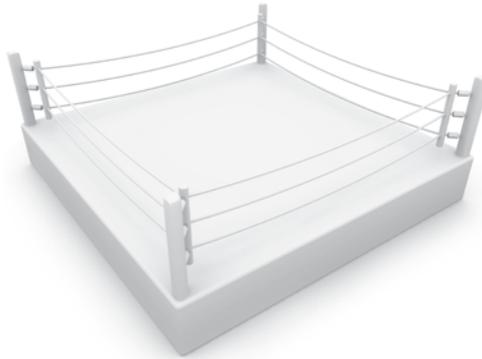




John Duffy in 2011.

OPPOSITE: in Virginia, with Composers Institute fellows Randall Eng and Whitney George



If anything prepared John Duffy for a career as an advocate of contemporary music, it may have been his childhood training as a boxer. As a boy growing up in the Bronx, he had joined his older brothers at the gym and was undefeated as an amateur fighter. But he just didn't have the temperament for it. "The idea of beating up on someone didn't suit me, so I stopped," Duffy recalled from his home in Camden, Maine. He turned to his true passion, music.

The Emmy-winning composer of more than three hundred pieces for the concert stage, theater, television and film fought his biggest battles as the co-founder and long-time president of Meet The Composer. He raised commissioning budgets during the flush years for arts funding but also through recessions and periods of retrenchment. He convinced skeptical orchestras that new American music was a necessary part of their mission. And he endeavored to raise the profile of jazz composers to that of their classical counterparts.

Duffy receives Chamber Music America's Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award this year in honor of his several decades of advocacy and creativity. Colleagues maintain that few other individuals did more to professionalize the field for composers. "John and I used to joke that it was 'Cheat the Composer,' given the way fees were handled until then," says Frances Richard, vice-president for concert music at ASCAP and MTC's former vice president. "He understood that composers need recognition, validation and remuneration."

One of fourteen children of Irish immigrant parents, Duffy was born in Manhattan in 1926 and raised in the Bronx's Woodlawn neighborhood. Sent to Catholic schools, he sang in choir and became enthralled by the sounds of J.S. Bach played on the church organ. As a teenager he took up piano and drums and played in a small dance band that entertained at school functions. While

**And in the
Composers' Corner...**

John Duffy

For more than three decades, one man has fought perhaps more effectively than any other person to bring visibility, fair compensation, and work to the creators of American music.

by Brian Wise



holding a summer job as a night watchman at B. Altman's department store in midtown Manhattan, he would often begin his evenings by visiting jazz clubs to hear Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington.

Though underage, Duffy joined the Navy during World War II and was stationed in San Diego. Afterward, back in New York City, he enrolled at the New School, where he studied with Henry Cowell, taking Cowell's course "Music of the World's Peoples," perhaps the first world music course taught in this country (among Duffy's classmates was Burt Bacharach). He took summer lessons with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood and studied as well with Solomon Rosowsky, a student of Rimsky-Korsakov and a cantor. (From Rosowsky, Duffy learned how to write Jewish cantorial music, experience that later paid off when he created the nine-hour, Emmy-winning score to the PBS series *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*.)

In 1952, Arthur Lithgow, the director and pioneer in American regional theater, established Shakespeare under the Stars, a summer festival at Antioch College in Ohio. He invited Duffy to become its music director. Writing incidental music for classics like *King Lear* and *Hamlet* was the beginning of a career-long involvement with the theater and the spoken word. "Those works had a profound effect," said Duffy. "They stayed with me and just provided inspiration and ideas that don't seem to go away. To me, the great dramatist is Shakespeare, and I've been lucky to earn a living over a long period composing for Shakespearean productions."

Yet after a string of similar posts—at the Guthrie Theater, the Long Wharf Theatre, and eventually, John Houseman's American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut—Duffy shifted his career back toward New York. During the mid to late 1960s he divided his time between writing incidental music for Broadway and Off Broadway shows—including scores for *The Ginger Man*,

Macbird!, *Mother Courage*, and *Playboy of the Western World*—and scoring television and film documentaries.

