

ALLA CORRENTE

John Corigliano



Italian-American composer John Corigliano (b. 1938) has summed up his artistic aims in this way: “It has been fashionable of late for the artist to be misunderstood. I think it is the job of the composer to reach out to his audience with every means at his disposal...Communication of his most important ideas should be the primary goal.” Throughout the development of his career, Corigliano’s “primary goal” of communication with the audience has always remained in his sight. In an atmosphere in which audience responses to new music so often range from indifferent to adversarial, Corigliano takes a place among the few “serious” contemporary composers whose appeal has moved beyond the new-music crowd to reach listeners who are steeped in more traditional, time-tested fare.

Corigliano was born into a musical family. His father, John Corigliano Sr., was concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic for 23 years, and his mother, Rose Buzen, is an accomplished educator and pianist. He is a former student of Otto Luening, Vittorio Giannini and Paul Creston. Growing up as a “regular kid,” he attended P.S. 241 and Midwood High School in Brooklyn, and then went on to Columbia University where he studied composition, earning his BA in 1959. He then moved on to the Manhattan School of Music where he continued to study composition. Corigliano’s father, with his “from-the-trenches” perspective on the world of classical music, at first discouraged John Jr. from pursuing a career in composition, all too aware of the difficulties that faced contemporary composers. But John Jr. continued to work to develop his compositional skills. Before achieving success as a composer, he worked as assistant to the producer on the Leonard Bernstein Young People’s Concerts (one of my personal favorite TV programs at the time). He also served as a session producer for classical artists such as André Watts. Corigliano first came to international prominence in 1964 when, at the age of 26, his *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1963) was the only winner of the chamber-music competition of the *Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds* in Italy.

Support from Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation followed, as did important commissions. For the New York Philharmonic he composed his *Vocalise* (1999), *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra* (1977) and *Fantasia on an Ostinato* (1986). For the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, he wrote *Poem in October* (1970); for the New York State Council on the Arts, he composed the *Symphony No. 2* (2001), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize (2001). He has demonstrated a special interest in the concerto; in his various concerti [for piano (1968), for oboe (1975), for clarinet (1977), for flute (1981), and for guitar (1993)], Corigliano both approached the relationship between soloist and orchestra from a fresh perspective and made notably creative use of the instrumental resources at hand.



Though Corigliano’s catalogue of chamber music remains relatively slender, works such as the Grammy-winning *String Quartet* (1995) and *Chiaroscuro for Two Pianos* (1997), which was written for two pianos tuned a quarter tone apart for The Dranoff International Two Piano Foundation, suggest an increasing interest in writing for smaller ensembles.

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Corigliano's affinity for the voice is at once evident in numerous vocal and choral works like his *Dylan Thomas Trilogy* (1960, rev. 1999) which was commissioned by the National Symphony Orchestra and is an evening-length "memory play in the form of an oratorio." In 1970 Corigliano teamed up with David Hess to create *The Naked Carmen*, which Hess acknowledged was originally conceived by Corigliano and himself as a way to update one of the most popular operas of our time, Bizet's *Carmen*. Also, he composed the song cycle *Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (2000).

He has continued to evolve a musical language in which architecture, color, and overt drama are paramount. While his works are steeped in a Romantic aesthetic that makes liberal, unembarrassed use of tonality, Corigliano's inclusive sensibility has led him to also employ extended instrumental techniques, microtones, and elements of minimalism and serialism (sometimes in a context of parody). More recently he has incorporated live electronic music into his compositions. The orchestra, however, is clearly Corigliano's native medium and is the ensemble for which he has written his most compelling works. The *Symphony No. 1* (1990), written in response to the AIDS crisis, is remarkable for its effective alchemy of intensely personal associations and musical potency. It was awarded the Grawemeyer Award in 1991, the most lucrative prize in the world of contemporary classical music. In 2001 he received the Pulitzer Prize for his *Symphony No. 2* (2001).

On an occasional basis since the 1980s, Corigliano has lent his abilities to producing film music of exceptional interest. His score for Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980) was nominated for an Academy Award; nearly two decades later, he took home the Oscar for his score to François Girard's *The Red Violin* (1998). Portions of the score to *The Red Violin* were also used in his *Violin Concerto* (2003).

His most ambitious work to date, the opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991), has earned worldwide plaudits and, in a rare instance among contemporary operas, has enjoyed repeated productions since its premiere. In 2011, Corigliano's *One Sweet Morning* premiered at Avery Fisher Hall with the New York Philharmonic; it was commissioned to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the September 11th Attacks. Ms. Stephanie Blythe performed the solo mezzo-soprano role. Corigliano is married to his partner, composer Mark Adamo, in New York City.

—Adapted from *All Music* (allmusic.com) and *Wikipedia* by James J. Boitano, Ph.D.

