

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

The Red Violin

John Corigliano

John Corigliano is one of the most respected and highly honored of American composers, a recipient of the prestigious Grawemeyer Award (1991) and three Grammy Awards for Best Contemporary Classical Composition (in 1991 for his Symphony No. 1, in 1997 for his String Quartet, and in 2009 for his *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan*). He has been a member of the Ameri-

can Academy of Arts and Letters since 1991. The Metropolitan Opera's 1991 production of his opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* represented the first time in two decades that the company had commissioned and presented a new work. His Symphony No. 1, with its subsequent choral incarnation, *Of Rage and Remembrance*, has been acknowledged as one of the most compelling artistic statements

IN SHORT



Born: February 16, 1938, in New York City

Resides: in New York City

Work composed: 1997–98

World premiere: The film was released June 11, 1999; a piece titled *The Red Violin: Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra*, derived from the film score as a concert work, had already been premiered, on November 26, 1997, at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, by the San Francisco Symphony, Robert Spano conductor, Joshua Bell, soloist. Bell was also the soloist on the film's soundtrack, with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra.

New York Philharmonic premiere: these performances

Estimated duration: ca. 140 minutes



In 1681 Cremona, Nicolò Bussotti (Carlo Cecchi) shows the violin he is making to his wife, Anna Rudolfi (Irene Grazioli); the varnish he finishes the instrument with sets the story in motion.

related to the AIDS crisis; it will be performed by the New York Philharmonic in May 2019. His Symphony No. 2, which followed in 2000, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2001. His first film score, for *Altered States* (1980), was nominated for an Academy Award and his second, for *Revolution* (1985), received Great Britain's Anthony Asquith Award for distinguished film composition.

In 1999 Corigliano won an Academy Award for *The Red Violin*, his third film score. He also won the Canadian Genie Award for best film score, the Quebec Jutra Award, and the German Critic's Prize. In 1992 *Musical America* named Corigliano as its first Com-

poser of the Year, and in 2002 he was honored with the Gold Medal of The National Arts Club in New York City.

Corigliano was born into a musical family; his father (also named John Corigliano) served as Concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic from 1943 to 1966 (see "In the Composer's Words," below). He studied with Otto Luening at Columbia University and Vittorio Giannini at the Manhattan School of Music; became enmeshed in the New York radio scene, as music programmer for WQXR and music director for WBAI; was involved briefly as a record producer for Columbia Masterworks; and worked for almost a

In the Composer's Words

Composing the music for the film *The Red Violin* gave me an opportunity to visit my own past, for my father, John Corigliano (I was a "Jr.") was a great solo violinist and the Concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic for almost a quarter of a century. My childhood years were punctuated by snatches of the great concertos being practiced by my father, as well as scales and technical exercises he used to keep in shape. Every year, he played a concerto with the Philharmonic (as well as in other venues), and I vividly remember the solo preparation, violin and piano rehearsals, orchestral rehearsals and the final tension-filled concerts (where I would sit backstage, listening to my father over a small speaker, breathlessly playing the work in my head and listening to make sure everything came out all right).

The Red Violin galvanized my energies into producing several further works derived from the film score, including a Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra, a Suite for Violin and Orchestra, a set of Caprices for solo violin, and my Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. In these works, as in composing the music for the film, I had the great good fortune to have the sublime young virtuoso Joshua Bell as the voice of the violin. Josh's playing resembles that of my father; he is an artist in the great tradition.

— John Corigliano

The composer with his father, John Corigliano, Sr., in 1966



Sources and Inspirations

In the course of a sweeping tale traversing centuries and continents, *The Red Violin* references some points in classical music history. Real-life personalities and events color the episodes in:



Cremona — The Italian city where the red violin is created was the center of the violin world in the time period depicted. Luthiers of the Amati and Ruggeri families were well established, joined by Giuseppe Guarneri and Antonio Stradivari. *The Red Violin* was inspired by a particular Stradivarius, *The Red Mendelssohn*. Crafted in 1720, the instrument's whereabouts were unknown for more than 200 years, when it came into the possession of the Mendelssohn family in the 1930s. Its red color is a result of Stradivari having changed from the more common golden varnish to a darker tone.



Vienna — The red violin is played by a musical prodigy who dies at a tragically young age. It brings to mind stories of the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who as a child played on tours for the crowned heads of Europe. Mozart was mostly known for piano performance, but he also played violin and viola. And while he did reach adulthood, he lived only to age 36.



