

## ***Circus Maximus* (Symphony No. 3 for Large Wind Ensemble)**

JOHN CORIGLIANO

B. February 16, 1938, New York

*Premiered February 16, 2005 in Austin, Texas, with Jerry Junkin conducting.*

*Scored for four flutes, two doubling on piccolo, four oboes, one doubling on English horn, three clarinets, two bass clarinets, two contrabass clarinets, three bassoons, one contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, two tubas, two euphoniums, piano, harp, timpani, and additional percussion; plus a surrounding ensemble of one clarinet, four saxophones, eleven trumpets, two horns, percussion and one string bass; and a marching band with one piccolo, one E-flat clarinet, two trumpets, two trombones and percussion. (approx. 35 minutes).*

*Circus Maximus* is my first work specifically for concert band. Many years ago, I arranged a piano-four-hand suite, *Gazebo Dances*, for band, but I have always felt more comfortable writing for the symphony orchestra. The sight of multi-staved-and-transposed-band score still fills me with dread.

Attending a band concert, in contrast, I find exhilarating. For starters, the repertoire of band music is largely contemporary. As a result, the audiences expect and look forward to new works. Listening in an environment largely ignored by the press, they learn to trust their own ears and respond directly to what they hear. Most important of all, concert bands devote a large amount of rehearsal time over a period of weeks, not days, to learning thoroughly the most challenging of scores. With its combination of new notations and spatial challenges demanding an intricate coordination of a large work, *Circus Maximus* could only have been attempted under such special circumstances.

I owe a great debt to the dedicatee of *Circus Maximus*, Jerry Junkin. He approached me about writing an original band work years ago. I declined at the time, because, frankly, the thought of that enormous ensemble, composed of so many instruments I had never written for, overwhelmed me. But Jerry persisted; and his encouragement both in commissioning me to write this work and during the composing process (during which he was incredibly supportive) has really made this piece possible.

Jerry wanted a large and theatrical piece: a third symphony. And, when I thought about that, it made a certain sense. My first symphony was for large symphony orchestra, my second for string orchestra alone, and this piece is for winds, brass, and percussion alone.

For the past three decades I have started the compositional process by building a shape, or architecture, before coming up with any musical material. In this case, the shape was influenced by a desire to write a piece in which the entire piece is conceived spatially. But I started simply wondering what dramatic premise would justify the encirclement of the audience by musicians, so that they were in the center of the arena. This started my imagination going, and quite suddenly a title appeared in my mind: *Circus Maximus*.

The Latin words, understandable in English, convey an energy and power by

themselves. But the Circus Maximus of ancient Rome was a real place – the largest arena in the world. 300,000 spectators were entertained by chariot races, hunts, and battles. The Roman need for grander and wilder amusement grew as its empire declined.

The parallels between the high decadence of Rome and our present time are obvious. Entertainment dominates our reality, and ever-more-extreme ‘reality’ shows dominate our entertainment. Many of us have become amused by the violence and humiliation that flood the 500-plus channels of our television screens as the mobs of Imperial Rome, who considered the devouring of human being by starving lions just another Sunday show.

The shape of my *Circus Maximus* was built both to embody and to comment on this massive and glamorous barbarity. It utilizes a large concert band, and lasts approximately 35 minutes. The work is in eight sections that are played without pause.

I. Introitus: Trumpets and percussion surrounding the audience play fanfares, signaling the opening of the work. The full band enters with a primitive call from the clarinets. A short central section features the lowest winds and brass followed by the joining of the offstage and onstage ensemble playing together this time, and reaching the first climax of the work.

II. Screen/Siren: A saxophone quartet and string bass call from the 2nd tier boxes in seductive inflections. Other instruments scattered around the hall (clarinet, piccolo, horns, trumpets) echo the calls, which are suddenly interrupted by

III. Channel Surfing: Sensory overload and infinite variety dilute concentration. Our need for constant change echoes the desires of the ancient mob, only now we can access it all by pressing a button. Music in this section is constantly interrupted by other music and comes from all sections of the hall.

IV. Night Music I: Tranquility in nature. Away from cities, forest sounds suspend time. Animals call to each other.

V. Night Music II: The hyper night-music of the cities pulse with hidden energy and sudden flashes. Sirens and distant battles onstage build the tension to

VI. Circus Maximus: The peak of the work incorporates all other movements and is a carnival of sonoric activity. A band marching down the aisles counterpoints the onstage performers and the surrounding fanfares. Exuberant voices merge into chaos and a frenzy of overstatement.

VII. Prayer: In answer to this, a long-lined serene melody is set against a set of plagal (IV-I) cadences that circle through all the keys. The rising line grows in intensity against the constantly changing harmonies as the chords overlap from stage to surround trumpets and back.

VIII. Coda: Veritas: Music from the Introitus enters almost inaudibly, but grows in

intensity until it dominates the “prayer” music, and the surrounding trumpet calls reach an even higher peak.

This is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 3.

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— *John Corigliano*