistic; it uses a multiplicity of techniques. [Twelve-tone music](#) is not a style. I use twelve-tone techniques, and aleatoric techniques, tonal techniques. These are all techniques. What I think of as style—and I've gotten to this over years of really thinking about it—is that style is the unconscious choices I make. When you sign your name, it's your signature and you don't think about it. But nevertheless, it's your signature. When you compose, there are certain signature things that you do that you don't think about, certain harmonic worlds you gravitate to, textural spacings, rhythmic tropes. [Stravinsky](#) is very recognizable because of spacing. You could just hear one chord, which shouldn't tell you anything, but you'll know it's Stravinsky because of the peculiar way the instrumentation is spaced. I think that's part of his vocabulary. And it carries through from [Les Noces](#) to the serial pieces. If you look at a chord in the serial pieces and you look at a chord in *Les Noces*, I think you'll find a similarity in spacings even though one came about from a completely different set of rules than the other. The stylistic handwriting happens naturally. What I need is an architecture that makes the diversity seem inevitable. Stylistic wildness is the best thing in the world but it could also be a mess. You can use everything and it's a mess. Or you can be economical and really build a piece where this is the tutti but here it's very bare and then you make something else. If you deal with techniques of the world, microtones, everything, you really need to have a piece that calls for those things.

FJO: Speaking of [microtones](#), I love your two-piano quarter-tone piece.

JC: Well, it's its own piece. I probably will never do that again but it was a wonderful experience for me to do. Again, the reason was, "Why should I write a two piano piece when I could write a one piano piece that sounds like two pianos. What's the point? Why do I need the second piano?" I couldn't figure a reason until I realized that because of the piano's fixed tuning, quartertones can really be heard between two pianos. Whereas, on strings or something else, they very often sound like out-of-tune playing. So I thought, "What would happen if I wrote a piece in which the lyrical possibilities of the quarter tone were demonstrated and worked over and I could really make something beautiful happen with it?" That's how I got that. But it's always in answer to the question, "Why am I doing this? [In this case,] what's the purpose of a two-piano piece and why do we need one?"

FJO: So what would you say are your stylistic signatures?

JC: There are certain harmonic progressions and certain kinds of leaps that I know that I've done many, many times. The way I became aware of all of this was because [Leonardo Balada](#) from Pittsburgh came into New York quite a few years ago and he wanted to meet me. He's a lovely man and a wonderful composer. We were talking about this whole thing and I said, "I don't believe in this whole style business. I don't feel I have one." And he said, "Oh, excuse me, you do. It's very recognizable." And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "Have you got a copy of the *Fantasia on an Ostinato* and of *Etude Fantasy*?" I said yes and I took them out. The *Fantasia on an Ostinato* was based on [Beethoven's Seventh Symphony](#), the second movement [*hums*]. The whole piece is based on that, the major chord and then the minor chord, and that rhythm. Fourteen minutes in, there's a big climax in which the piano ripples and goes above and below with the left hand in major and minor thirds with a note in the middle in the right hand and then both hands and then finally just one hand. The *Etude Fantasy* was written as a large solo piano piece and the first movement was written for left hand alone. I wrote that first and used the material of that for all four movements. So it's based on the mechanism of how the left hand works. And there were exactly the same pitches and rhythms and textures in the two pieces: one derived from Beethoven and one derived from the left hand. I didn't know it. And I said, "My God, you're right. It's true!" I can show you.

And I'm an "A" person. Eighty percent of my pieces gravitate towards an A, as a tonal thing, not at the beginning, but somewhere in it.

FJO: And in the excerpts from [the band piece](#) you played for me, I heard ostinatos broken up with sudden bursts of sound which I hear in a lot of your pieces.

JC: It's full of that. But you can't control those. That's style. That's who you are. And you don't know it; somebody else tells you. But those are what make your music sound like you, the unconscious choices. Once he showed that to me I found so many other things that I didn't realize because I wasn't concerned with those when I was writing. Musically those were the right notes. I had those notes because they were the right notes for Beethoven. I had those notes because they were the right notes for the left hand. I didn't know they were the same. And there it is.

FJO: And of course, those unconscious decisions are the things you can't study.

