Arts & Humanities

The Music of Communion

The lucid, distinctly American music of John Corigliano has established him as one of the most highly acclaimed composers of our time.

By
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|
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John Corigliano ’59C has enjoyed more success in the last ten years than most composers see in a lifetime, but he refuses to let it go to his head.

“There’s a kind of arrogance in music making that has led to this complete disenfranchisement of the human beings who go to a concert by the ‘gods’ who write music for the concert,” he says. “The idea of writing music that is complex and incomprehensible—except to a few other composers—became a virtue, and that has hurt concert music.”

At the same time, he says, composers who reach out to audiences are often thought of as either pandering or simplistic. “As a composer who tries to speak to an audience, I know that that is not necessarily the case. As a communicator you want to impart intellectual knowledge, you want to impart emotional knowledge.”

Corigliano’s music is characteristically American—diverse, ambitious, and unrestrained. “He speaks the American music language with great assurance and great eloquence,” says Robert Ward, Professor Emeritus of Music at Duke University, who sat on the jury that awarded Corigliano the Pulitzer Prize for music last year. “He uses the sounds that have become familiar in American music in his writing to express the contemporary spirit of America as he sees it.”

Corigliano began a decade of remarkable success in 1991 when he won the the prestigious Grawemeyer Prize (an award worth $150,000) for his Symphony No. 1, subtitled *Of Rage and Remembrance*, which he wrote to commemorate his many friends who have died of AIDS.

Since then, it’s been one major award after another. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s recording of the work on Erato won Grammy awards for best new composition and best orchestral performance. When the Cleveland Quartet’s recording of his String Quartet on Telarc won a Grammy for best new composition in 1996, he became the first composer to win a second Grammy in that category. He later expanded and reworked that piece into the symphony that won last year’s Pulitzer.

Then in 2000, he won the Academy Award for best score for *The Red Violi*n, making him the second classical composer in history to win an Oscar. (The first went to Aaron Copland in 1949 for *The Heiress*, and the third went to Columbia alumnus Tan Dun ’93SOA in 2001 for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.)

While many know Corigliano for *The Red Violin*, his first symphony is probably more telling of Corigliano the composer. An article on AIDS and art by *Washington Post* critic Tim Page ’79C opens with a vivid description of the music: “It crashes to life with a single, sustained, frenzied note for massed strings that eventually devolves into spasmodic buzzing, then veers completely out of control into a riot of orchestral lunacy. With its snatches of sardonic melodies, clotted chords, heartbeat timpani and rattling death marches, the symphony is Corigliano’s response to the AIDS crisis and a distinguished contribution to a large body of art reflecting a global catastrophe.”

Page, who describes Corigliano’s music as “inventive and personal,” was another member of the Pulitzer jury that selected Corigliano as last year’s winner. “His music has a real tradition behind it,” says Page. “It’s not necessarily radical, but always original. There’s a distinct voice there. I admire that he is not ashamed of the past, but also looking forward to the future.”

Corigliano says his interest in American music made him feel like a bit of an outsider in Columbia’s undergraduate music program, where in the 1950s it seemed to him that most students were enthralled with European composers and methods. “I was in love with the American composers that no one seemed to be interested in,” he says. The work of Walter Piston, Samuel Barber, and Aaron Copland has influenced his own, though his music has also been inspired by more abstract composers like Arnold Schoenberg and Krzystof Penderecki.

At Columbia, Corigliano studied with the legendary Otto Luening, with whom he remained close until Luening's death in 1996. "Luening was a very warm and intuitive person. When I was a young composer, I was extremely insecure. He was more encouraging than critical because he knew that I was so critical. You have to psychoanalyze your student a little bit," says Corigliano. "You need someone to tell you 'You can do it' rather than 'You're doing that wrong.' He had a psychological intuition as to what a very hypercritical young composer might need to get him to write more music."

Corigliano didn't pursue a degree beyond his bachelor's; he wanted to get into the living music scene rather than move immediately into academia. "I didn't want that to be my journey because I felt that was separating me from people rather than unifying me with people." Both his parents were musicians—his mother, now 96, is a pianist, and his father, who died in 1975, was a violinist and concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic from 1943 to 1966—and they worried that their son would have a hard time making a living as a composer. So when his mother ran into the mother of the Lehman College music department chairman in the beauty parlor, she asked about getting her son John a teaching job. The chairman called him in for an interview and eventually hired Corigliano as an adjunct. That was 1972, and to this day Corigliano continues to teach at Lehman, where he now has the privileged designation of Distinguished Professor. (He also teaches at Juilliard.)