Duffy has always found ways of addressing serious themes alongside more routine assignments. These include the Chappaquiddick incident (*Black Water*, his 1993 collaboration with Joyce Carol Oates), the church bombings in Birmingham, Alabama (his 1965 Concerto for Tenor Saxophone and Orchestra),



TOP: Duffy in New York City in 1992
ABOVE: With composer John Harbison

and *Muhammad Ali* (his 2000 opera named after the former world heavyweight champion). “I think of music as a social art where you respond as you’re expressing your time,”

said Duffy. “I love Shakespeare and Verdi and Marc Blitzstein, Copland and Virgil Thomson. All these people seemed to be alive and in tune with their own time.”

Championing of the composers of his own time began for Duffy in the 1970s, when the New York State Council on the Arts was searching for a leader to re-launch a fledgling program called Composer in Performance. The program had stumbled out of the gate; and Duffy, who had spoken at some panels organized by the NYSCA, was considered a natural choice to bring it back to life.

Armed with a budget of \$65,000, Duffy renamed the NYSCA initiative Meet The Composer, which, he says, was meant to evoke the spirit of Walt Whitman, an artist who celebrated his connection with the common man. Its goal was to help living American composers find outlets for their music but also to help composers, directors and choreographers find each other and work together.

The organization took shape quickly. A *New York Times* profile from 1974 lauded Duffy’s efforts in “bringing composers into contact with popular audiences in theaters, in ghetto streets, in churches, in storefronts and in ‘rural areas.’” Duffy had made an offer to concert promoters around New York State: If they programmed contemporary works, they could have the composers—famous ones as well as young upstarts—on hand to explain their pieces.

Through its core program—the Meet The Composer Fund—the organization placed composers in communities while establishing standard fee structures and guidelines for how composers could speak to audiences about their work. No genre was off limits. In the organization’s first year, it brokered a commission for the jazz pianist Cecil Taylor with the Dance Visions Workshop in New York. “I thought, ‘In unity there’s strength,’” says Duffy. “If you look at our board in the 1970s, it included Steve Reich, Billy Taylor,



The composer at home in Camden, Maine, working on the score of his opera *King David* in 2008

Richard Rodgers, Virgil Thomson, Copland and Bernstein. These were people who represented the whole rich canvas of music in the USA.”

Intent on expanding the program beyond New York, in 1976, Duffy encouraged regional groups to form MTC affiliates by giving them annual grants of \$15,000. One rule was that 60 percent of the affiliates’ grants had to be for local composers (“We didn’t want to seem like carpetbaggers,” Duffy said at the time). Duffy also gained access to political channels. In 1979, when New York mayor Ed Koch wanted to commission works for the evenings when he entertained colleagues at Gracie Mansion, Meet The Composer was there to facilitate.

Then, in 1982, the organization initiated its most visible—and still debated—endeavor: an ambitious 10-year plan to place composers in residence with major American orchestras. The Orchestra Residencies Program established three-year residencies with 21 different ensembles and featured 29 composers; 65 new works were written and 19 recordings made. At a time when new American music was rare in orchestral concerts, composers suddenly had visible roles, from Jacob Druckman working with the New York Philharmonic to John Adams enjoying a warm relationship with the San Francisco Symphony.



At the John Duffy Composers Institute

Previous efforts to fund new orchestral music often got caught up in politics: foundations or wealthy donors chose the composers they wanted to promote, regardless of the orchestra's preferences. Here the orchestra had a say. Still, some pointed out that once the MTC residencies program ended, most of the orchestras cut their composer chairs and it was back to business as usual. "As orchestras retrench, the composer-in-residence will become an increasingly endangered species," wrote K. Robert Schwarz in *The New York Times* in 1996.

"The specific program itself was not self-supporting; that's true," says Ed Harsh, president of Meet The Composer since 2007. "But the way that the orchestra field thought of the role of a composer—whether it be literally a composer-in-residence or having a composer onsite for a performance at a minimum level or just a positive force in their repertoire—that absolutely changed."

