

## CityMusic celebrates John Corigliano's 80th: a conversation with Avner Dorman, Tessa Lark, and the composer himself

by Daniel Hathaway, Jarrett Hoffman, and Mike Telin



“I knew this was John Corigliano’s 80th birthday season and I really wanted to do something special to celebrate that,” [CityMusic Cleveland](#) Artistic Director Avner Dorman said during a telephone conversation. “We thought about showing the film *The Red Violin* and playing the score. Then we realized that performing the concerto would be more artistically satisfying.”

CityMusic opens its 14th season when Avner Dorman leads a program that celebrates the 80th birthday of composer John Corigliano. The program will include his “The Red Violin” Concerto, featuring Tessa Lark, as well as Robert Schumann’s Overture to *Genoveva* and *Symphony No. 3*, “Rhenish.” The first of five area performances will take place on Wednesday, October 18 at 7:30 pm at St. Jerome Church in Cleveland. Click [here](#) for additional time, days, and locations.

“I’m excited about this program, and the fact that we managed to put it all together is extraordinary,” Dorman said. “I’m sure this is going to be a huge hit with our audiences. The amazing thing about John’s music is that he doesn’t compromise innovation for the sake of listenability, but he also doesn’t compromise the emotional impact for the sake of innovation. That’s a quadruple challenge.”

The conductor feels that Schumann is a lot like Corigliano in that he is both forward-looking and traditional. He noted that the Overture to *Genoveva* is rarely performed these days. “I knew it existed and when I listened to it again, I was struck by the brilliance of the music. I think it is a forgotten gem. There are moments when you’re sure it’s Strauss, but its structure is very Baroque.”

In addition to being a conductor, Dorman is also a celebrated composer who studied with Corigliano at Juilliard, where he earned his DMA. “He was a fantastic teacher,” Dorman said. “He’s very thoughtful and encouraging.”



Tessa Lark is the recipient of a 2016 Avery Fisher Career Grant, and she was a Silver Medalist in the 2014 International Violin Competition of Indianapolis. But it was her win at the 2012 Naumburg International Violin Competition where she first met Corigliano. “He was a judge in the finals, and we met at the reception after the competition,” Lark said in a separate conversation. “I’d been a huge fan of his work for a long time. We’ve stayed in touch a little bit since the Naumburg, and he’s come to a couple of my recitals in New York.”

Lark said she looks forward to seeing Corigliano, who will be in attendance for at least one of the concerts. “This will actually be my first time performing any of his work in public, so it’s an honor to be able to play it for him.”

Learning the concerto was an exciting prospect for the violinist. “With my performance schedule it’s hard for me to learn a new piece just for giggles. It’s great when people ask me to perform music that I haven’t played before because it gives me more incentive to learn it. ‘The Red Violin’ Concerto is one that I’ve had my eye on for a really long time. I’m super glad that CityMusic programmed it so I could learn this incredible piece.” She added that in preparing for her performance season, she knew the Corigliano “would need more daily watering” than other pieces.

Dorman called the concerto an amazing piece that is innovative yet steeped in the tradition of the great Romantic concertos, and one that stretches the orchestra and soloist

in a variety of ways. “It has all the grandeur of a great violin concerto, but when you look at the score, rarely is there a moment that is not unusual. It’s the best of both worlds.”

The conductor said it’s a challenging piece to put together. “There’s not one moment when I think, ‘Ok, I’m going to conduct in 4/4 and they’ll just play.’ In the last movement, there are places that are unsynchronized between the soloist and the orchestra. It’s almost like you’re hearing two turntables that are being spun faster and faster but at a different rate of speed.”

Referring back to his studies at Juilliard, Dorman said that Corigliano taught him how to graph out a piece before he began to write. “It’s like creating a blueprint for a symphony, a concerto, or an opera. He would say that a lot of people just start composing and when they hit a stumbling block, they don’t know where to look for answers. He teaches you to question things, which is especially helpful when you’re a student, where the tendency is to focus on the moment instead of stepping back and looking at the big picture.”

Dorman said that he also learned a lot about orchestration and how to notate passages that are rhythmically unusual. “That is such a part of his artistry and another thing that has stayed with me in a meaningful way. Listening to this concerto reminds me of all the things that I want to do.”



Just before going to press, Daniel Hathaway had a brief telephone conversation with John Corigliano.

*Daniel Hathaway: First of all, happy 80th birthday — which will happen later this winter. How do you feel about that?*

John Corigliano: Old (laughs). They always say when you're 60 you look and act 40, and when you're 70 you look and act 50. But when you're 80, you're 80.

*DH: Your former student, Avner Dorman, who is conducting the CityMusic performances, has said the piece “has all the grandeur of a great violin concerto, but when you look at the score, rarely is there a moment that is not unusual. It's the best of both worlds.” What do you think of that description?*

JC: I like it. It is a concerto in the grand tradition, but I constructed it very carefully and its thematic and developmental actions are, I think, pretty tight. And it's a big concerto, over 35 minutes or so. I had to have a scherzo after the first movement to break the Romantic idea and show some wildness and different sounds.

*DH: You've encountered the soloist, Tessa Lark, before at the 2012 Naumburg Competition. You described her as a “dynamite violinist.”*

JC: I voted for her. Everybody voted for her — it was unanimous. I've never heard her play my concerto — I'm going to be flying in Friday to hear it without attending a rehearsal. I'm looking forward to it enormously.

*DH: You wrote the piece for Joshua Bell. How has it fared in the hands of other violinists?*

JC: Very well. There are three recordings of it now, and a fourth is going to be made. A lot of people have played it, and it's been done as a ballet by the New York City Ballet. It makes the rounds pretty well, and I'm pleased. The Juilliard School is using it as its violin competition piece this year. It's having its day in court.

*DH: You said you very much had your father in mind — the long-time concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic — when you were conceiving the piece. What might he have thought of it?*

JC: I think he would have liked most of it. He wouldn't have liked some of the special effects, like the crunch I use in the last movement, where I make a very percussive sound on the violin by holding the bow really hard against the string and moving it one inch fast and stopping. I don't know if he would have even played the concerto because of that. He was much more traditional. Once when he was playing my violin sonata, I wrote after this fiery cadenza, “no emotion.” He said, “I won't do that. It means ‘unmusical.’”

“No,” I said, “it means that you’re drained of all emotion, you’re weak.” He wouldn’t let me have that. It’s not the way he did things. I have a feeling he would have had a problem with a couple of places in this piece, but basically, he would have liked it.

*DH: In 2008 you told Steve Smith of the New York Times, “At the moment I don’t want to write for the orchestra, all the classic things. I’ve done that, and I want to go somewhere else.” Where did you go?*

JC: I went to writing an opera. The Met contracted it and then Peter Gelb said there was a part of the libretto he wanted changed. But we couldn’t change that without throwing the whole libretto out. So I took back the opera and the commission and now it’s up for grabs for opera companies to do it. I’ve pretty much finished composing it, and here it is: my opera.

*DH: What is it about?*

JC: It’s very bizarre, and if I say it, it’s going to sound very strange. It’s a combination of the ancient Greek play *The Bacchae* and *Dracula*.

*DH: That doesn’t sound so far-fetched.*

JC: It really isn’t when you come down to it. They’re very parallel plots with different endings. In the 19th-century ending, Dracula gets a stake in his heart, and in the early Greek drama, Dracula, who is not Dracula but Dionysius, triumphs and destroys the people he finds lacking, so it’s a very Greek ending.

*DH: Any bites?*

JC: I can’t talk about it, but there’s some interest, yes.

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