JC: Those are the things you can't calculate and therefore when you talk about style there's the use of techniques and then there's the personal style that you have no control over. And so I use many techniques but what holds it together are two things for me. One is the style that I have in common with myself no matter what techniques there are. And the other is architecture. When you build a piece in which you need certain things that are very disparate but they have a reason for being there. When they happen, they sound surprising, but inevitable. It's what I love about Beethoven.

Students and Teachers

FJO: So this inevitably leads to teaching composition. You're one of the few composers who actively teaches who probably doesn't need to at this point in your career.

JC: I don't need to, but I love it. I think it's good for the composer to teach because you always have new students and you have to begin at the beginning and make things clear. You've got to find a way to clearly communicate all the basic truths about music, all the things you want to talk about. And that's good for you. I think one of the biggest problems we have is the insular quality of music and musicians and

forgetting about the clarity issue and reaching out to people who are not musicians. Talking to new people makes it always important. You have to be clear. You have to be able to describe the same basic truths. And you should never lose sight of them, because people do.

FJO: What's interesting about how you choose to teach is that while you're at [Juilliard](#) which is perceived by so many people to be the very top of the top, you're also at [Lehman](#) which is part of the City College system. So, while the top students in the world can study with you, so can anyone, theoretically.

JC: I love teaching at Lehman College as well as at Juilliard and I don't think of them as opposites in talent. I think of them as different worlds in the way they operate. Juilliard composers want to go into our symphonic world to write chamber music and symphonies and things like that. The students at Lehman will either go into education or they'll go into commercial work. I had at least two students that won Emmys while they were studying with me at Lehman because we also teach all ages. Our program is connected with [Musicians Local 802](#). Musicians who want to come back to school can come back and get degrees. I've had the first bass player from the [Metropolitan Opera Orchestra](#), the trombonist from the [City Opera Orchestra](#), famous jazz musicians in the class, people 60 years old, people 22 years old. So it's a very interesting, diverse class and some of the people have a lot of world experience. We have one year of composition class and one year of orchestration class. It's so much fun to unlock this idea of creativity to people who've never composed in their lives. Some of the pieces are so ingenious and so full of spirit that it's hard to believe. We get players from the class and I conduct it and they play it. So they always hear it. It's a very different experience and I wouldn't want to be without it. We have a lot of fun and we get along so well. I have a kind of world experience that they want to hear about, and they do too. I've had students go off to play with major people and say, "I can't see you this week because I'm playing at the [Carlyle](#)." And I say, "Great. More power to you." Then they're going to put stuff they learned into their jazz charts, etc. [Michael Bacon](#), Kevin Bacon's brother, studied with me and won an Emmy while he was in my class.

FJO: What about the Juilliard students?

JC: Totally different. They come to Juilliard as symphonically-oriented composers. That doesn't mean that they won't end up doing film or something. It means that what we talk about is abstract music mostly, setting something occasionally, but mostly architecture and form, writing and composing. Very serious. I've had some great students. Two of them were [Rome Prize](#) winners in the last couple of years. [Jefferson Friedman](#) is having a piece done by [Slatkin](#) that he commissioned and performed in May with the [National](#) and he's bringing it to the [New York Philharmonic](#) this spring. And [Mason Bates](#) is a composer who also won the Rome Prize who's writing this outstanding stuff. The [L.A. Phil](#) just did a piece of his.

FJO: He also does electronica as [Masonic](#).

JC: He's phenomenal, a really amazing talent, an ear from God. Most of the time people try to integrate pop tropes into so-called classical music and it really feels snuck in. But with Mason, it's so much a part of him. He's got an ear that's so fine so that when he does it, it seems like they were always supposed to be there. The naturalness of the two merging is totally bewildering to me. I just sit in awe when I listen to it.

FJO: This is quite different from your own relationship to pop culture. When you did [the Bob Dylan settings](#), I remember you saying [in an interview](#) that you had actually never heard the originals.

JC: Let's say I had never consciously heard them, because I did hear them finally. A student of mine at Lehman actually put together [Bob Dylan](#) singing all of the songs in order and gave it to me on a CD and I was very surprised by what I heard. I may have heard "Blowing In The Wind" years ago in the '60s in a

coffee house. But I have to say in all honesty, and with no lack of respect, I don't think my ears would have focused on it. Because the phrasing was very standard folk music: four-bar phrase, three-chord harmony. It wasn't like the [Beatles](#) songs where I turned around and said, "What is that? Who's doing that?"

