

No program on this Da Camera season evokes as many personal memories as tonight's musical tribute to the great American poet John Ashbery (1927–2017). Touching on many years of friendship and going back to my earliest days at Da Camera, the phrase that inspired our season theme, "time future contained in time past," seems particularly true as I look back on the interweaving connections and memories that lie behind the music and poetry we hear tonight.

I first met John Ashbery in upstate New York in the 1990's when I was teaching at Bard College. John and his partner David lived nearby in Hudson, and we quickly discovered that we were also neighbors in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. John was a remarkable character, absolutely original in his modest yet deep erudition, shyness coupled with bursts of outrageous humor, and his embrace of the American vernacular in all its forms. Countless dry martinis, obscure camp movie reruns with titles I no longer remember, art exhibits and poetry readings, summer birthday parties in July, dinners cooked together in the large kitchen of his Victorian house on Court Street—these images of shared moments and past laughter come floating up decades later.

An astute art critic and voracious music listener with a taste for the forgotten and lesser known, John Ashbery's musical listening habits embraced many periods and styles. Our friendship began with talk of the Russian avant-garde composers of the 1920's I had recently recorded. He preferred recordings to concerts, finding the audience a distraction, and often he turned on the "hi-fi" for musical inspiration before putting pen to paper. I recently came across on my bookshelves a photocopy of an encyclopedic entry on the German composer Walter Braunfels, with John's scribbled inquiry in the margins as to whether we could find a place for a Braunfels work at a future Bard Music Festival, the festival I launched with Leon Botstein in 1990 that specialized in musicological "rediscoveries." Digging up the unknown gem, stumping me with a composer I had not heard of—merited or not—were among his pleasures.

JOHN ASHBERY



The New York Times called John Ashbery "a poet whose teasing, delicate, soulful lines made him one of the most influential figures of late-20th and early-21st-century American literature."

Ashbery (1927–2017) was a poet, art critic, playwright, and translator. He published more than twenty volumes of poetry and won nearly every major American award for poetry, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Yale Younger Poets Prize, the Bollingen Prize, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Griffin International Award, and a MacArthur "Genius" Grant., and National Book Critics Circle Award in 1976 for his collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, and at least as many major international awards. In 2012, Ashbery was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Obama.

John Ashbery's books included *Some Trees* (1956), *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970), *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), *Houseboat Days* (1977) *Girls on the Run* (1999), *Chinese Whispers* (2002), *Where Shall I Wander?* (2005), *A Worldly Country* (2007), *Quick Question* (2012), *Breezeway* (2015), and *Commotion of the Birds* (2016).

John Ashbery attended Harvard University and received an M.A. from Columbia in English. He was originally associated with the New York school of poetry of the 1950s and '60s, which also included Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara and others. Ashbery was an art critic and collagist, and his work was often compared to Abstract Expressionism and Surrealism.

In addition to his numerous awards, John Ashbery was the poet laureate of New York State from 2001 to 2003. He also served as chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and was the Charles P. Stevenson, Jr., Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College. His Norton lectures at Harvard were published as *Other Traditions*.

John Ashbery and Sarah Rothenberg in Ashbery's downtown Manhattan apartment in 1992. Photo by Charles Harbutt, courtesy of Bard College.



In my first season at Da Camera, I programmed a concert entitled, *Ancient Greeks and Modern Americans* to celebrate the opening of the Menil's Cy Twombly Gallery, and invited John Ashbery to Houston to read his poem, *Syringa*, which had been set to music by Elliott Carter. He was eager to come. (Carter was supposed to participate in the performance, too, but a serious bout of pneumonia kept him away. We feared it was the end for the 87 year-old composer, but Carter recovered and continued to live and compose another 17 years.) The day before the concert John, David and I made our way through the Menil Collection's art treasures and then set off on an excursion down to Galveston to meet up with painter Rackstraw Downes

and, at John's insistence, visit the Moody Mansion.

Years later, the Works and Process series at the Guggenheim Museum in New York presented a program of new works inspired by John Ashbery's poetry, and John suggested that I moderate the conversations with him and the guest composers. The concert opened with the world premiere of the ingenious work by John Zorn which opens our program tonight, based on Ashbery's *Girls on the Run*. This dizzyingly virtuosic work for coloratura soprano and percussion captures the untranslatable virtuosity of the poet's relation to the English language by, paradoxically, being a wordless vocalise. John was delighted with this unexpected non-verbal setting of his

poem, and spontaneously announced to the audience following the performance, "That's what I was trying to say." The composer was thrilled.

Back in 1994, as I was packing up my house in Germantown, New York in preparation for my move to Houston, I received word that I had been granted a National Endowment for the Arts solo recitalist grant. For that occasion, I commissioned the composer Joan Tower, a close colleague on several fronts, as she had been the founding pianist of the contemporary music group, Da Capo Chamber Players, prior to my taking her place as the group's pianist, as well as being on the faculty at Bard. (It was as a performer in Da Capo that eight months earlier I had first come to Houston, playing here at

the Menil Collection on the Da Camera series.) Joan Tower had already composed a piano piece with a title from a John Ashbery poem, *Like a...an Engine*, for the wonderful pianist Ursula Oppens, and I asked her to compose a companion piece for me. *Like a Daisy* was the second of what ultimately became a set of four pieces, and I performed the premiere at New York's Miller Theatre at Columbia University in 1996.