Mason Bates '00C, who studied under Corigliano for three years while in the joint Columbia-Juilliard program, says that as a teacher Corigliano was supportive but demanding. "His teaching is architectural, focusing on pre-compositional work," says Bates. "For most composers, who come to composition improvising on one instrument or another, John's insistence on thinking through a form completely before writing even one note can be extremely challenging. But it is a discipline that pays huge dividends."

When considering the context of a new work, Corigliano pulls it from what Bates calls the "abstract, often self-absorbed world that composers' music so often inhabits," and puts it into real life. "John has refined exceptional skills as a communicator and invests every note with direction," says Bates, who is now composer-in-residence with Young Concert Artists, a nonprofit organization dedicated to discovering and launching the careers of extraordinary young musicians. "This makes it very difficult for John to write, because each piece is a new experience that needs its own conceptual framework. . . . This results in music that

is kaleidoscopic, fresh, and inevitable, a kind of music that comes from agonizingly hard work."

No one would ever guess that Corigliano is 64 by looking at him—he exudes the energy of a twenty-year-old. He talks so fast that he can cover a dozen complicated issues related to the past, present, and future of classical music in under an hour—from the collapse of the classical CD market to the myth that conductors are the creative force behind music to the need for the orchestra to make peace with electronics. Though he thinks many artists exploit their status, he tries not to abuse the "artistic license"—except when he doesn't want to wear a tie.

After nearly half a century of composing, Corigliano took his first real break this past summer, which left him with a scary realization—he doesn't know how not to write music. "It's very, very nerve-racking at first. Not working makes me more nervous than working," he says. "I'm so used to having it as an answer to why I exist. I should have some intrinsic worth as person besides what I do, and I'm trying to find that."

The hiatus wasn't planned; it just more or less happened, he says. He found himself unable to write a ballet commissioned for the Minnesota Orchestra and the San Francisco Ballet. "I tried to work on it and I found I could not concentrate on it at all. I just didn't want to do it. . . . Usually that happens at first, but then I break through. But it happened for a longer amount of time, and I wasn't able to do anything. So I called up and I said, 'I'm postponing or canceling. I don't know which yet, but I'm certainly not doing it this summer.'"

He relaxes visibly as he talks about his plans to visit his country house an hour outside of the city. "That to me is a great joy," he says. "I love the country and the quiet. When I'm in New York I feel as if I have boxing gloves on, and when I leave New York I take them off. It's so tough here. The music world is so difficult—I mean, people romanticize it because they're not in it. Basically there's this bunch of rats and a tiny bit of cheese and they're all climbing over each other to get it. It's exhausting, really."

Corigliano brightens just considering the things he enjoys but never really had time to do before—painting, gardening, exercising, traveling. He jokes about the abstract painting he did in 23 minutes for his living room wall, admitting that he's more of an "applier of paint" than a painter. He points out with pleasant anticipation that the

act of painting is the complete opposite of composing. “It’s completely physical and when you look at what you have and you don’t like it, you change it; it’s not like this internalization of a musical idea for two years until you hear a rehearsal.”

The walls of Corigliano’s Upper West Side apartment are decorated with framed programs, awards, and posters, including a large advertisement for *The Ghosts of Versailles* at the Metropolitan Opera, with “sold out” stamped diagonally across in red. The work premiered in 1991 and was the company’s first commissioned opera in 25 years. Partly because of its success, the Met and other opera companies began commissioning more work by American composers. In a 1998 *New York Times* article, Patrick J. Smith referred to *The Ghosts of Versailles* as the “symbolic premiere that put the seal on the new flowering of American opera.”

Corigliano says now there are more opera commissions in the United States than ever before, and points to the success of his companion, Mark Adamo, composer-in-residence at the New York City Opera, as an example. Adamo’s first opera, *Little Women*, has been performed across the country, and PBS aired it last August on Great Performances. Now he’s working on the libretto and score to *Lysistrata*, a fantasia on Aristophanes’ comedy of sex and war, and has been commissioned to write a third opera based on *Dracula*.

There had been talk about Corigliano’s teaming up again with William Hoffman, the librettist for The Ghosts of Versailles, to do a musical, but Corigliano says that now they have an idea for a “rather savage opera” and that they’re toying with other projects.

Regarding the state of classical music, Corigliano would like to return to the eighteenth century and forget about the nineteenth, which he believes is when art became religion, artists became gods, and composers began writing unintelligible music. But the problem, he says, is not just the composers—it’s the audience, too. “You have no idea how many people will disagree with this,” he says. “The biggest problem is the people who worship the artist because they have given up the gods to worship. Understandably, they’re looking for another one, so they found it in art. But it’s the wrong place—because artists are only people. They’re only people.”

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