FJO: It's astounding to me that you wouldn't have heard some of these songs over and over and over again. How could you possibly escape something that was that pervasive in our culture?

JC: I've had things play in the background and not listened. I could have been at parties and heard it. But I would not have gravitated towards it. If I did hear it in the background, it stayed background. It never became foreground to me. It's not that it's bad but it's, I think, what it is. I think [the words are astounding](#) and I think the music's O.K. Many people think it's masterful and that's fine. Some of the [pieces of Mozart](#) that people love I think are extremely boring, whereas other pieces of Mozart I love.

FJO: So do you think it could still be possible for someone to grow up now and not be aware of popular culture?

JC: It's possible. I would say that 99 percent of people are aware of popular culture, maybe even 99.9 percent. But there's going to be someone who isn't and who doesn't care and sees no reason to because there's so much other stuff. It's a wonderfully free world we live in where that can take place, and it should.

FJO: Your growing up was a rather unique experience for this country. Your father was the concertmaster for the New York Philharmonic. Classical music must have been a part and parcel of your daily life.

JC: Well, my parents were separated. [My father](#) lived in a hotel in New York on 57th Street. We got together in the summers, but basically he didn't get along with my mother too well. She taught piano in Brooklyn and I lived in Brooklyn or I went off to boarding school. I basically didn't live with my father except in the summers when he practiced a lot. So my knowledge of classical music comes more from my mother teaching [Chopin](#) and those various pieces, but I wouldn't say that I was immersed in it. When I was young I actually wasn't that interested in it. I played pop music by ear. In those days, pop music was show music. I improvised things. I started writing things down in high school and then went off to college before I really started composing. In [high school](#) I did a thing called "The Sing" with Mrs. Bella Tillis, and [she encouraged me in music](#). She was my teacher and an extraordinary person. She's still alive, thank God. She lives now in the Dorchester and goes to three concerts a day!

What really got me interested in contemporary music was—I don't know what year but in those days it was monaural because there was no stereo but the LP had been invented—my mother got me a Hi-Fi set with a cabinet and a 15-inch woofer and a tweeter. And there was a Capitol record, a full dimensional sound recording, that was a sample disc, and it had the Gunfight Scene of *Billy the Kid* which had a big bass drum which shook everything when it played. And of course I was in love with that and with my new system. I played it over and over again. Right after that was the Dancehall Scene with the piano playing and the strings [*hums*]. The idea, the simplicity of those harmonies yet the complete originality of the way they were set, spaced, rhythmically done, just fascinated me. I started learning it by ear. Then I went out and got the whole ballet. Then I got the score. Then I got more things, like Stravinsky, because I could get them on LP. In those days, you never got an LP of a 25-year-old composer. You got Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Mendelssohn, and you got [Copland](#) and [Stravinsky](#). Really not much else was available. So my world was much smaller in those days than the world now.

Then stereo came in and then Columbia put out this series of modern music that really opened my eyes. And in college I went to concerts. I was in college from 1955 to 1959 at Columbia. I wasn't a great student

because basically they were teaching that tonality was dead and you must learn row technique, which I did, but I was very rebellious. I wrote things like a piece dedicated to my teacher [Otto Luening](#) called "Kaleidoscope" which is published now for two pianos, and it was very sassy like the "[Scaramouche](#)" of [Milhaud](#). I did that as a rebellion.

FJO: Otto Luening should have loved that piece.

JC: He did. He was very encouraging. He said, "I don't know why you write what you do, but I like it, son." He didn't understand why I would write it—it wasn't comfortable with the whole department's idea of what music was and where music was going.

FJO: But Otto's own compositions were also all over the map musically.

JC: He was all over the map. But in those days, it was really much tighter than we can imagine unless you'd been there. Don't get me wrong. I loved Otto. Right up until the day he died a few years ago, we'd been in touch with each other. But I wanted to get out of school—because the atmosphere seemed to be closing rather than opening—and get into the living idea of what classical music was in the world, [to find out] what I could do and how I could be of service. So after my bachelors, I went out and got jobs: [WQXR](#) radio, writing program notes and programming; [WBAI](#)...things like that. I worked for [Bernstein's Young Peoples' Concerts](#) for 13 years. There were only four shows a year, but I did a lot with CBS television: [Horowitz's Return](#) and all that. Record stuff: I produced [André Watts](#) in the early '70s. I was a producer at [Columbia Masterworks](#) just to stay alive. And it's benefited me a lot. For example, as a producer, I know what I want sonically now. When a piece of mine is recorded, I don't say just, "Make it more beautiful." I say, "You've got to pull those mikes in there; it's got to be tighter." It's very nice that I had the ability to do that because I learned [from it].