John and I also shared a love of things French and the city of Paris. One summer we met up in the *quartier Saint Germain* and wandered the streets together. He and David were staying in one of those minuscule left bank hotels off the boulevard where the rooms require a certain amount of choreography to maneuver between bed, doors and drawers. John was a remarkable translator of French to English (in addition to Rimbaud, Max Jacob and others, he translated the works of his former companion French poet Pierre Martory, who was with us on one of those Paris afternoons.) I remember sitting with him at a reading by contemporary French poets in a New York art gallery where a French line of poetry had been translated into English as something like "let's get out of here." John leaned over to me and whispered, "shouldn't that be 'skedaddle?'" capturing, in a second, not just the meaning and the spirit, but an aural crunchiness that brings language to life.

And so, when I was asked to play at the 92nd Street Y memorial for John last December, I chose the music of French composer Erik Satie. The irony, wit and unsentimental melancholy of Satie, the surface playfulness but underlying seriousness, the surreal titles and private verbal jokes written in the scores, the innate privacy of Satie—remind me of John, but also

make me sad. I didn't play Satie in those days when our friendship was most active, preferring the complexities of Messiaen and others, and the subject of Satie feels like a conversation we never had. Friends are friends even in absence—we carry on conversations in our heads with friends who are distant; even forgotten friends can suddenly be spoken to in our minds when an outside stimulus brings them back. But absence and death are not the same thing; and so the imaginary conversation about Satie brings an ache of loss. John Ashbery often described himself as a surrealist, and Satie may have been the first Surrealist. The musical scores of the miniature *Three Distinguished Waltzes of a Jaded Dandy* are filled with idiosyncratic narrative instructions to the performer that I long to read to John; I cite here a few: above *forte* octaves the pianist is admonished, "*Do not cough*" and, at the very end, we must "*Continue, without losing consciousness...*"

The Guggenheim Museum concert that I mentioned earlier, where the Zorn work was premiered, included a work by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Charles Wuorinen. I believe this occasion brought about the first encounter between Wuorinen and Ashbery, followed by others (and more dry martinis.) After the concert, we all gathered at an Italian restaurant around the corner on Madison Avenue, and Wuorinen found a moment to tell me that he had an idea for a larger work based on Ashbery's texts. (Wuorinen had already been down to Da Camera in my first season to conduct his work, *A Winter's Tale*.) Wuorinen's new idea developed into a major work for Da Camera, which was commissioned with support from Louisa Sarofim in honor of my tenth anniversary as artistic director: *Ashberyana*, for baritone, trombone, string quartet and piano. As it

happened, I gave birth to twins right before the scheduled premiere of *Ashberyana* at the Menil Collection, so that concert was delayed by a year; but I did perform in the world premiere at the Guggenheim in New York six weeks after my children were born.

Ashberyana has had a deservedly rich life since the premiere conducted by the composer. With the Brentano Quartet we have performed the work with Maestro James Levine conducting and also recorded it for the Naxos label. The Da Camera all-Wuorinen CD entitled *Ashberyana* also includes the composer's transcriptions of the French Renaissance composer Josquin des Prez (c.1450–1521) composed for the Brentano Quartet, *Josquiniana*. Utterly beyond time, the rhythmic inventiveness of this early composer is a natural inspiration for the modernist Charles Wuorinen, who transposed six 3–5 voice works for string quartet, noting that "some of the pieces are of doubtful authenticity, but are worth including on purely musical grounds, whether Josquin wrote them or not. In particular the last (*El Grillo*) is probably not by Josquin, but was too much fun to leave out."

Ashberyana begins with a memory. Back in 1996, I stopped by John's New York apartment one afternoon, and he brought me into the room off the kitchen where his typewriter sat facing due west, towards the Hudson River. Pointing out the window towards the horizon, at a mysterious mass of menacing dark nets, John complained that he used to catch a glimpse of the river as he worked at his desk, but now the view was completely obscured. The black, billowing structure that blocked the river was a multi-story Japanese driving range, part of the expanding Chelsea Piers sports center, perched on the edge of Manhattan for city-dwelling golfers in need of practice.

