

## Symphony No. 1

JOHN CORIGLIANO

B. February 16, 1938, New York

*Premiered by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra March 15, 1990 by Stephen Hough, violin and John Sharp, cello, with Daniel Barenboim conducting.*

*Scored for four flutes (three doubled by piccolos), three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet (doubled by contrabass clarinet), bass clarinet (doubled by E-flat clarinet), three bassoons, contrabassoon, six French horns, five trumpets, four trombones, two tubas, timpani, percussion, harp, keyboard, strings and two mandolins (approx. 40 minutes).*

*“It is the job of the composer to reach out to the audience with every means at his disposal.” John Corigliano*

The emotional expression found in the film scores of Ken Russell’s film *Altered States*, for which Corigliano won an Academy Award nomination; and *The Red Violin*, for which he brought home the Oscar, is even more compelling in his first symphony.

Symphony No. 1 was commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for its Centennial season. Having stated earlier that he would never write a symphony, it was only the need for a form large enough to express world-scale tragedy that Corigliano consented to compose it. After the first symphony became a personal and artistic success, he composed a second, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize.

Corigliano structured this symphony around the memories of close friends he lost to AIDS. Deeply moved by “The Quilt,” a patchwork of memorials to persons who had died of AIDS, Corigliano wished to memorialize in music those in his life that had already died or who were dying. This symphony is both a work of handcrafted memorials to specific individuals and an expression of personal grief.

The first three movements are memorials to lifelong friends:

“Of Rage and Remembrance” (the opening of which is marked “Ferocious”), memorializes a concert-pianist friend. The music expresses fierce agony marked by bursts of violent rage. The heavy heartbeat expressed by the timpani, and the wailing brass, accelerates into a fury that evokes a sense of terror. In the midst of this flurry, melancholy moans from the violins subdue the rage long enough for a nostalgic memory to emerge (by an off-stage piano) in the form of an Albeniz “Tango” (a favorite piece of the friend). The recurrence of the orchestra reminds us that the anguish is relentless. When stirring memories do emerge, they are veiled in sorrow.

The “Tarantella” eulogizes an amateur pianist, to whom Corigliano dedicated the tarantella of a dance set he composed. This movement is deliberately less structured, as it represents a dance of dementia. A “Tarantella,” a frenetic dance, done in ever increasing speed, is meant to cure the victim from insanity resulting from the venomous bite of a “tarantula.” Corigliano imagines the hallucinations suffered by the victim who was

compelled to continue the dance until he falls from exhaustion. He recalls the bitter irony when this friend suffered from dementia before death.

The strings promise a lovely dance melody, but are interjected with bombastic explosions from first one set of instruments and then another. The bended notes throughout the movement leave one reeling and unbalanced. As the dance melody struggles to continue, manic episodes shatter the mood, until, as Corigliano describes, the dance ends with “a brutal scream.”

“Chaconne: Giulio’s Song,” reflects on a long-term friendship that began in college. The material for the cello solo is based on a tape recording made in 1962 by Corigliano and his friend, Giulio, improvising on cello and piano. As the solo progresses, a second cello appears, representing Giulio’s teacher, who also died of AIDS. This begins the layers of eulogies of numerous friends woven into this section, motives constructed over statements written about each one.

The epilogue reunites these friends as the “Tango” solo joins the now tranquil tarantella melody; the two cellos weave in and around them until a single cello fades away.

This performance is the Detroit Symphony Orchestra premiere of Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1.

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Corigliano, Symphony No. 1, Leonard Slatkin conducting the National Symphony Orchestra, RCA 68450.

*Program notes by Kelly Yoakam, a master’s candidate in Musicology at Michigan State University.*