Overthrowing Composer-Gods and Performer-Gods

FJO: You talked about recordings in the early days being really limited. During my growing up and early adulthood, it was an amazing time for recordings. But now everybody is saying the record industry is dying and it's all going to go away. No one's really recording American orchestras anymore either, whether they're playing new music or old music.

JC: They don't deserve to because they insist on being paid so much and you can't sell the records. [The unions](#) are screwing up everything. We can't pay those recording fees and put out a record of the most popular work and sell enough to make money, therefore it's dead. What has to happen is they have to understand that it's profit sharing. Put out a record and let the players get a percentage of the sales. If it does well, they'll do well. If it doesn't do well, they won't do so well. But they'll be aware that this is something we're all in together. I think that what's happening with recordings is that the big guys have collapsed, but the small guys are actually really inventive and are still going on. I say that just having returned from Finland, recording for a small label, [Ondine](#), which is absolutely wonderful. They're putting out a second CD of mine. And, today some 23-year-old can actually record and process and sell a CD that's of the same quality as something [Deutsche Grammophon](#) can make. That's unbelievable. With just a few thousand dollars worth of equipment, they can now put out their own [recording]. So it's all broken down. You can go on the net and have your own website and sell your own stuff. You can make a company. You can distribute through another company if you want. There are a million avenues. So while the big people have collapsed, the small people are getting higher and bigger and better and that's going to be the way of recordings in the future.

FJO: Yet here you are, one of the most famous names among living American composers, you even have a [string quartet that's named after you](#). How many living composers can say that besides you and [Penderecki](#)? And you write a symphony that wins the Pulitzer Prize which once upon a time was the highest honor. And it was premiered by the [Boston Symphony](#), one of the nation's top orchestras. And it wasn't on a CD for quite a while. It took a small Finnish label to put this thing out with a Finnish orchestra. It's great but it doesn't make sense. Why didn't the Boston Symphony record it?

JC: They can't afford it. They were recording that week. They did a [Rachmaninoff](#) Concerto and they recorded a Tchaikovsky concerto with [Volodos](#). Sony didn't want my piece. They wanted Volodos playing the Tchaikovsky concerto. That's the real world. We can't make them record things they don't want to record. It's ridiculous in a way, but on the other hand, some of these smaller orchestras play just as well as the big orchestras. And some are even better, because they really play the music, so it's not that we're going to get worse performances. And the engineering is good because the equipment is not that expensive anymore. So it's just a question of the prestige of a [Sony](#) or an RCA or a Columbia. That's all gone. I don't think it's going to come back ever. Sony has just merged with [BMG](#) which sounds like a disaster to me in the making. I have a lot of [records](#) with BMG and I have not been fond of the way they distribute things. We'll see what happens. Maybe it'll be better. I'm not going to hold my breath. The smaller labels are wonderful. Individual composers are getting together and doing it. The orchestras are doing it themselves with their own labels: [Chicago](#), [New York Phil](#), etc. Perhaps that's the only way they can afford it now. They have to rethink everything but, you know, it's like [AA](#). You have to crash before you really know what your problems are. I keep thinking that until one of those big monoliths crashes—and it will happen—they're going to go on thinking that the European conductor and the young, beautiful soloist is the solution to everything. It's unbelievable, yet people's entire lives are built upon believing this.

FJO: The irony is that until the record companies flooded the markets with ads for Volodos I had no idea who he was. They created him.