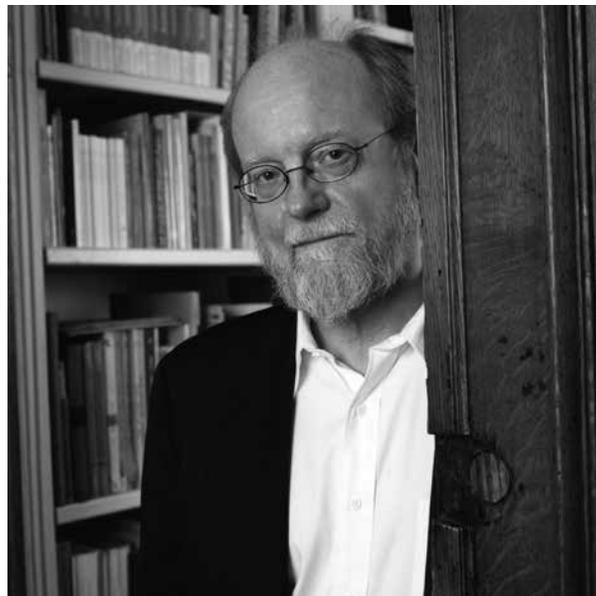
John later transformed the unfortunate obstruction into the poem, *Outside My Window the Japanese...* (See p. 35).

I was delighted when I received the score to *Ashberyana* in 2004 and found that Charles had serendipitously opened the set with this particular poem which commemorated, for me, a moment of surreal change in the daily life of our Manhattan neighborhood that John and I had shared.

With *Ashberyana*, Wuorinen brings his compositional wit and sharp intelligence to the audacious poetry of John Ashbery. Verbally and musically virtuosic, *Ashberyana* richly portrays the singular inventiveness that characterizes each man's creative output. Wuorinen pairs the baritone and trombone as unexpected partners in duet. The songful opening trombone solo, which forms a brief introduction, wordlessly forecasts the baritone's first entrance. Once the singer is present, the trombone continues to perform his vocalise, sometimes functioning as the baritone's double, joining the voice in punctuated unisons, or offering commentary. The solitary trombone acts as mediator between poetry and music, his haunting shadow forming the necessary bond between loquacious texts and a world without words.

It is clear from the start that Wuorinen enjoys language and revels in the

sumptuousness of Ashbery's vocabulary, which bounces effortlessly from the banalities of everyday life—including commonplace clichés and quotations from vintage television shows—to the arcane and the sublime. (For those too young to remember, "Maybe *this* will refresh your memory" was an oft-repeated line in the iconic courtroom drama, *The Perry Mason Show*.) Ashbery makes us notice words as though they were unknown artifacts from another



Charles Wuorinen

planet, rather than tools that we use to simply get through the day. We recognize the bizarre disconnects and surprising juxtapositions as vaguely familiar occurrences from our own post-modern lives, when our inner thoughts collide uncomprehendingly with the world around us.

In *Ashberyana*, music and poetry each retain their identity, and there is a sense of space around the words that

is surprising for a setting of so many of them. But "set" is exactly what Wuorinen does, as a jeweler with a gem. The poetry seems to be sculpted, raised in relief, etched in sound, but never weighted down by interpretation.

The rhythmic tension of the silences, the subtle underscoring of shifts in syntax and mood, the occasional playful mirroring of the poetic line ("jumping up and down on tiptoe"), the musical repetition of the Proustian phrase, "...

so far back in the mothering past." With ingenious precision, Wuorinen creates a dramatic musical structure to support Ashbery's poems, building with assurance and inevitability to the powerful climax of *The Laughter of Dead Men*. The final two lines, "so fearful of the first-person singular/and all the singular adventures it implies," are a telling statement expressed with the casual humility typical of this poet. A less attentive reader might miss the depth of meaning, but here Wuorinen pulls out all the stops. Allowing himself the liberty of setting "so fearful" three times, each with increasing intensity, he then creates a stunning melisma on the word "all," until the instruments, with

trombone in the lead, emerge with resounding force. The thrilling close of *Ashberyana* reveals Wuorinen's mastery of musical architecture; but the success of the work is equally due to the composer's talent as a reader of rare acuity. Music and poetry co-exist happily in this *tour-de-force*, and Da Camera is proud to have brought this wonderful work into existence.

—Sarah Rothenberg

DEAR SIR OR MADAM

After only a week of taking your pills
 I confess I am seized with a boundless energy:
 My plate fills up even as I scarf vegetable fragments
 from the lucent blue around us. My firmament,

as I see it, was never this impartial.
 The body's discomfiture, bodies of moonlit beggars,
 sex in all its strangeness: Everything conspires
 to hide the mess of inner living, raze
 the skyscraper of inching desire.

Kill the grandchildren, leave a trail
 of paper over the long interesting paths in the wood.
 Transgress. In a word, be other than yourself
 in turning into your love-soaked opposite. Plant

his parterre with antlers, burping
 statue of when-was-the-last-time-you-saw Eros;

go get a job in the monument industry.

THE LAUGHTER OF DEAD MEN

Candid jeremiads drizzle from his lips,
 the store looks as if it isn't locked today.
 A gauzy syllabus happens, smoke is stencilled
 on the moss-green highway.

This is what we invented the suburbs for,
 so we could look back at the lovable dishonest city,
 tears clogging our arteries.

The nausea and pain we released to float in the sky.
 The dead men are summoning our smiles and indifference.
 We climb the brilliant ladder toward their appetites,
 homophobes, hermaphrodites, clinging together like socks
 hanging out to dry on a glaring day in winter.

You could have told me all about that
 but of course preferred not to,
 so fearful of the first-person singular
 and all the singular adventures it implies.