Concert Review: Boston Modern Orchestra Project plays John Corigliano

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By Jonathan Blumhofer

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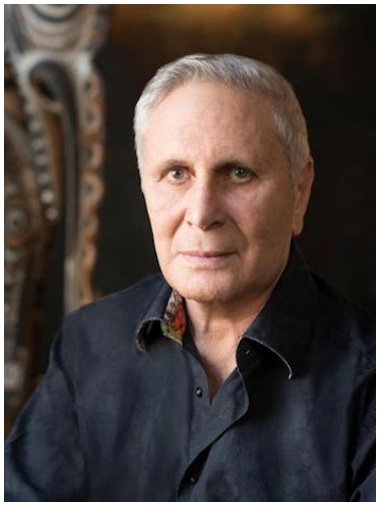

Composer John Corigliano. Photo: BMOP.

Over the last several seasons, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) has featured concerts devoted to music by members of that greatest generation of late-20th-century American composers. Three years ago, they presented David Del Tredici's *Child Alice*; two years past, it was a Philip Glass evening; last winter brought an engaging Joan Tower survey. On Saturday night at Jordan Hall, the ensemble and conductor Gil Rose turned their focus to the music of John Corigliano.

Corigliano has, of course, been a significant figure in the landscape of American music for over half a century. He's written in virtually every genre (from film and opera to symphonic works, chamber music, and songs) and his music's proven to be

conspicuously successful, firmly rooted as it is in the conventions of the past while simultaneously mining the devices and techniques of the present day.

Saturday's house got to hear those qualities — as well as Corigliano's penchant for the theatrical — in the pair of his pieces BMOP presented, beginning with 1993's guitar concerto, *Troubadours*.

Troubadours' three connected movements each evoke the spirit of the guitar's Iberian origins but without resorting to flamenco cliché. The first, with its diaphanous, mysterious orchestral chords and delicate guitar solos leads, fairly quickly, into the raucous central movement. Here, jaunty, colorful figures conjure an imagined Renaissance scene; in the middle, off-stage instruments evoke shawms and further revelry. After that energy is spent, an introspective cadenza leads to the serene finale: a chaconne that culminates in a quotation from a troubadour song by Beatritz de Dia.

Eliot Fisk was the able soloist on Saturday night. Playing with warm tone and fiery command, he executed his discreet-but-demanding part with assurance. Everything about Fisk's reading, from the first movement's brilliant solo runs, to the second's rhythmic figurations and his account of the strikingly reflective cadenza and finale, was charged with purpose and emotional heat.

So, too, BMOP's accompaniment, which was delicate in the first movement, wonderfully spirited in the second, and sadly touching in the finale.

After intermission came Corigliano's Boston Symphony-commissioned Symphony no. 2. It's a piece that hasn't been heard much in these parts since its premiere at Symphony Hall in 2000. Scored for string orchestra (and based on the composer's 1995 String Quartet), the Symphony's five-movement form and recurring thematic devices echo Bartók and Shostakovich, though its larger language — filled with aleatoric gestures, extended techniques, pungent harmonies, and angular rhythms — belongs distinctly to Corigliano.

Expressively, it's bleak music that takes as its theme saying farewell. The Symphony's outer movements are marked by queasy, microtonal scales and fragments of a chorale. The even-numbered ones – a furious Scherzo and a severe, rhythmic Fugue – lack nothing for intensity. At the work's heart lies a searching, luminous Nocturne that recalls pre-dawn calls to prayer Corigliano heard during a visit to Morocco.

On Saturday, that North African-inspired movement stood out for the shimmering, exotic atmosphere and strong sense of direction Rose drew from the BMOP strings. In general, BMOP's was reading of the piece excelled in the score's lusher episodes: the dense textures of the outer movements were rich and thick, while the second's diatonic central part was beautifully weighted.

The score's faster and more transparent passages lacked a degree of precision. Yes, the second movement was plenty energized, but its sixteenth-note runs sometimes sounded more skittish than secure. Likewise, the mighty fugue, for all its stern climaxes, missed a through-current of intensity.

Eliot Fisk performing, with the BMOP, John Corigliano's guitar concerto, "Troubadours." Photo: Clive Grainger.

Certainly, it's an open question, too, whether or not a bit more emotional variety would have resulted in a more affecting (and effective) piece. As it is, Corigliano's take on goodbyes is, if not exactly bitter, then full of sorrow: few happy memories to be had here.

That said, the Symphony's construction is solid and its strongest moments — the keening prayer-calls in the Nocturne and the unsettled siren-like falling thirds in the finale — are among the most ear-catching in Corigliano's catalogue. On those merits, no wonder the piece took home the 2001 Pulitzer Prize.

Saturday night's concert began with Diana Voyer's *The Infinite Forest*, the winner of New England Conservatory's Composition Competition this year.

Described in the program as a pastorale "for the digital age," *The Infinite Forest*, like plenty of its forebears, rambled amiably enough. Hazy, amorphous textures unfolded at different rates of speed, giving the music a stout but shifting foundation. Melodic lines then seamlessly emerged from and were swallowed up in these fluctuating thickets.

Even if it didn't quite add up to the sum of its parts — *Forest's* harmonic language needed more bite and its structure was a bit diffuse — Voyer's writing for the orchestra was fluent, marked by bright percussion sonorities and mellifluous horn and woodwind scoring. Further, bent notes and *glissandos*added fetching color to the score.