Honorary Doctorate Awarded to Composer John Adams

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The Mary Pappert School of Music presented composer John Adams with an honorary doctor of music degree in a special ceremony on March 11, 2009, adding his name to the roll of noteworthy musicians to receive that honor (see sidebar).

One of today’s leading composers, Adams was only 10 when he began composing, and by the time he hit his teens, his first orchestral works were already being performed. He is among a very small group of composers whose works are appreciated in both the opera house and concert hall.

Major American and European companies have presented his operas Nixon in China, The Death of Klinghoffer and Doctor Atomic, and the world’s preeminent orchestras have performed Naïve and Sentimental Music, Violin Concerto, Shaker Loops, Harmonielehre and other instrumental works, including Short Ride in a Fast Machine, one of the most frequently performed works by a living American composer.

His composition, On the Transmigration of Souls, a deeply felt commemoration of lives lost in the 2001 World Trade Center attack, earned a Pulitzer Prize in Music, and a recent recording of it garnered Grammy Awards in three categories: Best Classical Recording, Best Orchestral Performance and Best Classical Contemporary Composition.

Professor Emeritus David Stock, who has known Adams for more than 20 years, was the catalyst for granting Adams the honorary doctorate. “We first met when we were on a panel together at the National Endowment for the Arts,” explained Stock. “He is one of the world’s leading composers, so when the music school was first approached about the honorary degree, everybody liked the idea right away.”

Adams is a former composer-in-residence at the San Francisco Symphony and Carnegie Hall. The Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra named him its Composer of the Year for 2008-2009, and he has been a guest conductor with the London Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic and New York Philharmonic as well as with the Pittsburgh Symphony and orchestras in Atlanta, Stockholm, San Francisco and Detroit.