



WINGING IT  
PIANO MUSIC OF JOHN CORIGLIANO

URSULA OPPENS  
JEROME LOWENTHAL

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*Fantasia on an Ostinato* ©1987

*Kaleidoscope* ©1963

*Etude Fantasy* ©1981

*Chiaroscuro* ©1997

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## WINGING IT: PIANO MUSIC OF JOHN CORIGLIANO

Ursula Oppens

with Jerome Lowenthal in two-piano works

*Winging It: Improvisations for piano*\* (13:25)

① I. 12/28/07 (3:04)

② II. 1/3/08 (6:54)

③ III. 6/7/08 (3:15)

*Chiaroscuro for two pianos  
tuned a quarter-tone apart* (11:01)

④ I. Light (1:46)

⑤ II. Shadows (4:40)

⑥ III. Strobe (4:35)

⑦ *Fantasia on an Ostinato* (11:26)

⑧ *Kaleidoscope for two pianos* (5:41)

*Etude Fantasy* (17:33)

⑨ *Etude No. 1: For the Left Hand Alone* (4:12)

⑩ *Etude No. 2: Legato* (1:56)

⑪ *Etude No. 3: Fifths to Thirds* (2:48)

⑫ *Etude No. 4: Ornaments* (4:19)

⑬ *Etude No. 5: Melody* (4:18)

\*World Premiere Recording

Total Time: (59:30)

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

by John Corigliano

### WINGING IT (2008)

Premiered May 5, 2009, by Ursula Oppens, at Symphony Space, New York, NY.

When I was a kid, I was always improvising at the piano. My mother taught piano in the living room of our Brooklyn apartment, and a parade of young people filled the air with Czerny, Mozart, and Bach during my after-school hours. After they left, I went to the “big” piano (there were two in the room) and made up things.

Sometimes they resembled Mozart, Bach, and Brahms; sometimes they resembled nothing familiar at all. I had two piano lessons with my mother. She was a great teacher, but not for me. We fought and I quit. I never studied the piano again, but kept playing it — just for fun. While I don’t know the fingerings of all the scales, nor the discipline of repeating something exactly as written (my reading skills were as poor as my digital ones), I did love getting lost

in my imagination — and even when I played notes I didn’t want, I made them into “right notes” by using them again in the composition. (Stravinsky had been known to say that some of his unique sonorities came from his bad piano playing.) Through high school, I improvised, encouraged by my teacher, Mrs. Bella Tillis. While my parents were both against my going into music, Mrs. Tillis always encouraged me — and did for my entire life. But I had to get serious and learn notation and other musical skills. So I went off to Columbia University, majored in music, and learned to label the chords I had been playing by ear.

Writing music down is a very laborious process. While today’s computers make it easier, I still use a 0.9mm pencil to draw every note I imagine. Improvisation is sometimes useful to find starting material, or to advance a short distance, but since the act of notating is so cumbersome, it is really impossible to capture an improvisation of any length.

It is possible electronically to record

an improvisation, but physically transcribing it is quite difficult, and the composer always ends up changing things while translating sound into notes. I did only one improvisation on tape, the 2½ minute “Hinchi Mushroom Dance” for the film *Altered States*. I was improvising to the picture, and later used the shape of the improvisation (changing lots of notes) to form the orchestral dance in the film.

This project is quite different from transcribing an audiotape. Here, I was determined to improvise piano pieces on a keyboard, and translate them as accurately as possible to the page so Ursula Oppens could perform them in concert. To do this, I used a computer technology known as MIDI sequencing, which captures both the sounds and a crude but accurate notation of what is played.

I also needed an expert musician and technician to “translate” the notation. This is much more complex than it sounds. Since I improvised freely, there was no steady beat for the mechanism to insert measures. Mark Baechle was

tasked with listening to what I played, and then trying to figure out how to put it into measures that made sense. There are many ways of notating the same music, so this required extraordinary musical experience.

Mark made his “translation” of what he heard and saw, and then I often re-barred it, or re-wrote it to clarify the moving voices or the right-left hand relationships. This happened several times until the written piece matched the recorded played one. Even then, certain changes had to be made, mostly due to my poor piano playing. Repeated sonorities or chords were often not repeated accurately in my performance, even though I knew that was what I wanted. So I had to correct the written proofs to compensate for my splattered notes. While I tried to reproduce accurately everything I played, sometimes it was not practical. The last improvisation, a 3½ minute virtuoso piece, had ascending passages in running 16th notes in several sections. While I wanted to repeat those sections, I couldn’t remember them exactly, and

therefore played other 16th notes in an ascending pattern. I could have notated these different passages as improvised, but that would be asking the pianist to play a consistently fast piece that never repeated any notes. So, occasionally, I copied the same notes into a later passage that was meant to do the same thing. The first improvisation was too short, and didn't have a satisfying ending, so I took the liberty of repeating the opening section at the end (i.e., as a *da capo*) and added a single "composed" measure to conclude the piece. Other than that, these three improvisations are just that. They are titled by the date I originally played them.