Oxford — The romantic and musical passions of violinist Frederick Pope echo legends surrounding the violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840), who was said to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for lightning virtuosity and fame. Paganini's theatrical performances were immensely popular throughout Europe and he was known equally for his romantic entanglements.



Shanghai — Events of the Cultural Revolution depicted bear striking resemblance to the stories recounted by Chinese musicians and composers who grew up in the era and recall having to hide musical studies and instruments. Far from suppressing Western cultural influences, as the Communist leadership intended, a new wave of classically oriented music has emerged from China in ensuing decades.

From top: The red violin is born in Cremona; travels to Vienna with prodigy Kaspar Weiss (Christoph Koncz); is played by Frederick Pope (Jason Flemyng); and surfaces in China

— The Editors

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 proceeded to embrace a style in which Romantic grandeur can rub elbows with an unmistakably modernist musical vocabulary. Corigliano's music has been richly represented on Philharmonic programs over the years, beginning with the 1977 premiere of his Clarinet Concerto and including, in 2006, the New York premiere of his Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (*The Red Violin*), based on music from the film score, with Joshua Bell, who played on the soundtrack, as soloist.

The film *The Red Violin*, directed by François Girard, is constructed as a series of episodes that track the picaresque peregrinations of a magnificent violin crafted by a 17th-century master in Cremona, the capital of Italian violin-making. The fictional tale weaves through three centuries and five countries — Italy, Austria, England, China, Canada — as the instrument wends its way to

a Montreal auction house. Such a journey calls for a multiplicity of musical styles, and Corigliano's score reveals his chameleonic ability to evoke distinct musical cultures and absorb them into an overarching style of his own. Corigliano wrote:

A story this episodic needed to be tied together with a single musical idea. For this purpose I used the Baroque device of a chaconne: a repeated pattern of chords upon which the music is built. Against the chaconne chords I juxtaposed a lyrical yet intense melody representing the violin builder's doomed wife. Then, from those elements, I wove a series of virtuosic études for the solo violin, which followed the instrument from country to country, century to century. I composed these elements before the actual filming, because the actors needed to mime to a recording of these works since their hand motions playing the violin would have to synchronize with the music.

Instrumentation: timpani, two bass drums, marimba, vibraphone, castanets, tambourine, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.



Frederick Pope discovers the red violin being played in a traveling caravan

Another Violin's Journey

The violin played by Joshua Bell in this performance does indeed have a red hue, and the 300-year-old Stradivarius comes with quite a passionate back story of its own. Violins produced by the celebrated Cremona instrument-maker Antonio Stradivari often carry the names of previous owners. Bell owns the Gibson ex-Huberman. It is one of only a half dozen violins known to have been made in 1713, during Stradivari's "Golden Period," and it was in the possession of a French family until the late 1800s, when it was purchased by George Alfred Gibson, a professor at the Royal Academy. Around 1911, it was sold to Polish violinist Bronisław Huberman. The violin was stolen from Huberman in Vienna in 1919, but was recovered within days. (In fact, Huberman may well have played it in his several performances with the New York Philharmonic between 1922 and 1934.) In 1936 the violin was stolen a second time, from a dressing room at Carnegie Hall; Huberman died in 1947 without ever seeing the Strad again.

The instrument resurfaced in 1985, in the estate of Julian Altman, of Connecticut, who told his wife on his deathbed: "I want you do something about that violin. That violin is important." Altman told her that he had bought the violin in 1936 from a friend for \$100, and a 1936 newspaper clipping about the theft was found in the instrument's case. Mrs. Altman told *The New York Times* that her husband had made a living playing the violin in restaurants and at various events — they had met when he serenaded her with "Lara's Theme" from *Doctor Zhivago* at a restaurant — but that he never paid the instrument much attention, often leaving it behind after engagements. She also described him as a scoundrel, womanizer, and gambler, adding, "Maybe for once in his life he was telling the truth."

Bell obtained the violin in 2001, after having first seen and played it a few years earlier, when it was owned by Norbert Brainin of the Amadeus String Quartet, and falling in love with what he described as its sweet but gutsy tone.

— The Editors



Like Joshua Bell's Stradivarius, a legendary instrument resurfaces in The Red Violin, when appraiser Charles Morritt (Samuel L. Jackson) examines it at a Montreal auction house.