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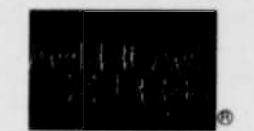
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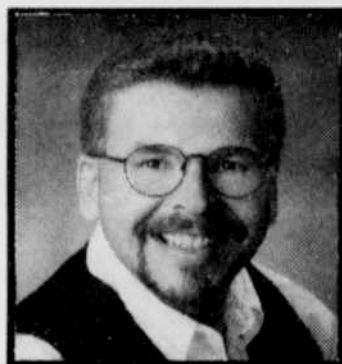
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SCORING THE LOSSES

Composer John Corigliano pays homage in his first symphony to friends lost to AIDS

by Bob Roehr

Quiet strings and a wistful piano yield to the fortissimo cacophony of an expanded orchestra playing at full tilt. John Corigliano (pronounced core-lee-AH-no) is hunched in a seat making notations on the score, then leaps to his feet and bounds to another point in the concert hall of the Kennedy Center to check the sound balance.

He is a striking figure of grace and passion in

MUSIC

a collarless hunter green knit shirt and well-worn jeans. The merest shadow of a paunch and a frosting of gray in his hair hint of middle age, not the 57 years he has lived.

With a swipe of the maestro's hand there is silence. The percussionists playing chimes on the wings of the stage are confused, which is left and which is right? "John, does that make a difference?" asks Leonard Slatkin. "No," comes the reply. And with that the conductor returns to rehearsing Corigliano's Symphony No. 1.

The work is an homage to friends lost to AIDS, which premiered in 1990 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The recording snatched a Grammy Award and stayed atop the classical charts for months. The symphony vaulted Corigliano from journeyman to the ranks of the country's most prominent living composers. More than 600 performances later, it has entered the repertoire of many of the world's major orchestras.

There is an added edge of excitement to this particular rehearsal, because the performance will be recorded later in the week. Slatkin has chosen the Symphony No. 1 as the first work he and the National Symphony Orchestra will record together. RCA Red Seal will release it next fall, when he officially moves to Washington, D.C., to take over as music director of the NSO.

Corigliano shares the loss of "all these people" to AIDS, saying, "I stopped counting at a hundred in my phone book." When his best friend of 30 years, Shelly Shkolnik, came down with pneumocystis, it crystallized his decision to write the symphony. "It became a passion for me," he says.

The pair continued their long-distance telephone conversations on the work in progress over its two-year gestation. But they never spoke of Shkolnik's role in its genesis. "I would play him other parts of the work, but never the parts that concerned him. It was very strange," says Corigliano. "It was always an abstract piece we were talking about."

"The irony and the horror of doing it was that I would talk with him and laugh. And then I would go and continue to write his memorial piece."

The charade dropped a few weeks prior to the premiere, as the deadline for program notes approached. "Will you accept the dedication?" asked Corigliano. "Yes," said Shkolnik to the honor. He attended rehearsals and the concerts, and died a week later.

Corigliano explains the structure of the sym-

phony as a remembrance of three life-long friends who were musicians. "In the third movement I planned my little quilt for other friends. And an epilogue in which I leave the audience with, 'All right, you've lost all these people. The rage is there, the loss is there, the remembrance is there. What now? How do you face all of that? How do you go on?'"

"That was the first thing that I wrote, the chords of the epilogue. You have to come to terms with that. All of us in the gay community have to come to terms with what you do when you have lost hundreds of people, and you get up the next morning. You don't dismiss it, but if you walk around truly depressed about it you aren't doing any good either. How do you face life then?"

"You go on and be true to the ones you love. The way for me was the idea of eternal memory as a way of keeping people alive. I'm not saying it was a new thought, I'm just saying it is how we get through."

He continues, "The fact that I talk about Shelly a lot in interviews—I love that because it gives him life. That remembrance keeps Shelly alive. It's wonderful. That gives me a feeling of joy."

"So the epilogue is floating in a sea of waves of foreverness with friends. They are there. You



John Corigliano

have to remember them, and not forget them, and bring them up in conversation. Keep them alive."

Corigliano consciously did not include AIDS in a descriptive title of the work because he "didn't want to beat people over the head." Loss is loss, regardless of the reason. The symphony can be understood as an evocative emotional work by all.

He recalls a performance last year in Kiev in Ukraine: "They had never heard of AIDS; there were no program notes, they just heard a symphony. And they responded that way."

So, too, did the audience that night in the concert hall of the Kennedy Center. From the Queen of the Netherlands ensconced in the presidential box to black-tied supporters of the Whitman Walker Clinic in orchestra seats to students in the upper balcony, the audience responded to a work the *Washington Post* music critic called "a terrific piece—wrenching, original, as challenging as it is accessible to a careful listener."

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by Jack Heifner