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John Corigliano at 80 on His Music, Influences & Future Plans

FEBRUARY 12, 2018

By *Thomas May*

Released in 1999, François Girard’s film *The Red Violin* crystallized an image of the instrument for many who don’t usually listen to classical music: the violin as simultaneously a vehicle for ultimate beauty and a protagonist that transcends time. And what animated that image was the music written by [John Corigliano \(http://www.johncorigliano.com/\)](http://www.johncorigliano.com/), who turns 80 on February 16.

As the music world looks back over Corigliano's contributions over a lengthy career, his works for strings will emerge and play a leading role. These go back to the Violin Sonata of 1963—written when the composer was in his mid-20s—and range from the touching miniature *Snapshot: Circa 1909* (2003) to such grandly conceived, pivotal masterpieces as the String Quartet (1995).

The Red Violin itself generated a whole constellation of related works featuring the solo violin: pieces heard in the film itself (written before filming actually took place, so fingers and bowing could be synchronized to Joshua Bell's prerecorded playing), which were gathered into a Suite; the Chaconne; Caprices extracted from the film; and, as the culmination of all these inspirations, a significant, frequently performed addition to the contemporary concerto repertoire: the *Red Violin* Concerto of 2003. This work was premiered by two of Corigliano's most fervent champions: Bell, for whom it was tailored, just like the earlier *Red Violin* music, and Marin Alsop, leader of the Baltimore Symphony.

Among his best-known compositions, the Concerto is at the same time a microcosm of what has made Corigliano such a vitally important and unique voice among living composers. This is music with widespread appeal, yet whose accessibility coexists with the highest artistic standards. Corigliano pays homage to the musical past while pushing beyond the violin's conventional boundaries. And his characteristic directness of expression is harmonized with a satisfying musical complexity: Head and heart are given equal due, making for a composition as meticulously crafted and durable as the priceless instrument the film celebrates.

"[The Concerto] became so popular that I think it inspired a lot of artists to add their personal take to it," says Russian-American violinist Philippe Quint, a leading interpreter of Corigliano. He recalls once hearing the main theme blaring out in a lounge near Brussels "as some part of a heavy-metal mix using the *Red Violin*." Quint recently performed as the soloist in a revival of the ballet that Peter Martins choreographed to *The Red Violin* in 2006. "John's music is very natural, sincere, organic—at the same time he expands the boundaries of the instrument and uses effects that even I as a violinist have not thought about," says Quint.

One source, undoubtedly, of the sense of authenticity that gives Corigliano's music much of its appeal is the way it is rooted in profoundly personal connections. Another is the composer's instinct to wait until the timing is right to take up a project. His earlier concertos for oboe and clarinet were turning-point pieces toward a new concept of composition that Corigliano describes as "architectural"—working from the vision of the overall formal design inward to the detailed musical expression.

But it wasn't until after the experience of his Academy Award-winning collaboration with François Girard—his third film score—that Corigliano felt the impulse to expand his work into a violin concerto. "I dedicated it to my father because in a sense he was responsible for it," the composer explains in an interview at his home on New York's Upper West Side. "Even though I don't play the instrument, it's a very idiomatic violin concerto. I got to know what the violin is capable of in my ear from listening to my father practicing difficult passages over and over."

"Since I took up the Violin Concerto about seven or eight years ago, I've played it on four continents—in Turin, Uruguay, Japan, and a bunch of places in the United States—and it's always a huge hit, even though the Concerto is quite a modern work."

—Lara St. John

John Corigliano Sr. served as concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic from 1943 until mandatory retirement in 1966. In addition to the usual concertmaster duties, he soloed in concertos every year and continually expanded his repertoire: For example, he introduced the Delius Violin Concerto to the United States. Corigliano Sr. also regularly played traditional repertoire with a string quartet made of first-desk players from the New York Philharmonic. For a time he played a Guaragnini once owned by Paganini, until that was replaced by a Golden-Period Stradivari.

All of this fed into the composer's earliest experiences of music. He recalls many times as a young boy sitting in Carnegie Hall's green room (in those pre-Lincoln Center years). "I would hear him play through the speakers and suddenly tense up every time a difficult passage was coming up and relax afterward. I was never interested in performing because the idea of doing that in front of an audience was too overwhelming, having seen my father getting nervous and later worrying about reviews." Even as a composer, he adds, "during my first 15 to 20 years, I didn't stay in the hall for my own pieces either but listened on speakers."

But his father opposed Corigliano's decision to become a composer. As early as 1963, Corigliano channeled some of these primary experiences of what the violin could do into his Violin Sonata, a substantial work he actually envisioned for both his parents: His mother Rose Buzen taught piano and "was a very fine pianist though she did not play in public."

For years, though, his father would not even look at the piece. "He wanted to discourage me from being a composer because, in the 1950s and 1960s, most music being written was 12-tone composition, and the audiences and critics didn't like it. So he thought I was going to make myself unhappy and not be able to make a living."

The Violin Sonata, which is now part of the repertoire and has been recorded many times, won first prize in the Spoleto Festival's inaugural Chamber Music Competition in 1964—with Samuel Barber, an important mentor for Corigliano, among the jury. It was taken up by such illustrious violinists as Roman Totenberg, and eventually Corigliano's father could not ignore it any longer.

"And then he fell in love with the Sonata and played it all the rest of his life." In fact, says Corigliano, "He died playing it—literally." On his 74th birthday, in 1975, the elder violinist suffered a cerebral hemorrhage during a party at which he was playing the Sonata for friends at his home. "After the second movement, he put his violin down and went unconscious."

