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ATOP THE CHARTS

Composer John Corigliano, whose *Symphony No. 1* evokes the anguish of AIDS, makes challenging, approachable music

by Bob Roehr

John Corigliano is a hot musical property these days. "Of Rage and Remembrance," on RCA Red Seal, is high among the *Billboard* classical charts as the first recording Leonard Slatkin chose to make with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. And two other record labels have released CDs of Corigliano's work in the last six months.

"Of Rage and Remembrance" is a serious

write." He works slowly, on but a single project at a time, and builds a rational structure "from the idea of the piece." The melody "has to develop from the architecture" of the total work. Only as it nears completion does he sort out offers to match up and finalize a commission.

Corigliano's personal intensity is apparent one dreary day in April as "Of Rage and Remembrance" is recorded at the Kennedy Center. His entire being seems dedicated to the process. He follows the score through lowered glasses, as eye and ear measure each note pulsing through the maze of the control board. His hands move as if conducting, then dart to make a notation on the page. A jaw muscle flexes with a tic of tension.

Pitch, tone, balance, intonation, he absorbs all and makes his suggestions to the recording crew. Sometimes it is to correct a phrasing of the singers or a balance in the microphone, once he pleads "softer, more ethereal" in the phrasing of a section. Tension mounts. During a short pause while conductor Leonard Slatkin walks back from the control room to the podium, Corigliano paces to the wall and pushes himself off a couple of times in a standing push-up.

Which section should they run through again to lay down yet another, perhaps more perfect, track? They count down the final minutes of recording time; union work rules mean that even a few seconds over will be very expensive. And finally it is done, the session over.

Corigliano has endured this process repeatedly this past year. The recordings include a string quartet commissioned for the farewell tour of the Cleveland Quartet, recorded by that group and released by Telarc (CD-80415).

Music

work: a cantata for orchestra and chorus on the subject of AIDS. The music is drawn from the third movement of his brooding, anguished and highly regarded *Symphony No. 1*, also on the CD. The text by William M. Hoffman begins:

This is the season of stone:

Dead leaves on a garden wall,

Dry berries in bone-cold air,

A brittle moon, an ashen sun.

Corigliano calls it "my little quilt for friends." And like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, the work embodies contradictory emotions—melancholy, an edge of bitterness, and also the warm remembrance of things that made each friendship so special.

"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?'"

"You have to come to terms with that. All of us in the gay community have to come to terms with what do 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?"

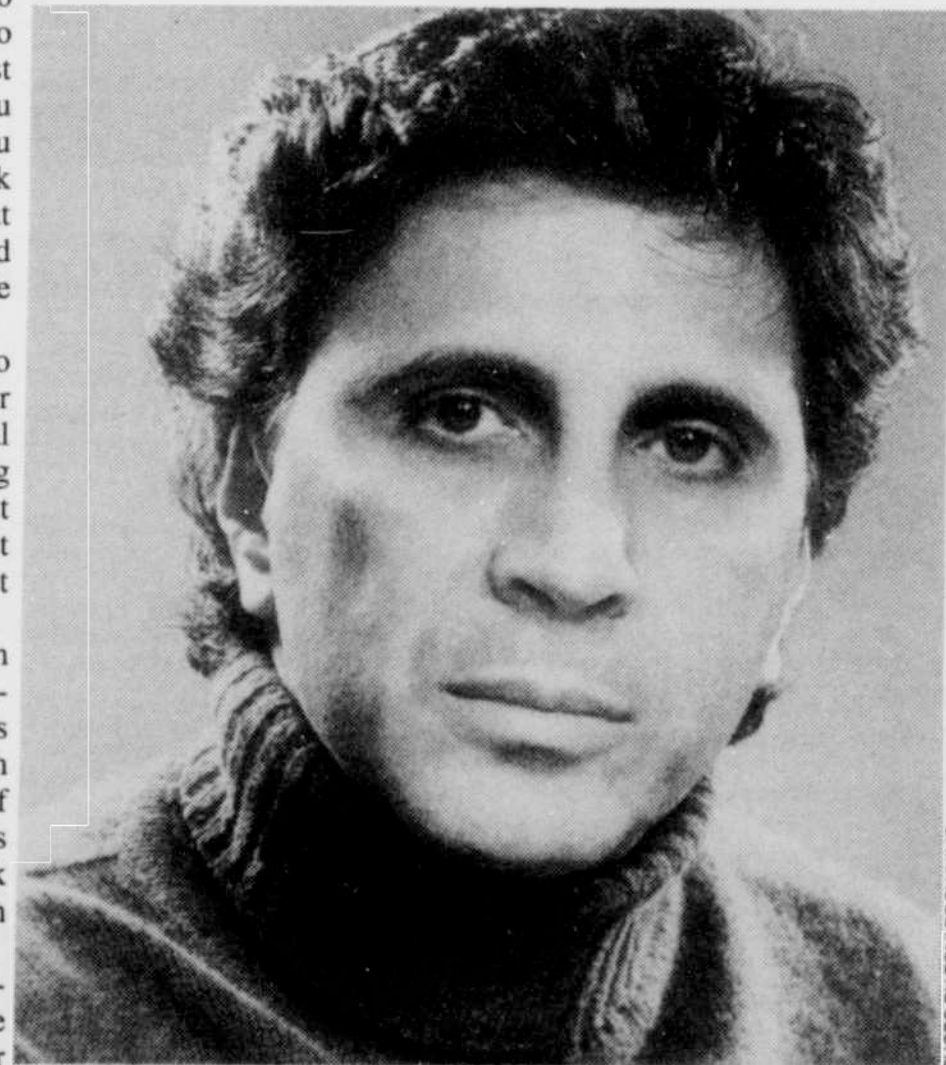
"You go on and be true to the ones you love. The way for me was the idea of eternal memory as a way of keeping people alive. I'm not saying it was a new thought, I'm just saying it is how we get through."

Corigliano, at 58, seems in mid morph between boy wonder and elder statesman. His body is trim and moves with the quick agility and energy of an athlete, while his hair is mutating to the type of thick silver mane one associates with classical eminence.

His music is often demanding—not likely to replace Vivaldi as background for brunch. But it is not demanding in the academic sense of the 12 tone system which drove audiences from concert halls in the 1960s. No, Corigliano operates within an accessible melodic tradition: He can write a pleasant tune, but he has something more to say. There is an intensity to what he writes that requires you to listen to it, not merely hear it.

"Commercial music is mainly meant to get you to listen to everything the first time," he says, "but noncommercial music has this layered quality to it." The composer has to "entice" the listener at first hearing, but "at the same time hold forth these wonderful things down the line" that encourage and reward repeated listening.

He says that "every piece is a difficult piece to



John Corigliano

The label also released an all-Corigliano CD (Telarc CD-80421) by I Fiamminghi, The Orchestra of Flanders. It brings together a handful of his shorter and generally lighter pieces along with the premiere recording of "Creations." The text of "Creations" is drawn from the first chapters of the Bible and is spoken by openly gay actor Sir Ian McKellen. The music is more abstract than many of the composer's other pieces.

Almost all of Corigliano's work has been recorded now, so don't look for a flood of new offerings any time soon. But the existing catalog is deep and offers endless hours of repeated, rewarding listening enjoyment.