

**2017-2018 Season**  
**January 20 and 21, 2018**  
**Program Notes**

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda



***The Red Violin*, Film with Live Orchestra (1998)**  
**Music by John Corigliano (b. 1938)**  
**Directed by François Girard (b. 1963)**  
**Original Screenplay by François Girard and Don McKellar (b. 1963)**

Canadian director François Girard gave evidence of his insight into musical subjects with the remarkable *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* in 1993, and subsequently filmed a live concert by Peter Gabriel (1994) and a segment of Yo-Yo Ma's video based on Bach's six Cello Suites (1997). Girard's *The Red Violin* (1998) tells the story of an extraordinary instrument made by a violinmaker in 17th-century Cremona. The violin's haunting tone and expressive power, according to the tale, arise from its unique varnish, which the maker formulated with the blood of his beloved wife, Anna, who died in childbirth, to preserve her spirit and allow it to sing forever in the voice of the instrument. The film is structured as a number of episodes set across three centuries in Vienna, Oxford, Shanghai and Montreal that trace the subsequent history of the violin. Girard commissioned the film's all-important score from John Corigliano.

John Corigliano, one of today's most prominent and frequently performed American composers, was born in New York City on February 16, 1938, and raised in a family rich in musical talent — his father, John, Sr., was for many years concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic and his mother was an accomplished pianist and teacher. From 1955 to 1960, Corigliano studied at Columbia University with Otto Luening and at the Manhattan School of Music with Vittorio Giannini. After graduating with honors from Columbia, Corigliano worked for three years as a programmer and writer for New York radio station WQXR; from 1961 to 1963, he was music director of station WBAI, also in New York. He served as Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1987 to 1990, and is currently Distinguished Professor of Music at Lehman College of the City University of New York, which has established a composition scholarship in his name; he has also been on the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music since 1991. Corigliano has gained international acclaim through many performances and recordings, and been recognized with such distinguished honors as the Pulitzer Prize, Grawemeyer Award, five Grammy Awards, Horblit Prize and an Academy Award (for *The Red Violin*). In 1992, *Musical America* named John Corigliano as that publication's first "Composer of the Year."

“I was delighted to accept when asked to compose the score for Girard’s fascinating film *The Red Violin*,” Corigliano said. “How could I turn down so interesting and fatalistic a journey through some three centuries, beginning as it did in Cremona, home of history’s greatest violin builders? ... I composed a singable theme, hummed by the violin master’s wife, Anna, which mutates into a solo violin melody when, after Anna’s death, her spirit enters the violin of the title. As its underpinning, I wrote an inexorable seven-chord *chaconne* [an ancient variations form in which a short, repeated chord pattern is decorated with changing figurations and elaborations], evoking the Tarot reading [that foretells the violin’s remarkable history] and the fate it signals.

“*The Red Violin*, my third film score [Corigliano’s music for Ken Russell’s 1980 *Altered States* was nominated for an Academy Award; his score for Hugh Hudson’s 1985 *Revolution* received the Anthony Asquith Award for Outstanding Achievement in Film Music from the British Film Institute] also gave me an opportunity to visit my own past, since my father, John Corigliano (I was a ‘Jr.’), was a great solo violinist and the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic for more than a quarter of a century. My childhood years were punctuated by snatches of the great concertos being practiced by my father, as well as by the scales and technical exercises he used to keep in shape.”

Joshua Bell, then still at the beginning of his meteoric career as one of the world’s foremost violin virtuosos, was the soloist on the soundtrack and Corigliano conceived the music around the brilliance and expressiveness of his performance style. (Bell later admitted on an NPR interview that he was a hand-double for several close-up scenes when the actors were shown performing; Bell said Girard repeatedly accused him of over-acting. The role of Kaspar Weiss, incidentally, the ten-year-old Austrian orphan virtuoso, was played by the ten-year-old Austrian violin prodigy Christoph Koncz, who made his North American debut two years later with the Montreal Symphony and was appointed a Principal Second Violinist of the Vienna Philharmonic when he was twenty.) So rich was the score Corigliano provided for film — it won him an Academy Award — that he developed four independent concert pieces from its materials: *The Red Violin: Chaconne for Violin and Orchestra* (1997, which was premiered even before the film was first seen, at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 10, 1998); *Suite from the Film The Red Violin for Solo Violin, Timpani, Percussion, Harp and Strings* (1999); *The Red Violin Caprices for Solo Violin* (1999); and *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, “The Red Violin”* (2003).

*The Red Violin* is remarkable for the way Corigliano’s music is integrated into the film’s daring dramatic arc. The story takes place across three centuries: 1681 (Cremona), 1793 (an Austrian orphanage and Vienna), the late 1890s (a Gypsy camp and Oxford), the late 1960s (Shanghai, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution) and 1997 (Montreal, site of the instrument’s auction). The film’s structure is almost musical, a sort of cinematic rondo form supported by the returns of progressive

scenes set during the violin's creation (Cremona, 1681) and its modern auction (Montreal, 1997). The different "episodes" that these "refrains" frame depict periods in the instrument's history set in successive centuries in Austria, England and China; each of these episodes is introduced by the flashback revelation of a Tarot card to the Cremonese violin-maker's expectant and ill-fated wife. Corigliano wove the music for all of these divergent scenes around the central ideas of his score, adapting them to the different characters, styles and situations portrayed on-screen to create a sort of free variations-fantasia that plays an essential part in helping *The Red Violin* achieve both its wide range of emotions and its structural continuity.

*The Red Violin*, especially in this rare opportunity to experience the film with its music performed live, is an unforgettable experience. It touches on the deep human desires for beauty, for undying love, for something that threads together a shared experience that transcends a single lifetime. "There is a kind of ideal beauty that reduces us all to yearning for perfection," wrote the late Pulitzer Prize-winning film critic Roger Ebert. "*The Red Violin* is about that yearning."