JC: I guarantee you the record sales are causing the promotion because he's an artist. Our world is artist driven. The artists are the creators in the minds of most people. We are not. We're the arrangers. When I was on tour with [Jimmy Galway](#)—he had recorded my [Pied Piper Fantasy](#) and we went on tour with [Zinman](#) and [Baltimore](#) down the East Coast—I forget where we were and he had played it to six thousand people and a standing ovation and I stood on stage at the end too. And there was a record signing and there I was sitting with Jimmy Galway and there was this line of 150 people waiting with the [Pied Piper Fantasy](#). And they would go up to him and say, "We love your [Pied Piper Fantasy](#); would you sign." And he said, "What about him? He's the composer." And they looked at me and half of them closed the record and walked away because they didn't even know what I did. As far as they were concerned, I think they thought I was the back-up arranger and that he made it up. I think they think he made up the Mozart concerto. I do. And that mentality is encouraged by our field. It's all wrong. It's nuts. But it's what they believe. And it's what everybody working in all the divisions believe: the management, etc. So they built this false idea that the artist is a creator and they market it. They could resell repertoire with the new artist because people who want a new refrigerator also want a new CD set. Now, there's nothing more they can do. So the bottom drops out because artists are not the creative act. It really doesn't matter that much if you hold something just a little bit longer. It's not everything. It's important, but it's not the creative act.

FJO: I remember a speech you gave in Chicago years ago describing our obsession with comparing performances to fine wine tasting.

JC: That's exactly what it is. It's a bunch of people going to a concert and listening to a Beethoven concerto and discussing afterwards the quality of how it resolved as actually being really important. They think that's what is. Hearing nuances from pieces they know. New things are a threat. At this point audiences want to read the new novel, they want to see the new Broadway show, they want to go to the

art gallery, all of these things, but new music is seen as a threat. It's considered something that is above them and beyond them and in which they cannot be participants. They love and they want what they are familiar with and comfortable with. What they want to be critical about is, therefore, how one artist differs from another.

FJO: Why do they think new music is such a threat?

JC: Because it was for a while. We have to take a little bit of the blame. When you have a philosophy that you don't give a damn what the audience thinks, when a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer told me that he considers a concert a private communication through public means, the answer is that at a certain point when you're not talking to people and they know you're not talking to them, they go away. Instead of making it a new adventure where they're permitted to dislike something—the biggest problem is we've taken away their rights—when they dislike something, they're told they're idiots. When they like something, they're told they're idiots and that it was really just pandering. And after a while, since its diametrically opposed to their feelings and since the composer prides himself because of this romantic vision of not reaching people rather than reaching people, on being unintelligible rather than being intelligible, they don't understand it.

I trace this back to the birth of romanticism. [Benjamin Britten](#) said the rot began with [Beethoven](#). I feel that the rot began with [Wagner](#). Mainly because all composers up till then wrote to God—it was a Mass, it was a [Missa Solemnis](#), a Requiem, whatever—it was to God. Wagner wrote as a god. He made that very clear. And everyone treated him that way and this vision he had was of a god artist. Religion was dying and art became the new religion. God became the composer. If you go to any church, the one thing you know is that you don't understand God. You can't understand God. If you understood him he wouldn't be God. He'd be mortal. God is incomprehensible. So, all of a sudden, this virtue of incomprehensibility sprung up. I am incomprehensible because my message is so much more complex and morally stronger than the message of those people who were just speaking to you that you can understand. Therefore, you shouldn't understand me. But you should worship me and come to these concerts. Well, OK, but composers are not gods, they're people. And this has been the most destructive thing to art I have ever seen, art ruining art. The dark side of romanticism has never been talked about. [Hitler was a romantic](#). We have to know that. He saw himself as a moral, ideologically pure person. If you were a standard German living in Germany at the time, he was going to build an Autobahn so you could go to Poland and drive there in a new car. He was concerned with ecology and animal abuse. He was very civic minded. He just wanted to get rid of pollution like Jews. That was part of his romantic message. His message was purification and perfection. Where do we hear that? Sometimes in Paris and sometimes from certain modernist people who talk about art that way, but it's very destructive. Romanticism ruined the 20th century as far as I'm concerned and we have to get rid of it in the 21st. What it did was it gave us the egocentric idea of the artist-god and the audience-worshipper—the non-communication that that means—and bathed us in this until finally the audience was alienated by this and left like they leave churches. Now we want to win them back.

FJO: And, in a way, having a composer-god be dead is a lot safer than having a living composer be a god. A living composer can cough and make mistakes. So it's better have Beethoven and Wagner and Chopin. They're no longer real people.