Corigliano's gift was recognized early on, without hesitation, by such other prominent figures as Leonard Bernstein, who singled him out as "one of the most talented composers I know of today." Indeed, he would grow into a major player among American composers. Along with revitalizing the potential of concert music, Corigliano helped usher in the renaissance of contemporary opera with *The Ghosts of Versailles*, his grand opera completion of Beaumarchais' *Figaro* trilogy. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera—to a libretto by Corigliano's

close friend, the late William M. Hoffman—*Ghosts* stands with John Adams' *Nixon in China* as a key work in American opera of the late 20th century.

Ghosts epitomizes an innate theatricality that also runs through much of Corigliano's instrumental work, as well as a sophisticated approach to the musical past and what it can mean for composers at work today—very much evident in the *Red Violin* music, with its free-associative use of the Baroque chaconne, for example. In a monograph published in 2000, Mark Adamo, himself a successful composer as well as Corigliano's spouse, summed up his partner's aesthetic as that of “an American syncretist” for whom “self-definition is a constant process. Corigliano's career-long struggle to reconcile a titanic richness of available musical resources with unmissable structural order expresses the core American metaphor.”

To date, Corigliano has garnered the most-coveted official honors: a Grawemeyer (1991), a Pulitzer (2001), five Grammy Awards, and the Oscar for *Red Violin*. These recognitions from the outside world decorate his study, sharing space with the black grand piano that symbolizes the deep solitude of a composer's work.

If you take into account both his own music and his many years mentoring composition students—at Juilliard and City University of New York—Corigliano has had a more profound influence on the contemporary scene than is often acknowledged. Nico Muhly, Mason Bates, Avner Dorman, Adam Schoenberg, Eric Whitacre, and Michael Ippolito are among his most successful former students.

Corigliano's music has made an impact on listeners around the globe, as Lara St. John observes. The Canada-born, New York City–based violinist is another of Corigliano's interpreters. “I first met John when I was playing the Chinese premiere of the Chaconne in the early 2000s, and since I took up the Violin Concerto about seven or eight years ago, I've played it on four continents—in Turin, Uruguay, Japan, and a bunch of places in the United States—and it's always a huge hit, even though the Concerto is quite a modern work. There's something about that theme that keeps coming back that is so poignant and sensitive.”

St. John also shares with Corigliano a passion for travel and for exploring musical ideas outside the Western tradition. She mentions the unusual sonorities in the *Red Violin* Concerto—extreme *flautando* effects, for example—as uncannily resembling the sound of the Armenian *duduk* or Middle Eastern *ney*. Another signature sound of the Concerto is the series of pressured “crunches” in the last movement, which created a non-Western percussive effect. “I think it's his idea of how to get past the assumed limitations of the violin,” she says. After St. John showed Corigliano some bluegrass and folk fiddle techniques and rhythms, he used them in a short solo violin piece, *STOMP*, which was commissioned for the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 2011, and dedicated the score to her.

The monumental String Quartet (1995) incorporates memories from a trip to Fez, Morocco, in its central night-music movement. Modeled on the arch form of Bartók's Fourth Quartet and similarly structured in five movements, the work was commissioned for the farewell tour of the Cleveland Quartet. “At my hotel in Fez, at 4 am, I was awakened by the muezzins singing through loudspeakers. So I wanted to recapture this as night music in a non-Western way,” says Corigliano.

Characteristically, the quartet became a way of personally rediscovering one of the most hallowed forms of Western music—and reinventing it with complex new ideas. This is above all apparent in the fourth-movement fugue, which the composer describes as “quite the opposite of a standard fugue.” Normally, a fugue subject has rhythmic irregularities to allow the diverging voices to be clearly heard as independent. Corigliano's fugue uses even beats for all the voices, but with each line traveling at a slightly different tempo. “That's easy to hear but is extremely hard to notate,” he says. “And the players have to think of things that quartets are usually not asked to think about.” Later, when commissioned to write a symphony for the Boston Symphony, Corigliano reworked and expanded the quartet into his Second Symphony (winning the 2001 Pulitzer Prize).

As artistic advisor of the chamber series Wolf Trap at the Barns this season, St. John has devised a retrospective titled “Corigliano 8.0” (April 22), which will include a performance of the String Quartet by the PUBLIQuartet (in residence this season at the Metropolitan Museum of Art). “It's a huge and extremely difficult work, and nobody has been playing this recently,” Corigliano says. “But now we have two young quartets learning it: the PUBLIQuartet and the Attacca, so they can carry it forward for that generation.”

Corigliano has also written a nostalgic miniature for string quartet inspired by memories of his father: *Snapshot: 1909*, which refers to a photo of his eight-year-old father and older brother Peter performing on violin and guitar, respectively, in the Greenwich Village apartment where they grew up. Corigliano has the second violin play the role of the child, while the first violinist “is the great musician he dreamed of becoming—and which he did become.”

Corigliano's catalogue includes various additional works for strings that are arrangements of other compositions: *Soliloquy* for clarinet and string quartet (adopted from the Clarinet Concerto), *Voyage* for string orchestra (from a 1971 choral setting of the Richard Wilbur translation of Baudelaire's *L'Invitation au Voyage*), for example. Corigliano has written two works for Yo-Yo Ma: *Phantasmagoria* for cello and piano (using material from *The Ghosts of Versailles*), and *Fancy on a Bach Air* for unaccompanied cello (reworking the aria from the *Goldberg Variations*).

As far as Philippe Quint is concerned, “All of these string arrangements of other pieces show that string players are desperate to play John's music on their instruments. I wish he would write more things for us!”

Yet Corigliano calmly suggests that he may have said all he has to say. Or not. “I'm taking a break right now, but I don't know whether I'll come back or will even want to come back to composing. A lot of composers my age or younger didn't compose after a certain point. I don't feel the need or the desire to compose now, but that may change.

“I'm not closing a door.”

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