

# Conjurer: Concerto for Percussionist and String Orchestra and Brass

## John Corigliano

John Corigliano, like William Bolcom, was born in 1938, a vintage year for American composers, during which Paul Chihara, Gloria Coates, Alvin Curran, John Harbison, Frederic Rzewski, Joan Tower, and Charles Wuorinen also entered the world. Corigliano's was a musical family; his father (John Corigliano, Sr.) served for more than two decades as Concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic. As a young composer, Corigliano studied with Otto Luening at Columbia University and Vittorio Giannini at the Manhattan School of Music and worked for nearly a decade with Leonard Bernstein on the CBS broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic Young People's Concerts. Following an early period during which his music, as he has described it, was a "tense, histrionic outgrowth of the 'clean' American sound of Barber, Copland, Harris, and Schuman," he embraced a posture in which Romantic grandeur can rub elbows with an unmistakably modernist musical vocabulary.

Programmed by more than 150 orchestras around the world, his Symphony No. 1 (1988), along with its subsequent choral incarnation, *Of Rage and Remembrance* (based on the symphony's third movement), has been acknowledged as one of the most compelling artistic statements related to the AIDS crisis. With his Symphony No. 2, an expanded recomposition of his 1995 String Quartet, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2001. His 1991 opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* has been revived in multiple productions. The year following its premiere, Corigliano was named *Musical America's* first Composer of the Year and was elected into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Another of his most performed compositions is the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra: *The Red Violin*, which he adapted in 2005 from his Academy Award-winning film score for François Girard's *The Red Violin*.

Corigliano serves on the composition faculty

of The Juilliard School and also holds the position of Distinguished Professor of Music at Lehman College, City University of New York. During the 2007–08 season he was Composer of the Year for the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; a highlight of that tenure was the premiere of *Conjurer*, written for percussionist Evelyn Glennie and commissioned by an international consortium of six orchestras.

When asked to compose a percussion concerto, Corigliano confessed that he first reacted with horror:

All I could see were problems. While I love using a percussion battery in my orchestral writing, the very thing that makes it the perfect accent to other orchestral sonorities makes it unsatisfactory when it takes the spotlight in a concerto. For starters, a percussion-

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** February 16, 1938, in New York City

**Resides:** in New York City and Kent Cliffs, New York

**Work composed:** 2007, on commission from the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; Nashville Symphony; Royal Scottish National Orchestra; Dallas Symphony Orchestra; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Music Department (Lisbon, Portugal); and National Arts Centre Orchestra

**World premiere:** February 21, 2008, at Heinz Hall in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, Marin Alsop, conductor, Evelyn Glennie, soloist

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** this performance, which marks the New York Premiere

**Estimated duration:** ca. 35 minutes

ist plays dozens of instruments. ... The aural identity of the player is lost amid the myriad bangs, crashes, and splashes of the percussion arsenal. Only the visual element of one person playing all these instruments ties them together. In addition, most of the instruments have no pitch at all (or very little), and don't sustain a sound (like a violin or trumpet). As a result, most percussion concerti I have heard sound like orchestral pieces with an extra-large percussion section. The melodic interest always rests with the orchestra, while the percussion plays accompanying figures around it. ... Many of my works begin this way. I pose a problem and write a piece as the solution.

Once it was complete, it occurred to me that the piece's cadenza-into-movement form

characterizes the soloist as a kind of sorcerer. The effect in performance is that the soloist doesn't so much introduce material as conjure it, as if by magic, from the three disparate choirs: materials which the orchestra then shares and develops; hence, the title *Conjurer*.

**Instrumentation:** four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, and strings, in addition to the array of solo percussion instruments, including marimba, xylophone, a series of 18 wood instruments (in graded pitches high to low) of the performer's choosing (such as wood blocks, castanets or log drums), chimes, tam-tams, cymbal, vibraphone, orchestra bells, crotales, talking drum, kick drum, tom-toms, bongos or congas, bass drum, and timpani.

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## The Work at a Glance

The following observations are drawn from John Corigliano's commentary about *Conjurer*:

I. Cadenza I; Wood – The initial cadenza starts with unpitched notes, but gradually pitched notes enter and various motives are revealed as well as ideas based upon the interval of a fifth. This interval will run through the entire concerto as a unifying force. After a climactic run, the orchestra enters, developing the fifth interval into a rather puckish theme. Soloist and orchestra develop the material and build to a climactic xylophone solo, and finally return to the opening theme.

II. Cadenza II; Metal – The cadenza is for chimes (tubular bells) accompanied by tam-tams and suspended cymbals. It is loud and clangorous, with the motivic fifths clashing together. The movement itself, however, is soft and long lined. The melody that will end the movement is introduced in the low register of the vibraphone, and the movement develops to a dynamic climax where the chimes return, and then subsides to a soft texture in the lower strings as the struck/bowed vibraphone plays its melody.



III. Cadenza III; Skin – The skin cadenza features a “talking drum” accompanied by a kick drum. The talking drum is played with the hands, and can change pitch as its sides are squeezed. Strings connect the top and bottom skins, and squeezing stretches them tighter and raises the pitch. It provides a lively conversation with a kick drum: a very dry, small bass drum played with a foot pedal and almost exclusively used as part of a jazz drum set. This cadenza starts slowly, but builds to a loud and rhythmic climax. The movement then begins with the soloist and orchestra playing a savage rhythmic figure that accelerates to a blinding speed. A central section brings back the fifths against a pedal timpanum that is played with the hands in a “talking drum” style. The accelerando returns, and leads to a wild and improvised cadenza using all the drums and a virtuoso finish.

An African “talking drum”