

The Music of Communion

John Corigliano '59C has enjoyed more success in the last ten years than most composers see in a lifetime, but he refuses to let it go to his head.

"There's a kind of arrogance in music making that has led to this complete disenfranchisement of the human beings who go to a concert by the 'gods' who write music for the concert," he says. "The idea of writing music that is complex and incomprehensible—except to a few other composers—became a virtue, and that has hurt concert music."

At the same time, he says, composers who reach out to audiences are often thought of as either pandering or simplistic. "As a composer who tries to speak to an audience, I know that that is not necessarily the case. As a communicator you want to impart intellectual knowledge, you want to impart emotional knowledge."

Corigliano's music is characteristically American—diverse, ambitious, and unrestrained. "He speaks the American music language with great assurance and great eloquence," says Robert Ward, Professor Emeritus of Music at Duke University, who sat on the jury that awarded Corigliano the Pulitzer Prize for music last year. "He uses the sounds that have become familiar in American music in his writing to express the contemporary spirit of America as he sees it."

Corigliano began a decade of remarkable success in 1991 when he won the prestigious Grawemeyer Prize (an award worth \$150,000) for his Symphony No. 1, subtitled *Of Rage and Remembrance*, which he wrote to commemorate his many friends who have died of AIDS.

Since then, it's been one major award after another. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's recording of the work on Erato won Grammy awards for best new composition and best orchestral



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performance. When the Cleveland Quartet's recording of his *String Quartet* on Telarc won a Grammy for best new composition in 1996, he became the first composer to win a second Grammy in that category. He later expanded and reworked that piece into the symphony that won last year's Pulitzer.

Then in 2000, he won the Academy Award for best score for *The Red Violin*, making him the second classical composer in history to win an Oscar. (The first went to Aaron Copland in 1949 for *The Heiress*, and the third went to Columbia alumnus Tan Dun '93SOA in 2001 for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.)

While many know Corigliano for *The Red Violin*, his first symphony is probably more telling of Corigliano the

composer. An article on AIDS and art by *Washington Post* critic Tim Page '79C opens with a vivid description of the music: "It crashes to life with a single, sustained, frenzied note for massed strings that eventually devolves into spasmodic buzzing, then veers completely out of control into a riot of orchestral lunacy. With its snatches of sardonic melodies, clotted chords, heartbeat timpani and rattling death marches, the symphony is Corigliano's response to the AIDS crisis and a distinguished contribution to a large body of art reflecting a global catastrophe."

Page, who describes Corigliano's music as "inventive and personal," was another member of the Pulitzer jury that selected Corigliano as last year's winner. "His music has a real tradition