Duffy was aware that it would be an uphill battle. In 1991, John Corigliano abruptly resigned from his post as composer-in-residence at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, prompted at least in part, by what

he believed was the orchestra management's lack of appreciation for his music. He was particularly upset by music director Georg Solti's refusal to conduct the world premiere of his *Symphony No. 1* (Daniel Barenboim conducted instead) and with the quality of a test pressing of Erato Record's live recording of the work.

"John and Meet The Composer gave me great support when the CSO and Erato balked at recording my symphony," says Corigliano, who was installed through the Orchestra Residencies Program in 1987. "John called up both parties and made sure that the recording was made." The work went on to receive more than 150 performances in its first five years; it also won three Grammy Awards and a Grawemeyer Award. Corigliano adds: "John could be called at any time, and he would rush to defend the composer."

Duffy led Meet The Composer through at least two recessions and periodic financial setbacks, as when Exxon, the co-sponsor of the Orchestra Residencies Program, pulled out all of its funding halfway through the initiative. Theodore Wiprud, the education director at the New York Philharmonic,

worked at Meet The Composer during the late 1980s and early 90s. "[John] used to talk about the scramble but within a matter of weeks there were other funders to step in," says Wiprud. "You'd go to a funder meeting with John and he'd expect to hear back the next day. We'd say to him, it was the summer and funders weren't out looking at time. He'd just say 'that is exactly why we should be going after them now.'"

Meet The Composer's funding steadily increased during the 1970s and '80s and by 1992, its annual budget was \$3.3 million. "You could look back at the rather enormous grant budgets Meet The Composer had in its time," Wiprud notes. "It was only a great time for funding because [Duffy] made it that way. He had a salesmanship about music that he managed to get many of the most significant private foundations on board by stressing the importance of supporting contemporary culture, and supporting composition as a profession."

With his extensive film, theater and television credits, Duffy has had an inclusive view of classical music, but former colleagues

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say he took care not to promote works that mirrored his own tastes. Wiprud notes how, whenever Meet The Composer assembled panels to make decisions on commissions, “Duffy would always say, ‘We don’t make aesthetic decisions here.’ You’d assemble an independent panel with representatives of jazz, installation-based music, electronic, neo-Romantic, dodecaphonic music.”

Faced with a compositional field that was overwhelmingly white and male, Duffy saw that grants were given for works like Hannibal Peterson’s *African Portraits*, an exploration

of African American musical styles, and Julius Hemphill’s *Long Tongues: A Saxophone Opera*, featuring the World Saxophone Quartet. In 1990, Duffy estimates that nearly half of the organization’s \$2.5 million in grants went to women and minorities, with around a third going to jazz composers.

While Duffy’s compositional output tapered off during the 1970s, the following decade saw several big public works including *Heritage*, a symphonic suite commissioned by the Kennedy Center for the 40th anniversary of the founding of Israel, and *Wilderness*, a commission from the Sierra Club to address wilderness lands endangered by developers.

After Duffy retired from Meet The Composer in 1996, he continued to compose and saw a number of his pieces recorded. Since 2005, he has run the annual John Duffy Composers Institute at the Virginia Arts Festival, a summer seminar aimed at teaching the basics of writing for musical theater. Meanwhile, as Meet The Composer was undergoing its complicated merger with the American Music Center, he says that he has “enormous faith” in the organizations’ current leadership, adding “What they told me I trust. How I would do this is another thing, but that’s all past. But I stay out of it.”

“John was always there at that right moments to be the right kind of voice,” says Ed Harsh. “He’s a very compelling guy. There’s kind of a positive prophet-like air to him — like Isaiah.”

Brian Wise is an editor at WQXR Radio, New York’s classical music station. He writes about music for a variety of publications, including Listen, BBC Music, and The Strad.



Listening: in a classroom at the 2010 Composers Institute

THE AMERIGO TRIO

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