



Corigliano, John (b. 1938)

by Robert Kellerman

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American composer of symphonies, chamber works, choral settings, operas, and film scores, John Corigliano has created some of the most moving music inspired by the AIDS epidemic.

Corigliano was born in New York on February 16, 1938 into a highly musical family. His father was a distinguished violinist who was concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic from 1943 to 1966, while his mother was an accomplished pianist.

Corigliano trained at Columbia University and at the Manhattan School of Music, after which he worked as a music programmer for various New York radio stations and as music director for the Morris Theatre in New Jersey. He has taught composition at the College of Church Musicians (Washington, D. C.), the Manhattan School, the Juilliard School, and Lehman College, City University of New York, where he holds the position of Distinguished Professor of Music.

Among Corigliano's works are a violin sonata (1964); a clarinet concerto (1977), a flute concerto ("Pied Piper Fantasy," 1981), as well as various other concertos; a Grammy Award-winning string quartet (1996); the score to the film *Altered States* (1980), for which he was nominated for an Academy Award; the *Dylan Thomas Trilogy* (1961-1976), settings of Thomas's poetry for chorus and orchestra; and many other works.

He is perhaps best known for his score to the film *The Red Violin* (1997), for which he received an Academy Award; his music for the opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991), which was commissioned and premiered by the Metropolitan Opera, New York; and for his *Symphony No. 1* (1990).

Symphony No. 1 was inspired by the loss of many of Corigliano's friends to AIDS. Commissioned by Sir Georg Solti and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the symphony is notable for its large scale and dark mood. Although inspired by the devastation of AIDS, the symphony also stands on its own as a piece of music devoid of specific historical context.

Its third movement, "Guilio's Song," includes a cello solo based on a theme improvised by Corigliano and his cellist friend Guilio Sorrentino. This third movement inspired the separate, briefer chaconne *Of Rage and Remembrance* (1993), which was commissioned by gay men's choruses in Seattle, New York City, and San Francisco.

Scored for chorus and soloists (mezzo-soprano, boy soprano, two tenors, and two baritones), this work is set to poetry about loss by poet and playwright William Hoffmann (who also provided the libretto for *The Ghosts of Versailles*) and farewells to various friends lost to AIDS; the work concludes with a verse from Psalm 23, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," sung in Hebrew by a boy soprano.

The vocal score explicitly names friends of Corigliano and Hoffmann who have died of AIDS, and directs the singers to name friends whom they have lost to AIDS as well. Thus the work is not only an occasional piece but also a work in the long, venerable tradition of communal choral lament.

The year 2000 saw the premiere of *Vocalise*, scored for soprano, orchestra, and live electronics; a song cycle based on verses of Bob Dylan; the *Suite from The Ghosts of Versailles*; and his *Symphony No. 2 for String Orchestra*, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music in 2001. Corigliano continues to produce extraordinary compositions.

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About the Author

Robert Kellerman holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.