JC: It's much better if you're a conductor. One of the problems with doing the music of living people is that the conductor doesn't get to play God. I've been told by people who work for certain very famous conductors that I'm not to say a word to that conductor or to the orchestra during the rehearsal. If you say, "Maestro, could you take that a little faster?" Well, there's somebody above them. He is Wagner. He is Beethoven. He's Mozart. But he's not me, while I'm alive. We're not gods but we certainly are the generators of the original material. Therefore in a performance of works we created, our word is more important. That's not egocentric; that's just fair and logical. We created this vision. They are executing this

vision. Once we're dead, we're not able to do that anymore, then the mantle goes to the performer who becomes the composer in a certain sense. And that's where everything gets distorted, because the creative act is not the performance. And I say this with great respect and great admiration for great performers. The conductors that have a real understanding of this are the ones that get my respect. But many conductors operate the other way and it's really hard to get them interested in a piece of music which communicates to an audience in which they lose, as far as they're concerned.

FJO: To take this back to what we were saying about facial recognition, that is the core problem with the composer. The composer is so rarely the face that you see. Everybody flocked to Galway on that line. Well, they saw him on stage.

JC; You're absolutely right.

FJO: In the pop music world, they're doing all new music. Some do their own songs, but there are also the Britneys and Chers of this world who have committees who write their songs for them. But the audience doesn't care about who is on those committees because all they care about is the image they see. The same is true with movie actors. They're not saying their own lines.

JC: Screenwriters are ignored. A great screenplay can make or break a film. But great screenplays by great writers are really not that important at all. It really is about the performance. But that means, as far as I'm concerned, that composers have an obligation to appear and speak to audiences as often as they can and not speak down to them but to really tell them why they do what they do. I understand they may not be comfortable, because many people go into composing because they're not particularly verbal and it makes them uneasy. I think all composers should strive, if possible, to stand on a stage and to speak to an audience. I have found that the minute you say three words, whatever they are, and you're friendly and warm to them, they're so on your side. They so want to love this piece. You suddenly become a human being. I think it's our job to try to balance that out as best we can. We can't tour and perform all over the world, but we can go to major performances. And we can make very sure that we do a pre-concert talk, or a talk during the concert so the whole audience hears it, say for even three minutes. All of a sudden, they're thinking of you as a human being in their society who is writing music that could speak to them.

FJO: So what are the obligations of a composer in society?

JC: You can ask that of anyone. What are the obligations of a human being to a society? It depends on the human being. Some people feel very strongly about the world around them, some people don't. One can look at political issues and social issues and write about that. Many composers have done that. Not just [in response to] September 11th. Many composers in our country have written pieces to engage various social groups. I think that composing can also be an abstraction. I don't think that a string quartet has to be any more than a string quartet. There are many [other] ways you can help. I think the first thing is to be a good colleague. No matter what world we write in, we should encourage all composers and support them because we're all in it together. I think a composer who has gotten to a certain stage in his life should judge competitions, should donate his time to looking at young people's music and encouraging people, not simply take care of his or her own needs. It is a wonderful country, no matter how bad we feel about its political situation, because unlike other countries, we have the diversity in our art as well as in our society. You can write any kind of music in this country and find an audience. There's always a place for you. I encourage people to get together and understand that, the communal quality of what we're all doing and work for composers, and that means also for yourself. Because when you go to an orchestra and stand up in front of an audience and say something, you're not just saying something as a composer. You're also saying composers are people.

FJO: The name [Aaron Copland](#) has come up repeatedly in this conversation. And, he was one of the greatest citizens for composers in this country. Nobody has taken up that mantle. Maybe it's because we have the 500 cable channels so there's no mainstream anymore. You're closer to it than most, but the world is a different place now than when Copland had the authority to speak for composers. Even if a prominent composer today were to be called up against something like the [Committee for Un-American Activities as Copland was](#) in the '50s, would it be on that many people's radars?

JC: That's an interesting thing because I don't think it would even make a dent to the average citizen. And that's a shame. We had Stravinsky and Copland. Well, now we have [Philip Glass](#) and [John Adams](#). Philip even more because he's become an icon of a certain world. I must say what I love about Philip is that he's an extraordinary colleague and he's very good to young composers. He's given money for recordings and performances of young composers and is very encouraging to them. He's a very good music citizen. So, whatever personally I think of his music, I respect him completely because he's not just a composer. He's more than that.

FJO: In a way nowadays, you have to be more than a composer.

JC: You don't have to be, but you should be. I think you need to be more generous.