### **CHIAROSCURO (1997)**

*For two pianos, tuned one quarter-tone apart. Commissioned by Loretta Dranoff for the biennial Murray Dranoff International Two Piano Competition.*

*First performed December 21, 1997, at the Murray Dranoff International Two-Piano Competition, by Competition winners Anne Louise and Edward*

*Turgeon, Miami, FL.*

When Loretta Dranoff, founder of the biennial Murray Dranoff International Two Piano Competition in Miami, asked me to compose a test piece for her event, I was initially at a loss. I had composed one previous work for two pianos, *Kaleidoscope*, in 1959, and couldn't think of anything else I wanted to say in that medium. I couldn't see what made a second piano so important. It was the same sound; it was simply a matter of adding another player. I couldn't reconcile why I should write for two pianos when I could write as well for one. Eventually, the deadline forced me to come up with a solution. What occurred to me, finally, was the idea to change totally the concept of two pianos by "preparing" one of them. This was not to be a prepared piano in the John Cage sense, with objects inserted between the strings. Instead, one of the pianos would be tuned a quarter-tone lower than the other. So each piano would sound perfectly tuned by itself, but, for example, the note G on one piano would sound at a pitch between

G and F sharp on the other, creating eerie effects and dissonances when the instruments were played together.

Quarter-tones are readily (and sometimes unintentionally) produced by violinists and singers, but they rarely appear in piano music, because of the instruments fixed pitches. Charles Ives experimented with them, and they appear in Bartok's classic string quartets. I have used them only twice before, in my (first) film score for *Altered States*, and in the opening star music of *Pied Piper Fantasy*, my concerto for flute and orchestra from 1982. In those contexts, I liked the eerie, hallucinatory quality the mistuning evoked. For *Chiaroscuro*, however, I wanted to use quarter-tone music expressively, as well as to make it a startling device. I was looking for the expressive power between two notes, as a blues singer does.

A brief annunciatory opening sets up a dreamy, ardent slow movement in which the sighing semitones that classical music has always used to express mourning are subdivided into quarter-tones for an effect I thought

both subtler and more intense. The third movement interrupts a stabbing toccata in the competing C minor keys of the two pianos by bringing, for a moment, both pianists together to play on one piano. Here the music quotes a chorale by Bach, symbolic of our stable and traditional harmony (however, while both pianists are playing at last in the same key, they are still subtly out of rhythmic phase, as one player's quarter note equals the other's dotted eighth). But before long, the surrealism of quarter-tone harmonies returns, as each pianist seems to fight to define his or her tuning as tonic. All is resolved, though, in the percussive cluster of the final gesture.

### **FANTASIA ON AN OSTINATO (1985)**

*Commissioned by the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, 1985. First performed May 24, 1985, at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, by Barry Douglas; Texas Christian University, Fort Worth.*

In 1985, the seventh Van Cliburn International Piano Competition

commissioned me to write their competition piece to be played by 12 semi-finalists. In mulling over the project, I immediately rejected the idea of a technical showpiece as redundant. What could I write that would test something the standard repertoire would not? I decided I could investigate the performers' imagination and musicality. A young performer's life is dominated by guidance: from living teachers to the encyclopedic recorded catalogue of the world's important pianists playing the standard repertoire, they are trained from childhood to re-create, rather than create. But this piece would be brand-new: no example waited to guide (or limit) them. And the piece would be deliberately constructed to make the players' teachers of little to no help. They would be on their own.

So I constructed the beginning and end of *Fantasia on an Ostinato* precisely, but I made the large central section a series of interlocking repeated patterns: the performer decided the number and, to a certain extent, the character of these repetitions. In other words, the shape

was his/hers to build. Interestingly, the duration of this piece varied from 7 minutes to over 20 in the Cliburn performances!

These repeated patterns comprise my only experiment in "minimalist" technique. While mulling this piece, I remembered minimalism's forebears — Pachelbel's Canon, Ravel's brilliantly scored *Bolero*, and the second movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, in which a relentless ostinato, or accompaniment figure, continues unvaried (except for a long crescendo and added secondary voices) for nearly five minutes: unusual in Beethoven, who constantly varied his materials.

The first half of my *Fantasia on an Ostinato* develops the obsessive rhythm of the Beethoven and the simple harmonies implicit in the first half of his melody. Its second part launches those interlocking repetitions and reworks the strange major-minor descending chords of the latter part of the Beethoven into a chain of harmonies over which the performer-repeated patterns grow continually more ornate. This climaxes

in a return of the original rhythm and, finally, the reappearance of the theme itself.

### **KALEIDOSCOPE FOR TWO PIANOS (1959)**

*First performed June 28, 1961, at the Festival of Two Worlds, by Morey Ritt and Stanley Hollingsworth; Spoleto, Italy.*

I wrote *Kaleidoscope for Two Pianos* during my student years as an undergraduate at Columbia University (1955–59). The work began as a project in Otto Luening's composition class and is dedicated to Luening and composer Marc Bucci. As the title implies, it is a colorful mosaic of changing symmetrical patterns, some infused with a ragtime feel, others highly lyrical in content. The work is in ternary form with an extended lyrical center that treats a folk-like melody to a variety of contrapuntal elaborations. In general, *Kaleidoscope* is high-spirited and full of the energy of youth.

### **ETUDE FANTASY (1976)**

*First performed October 9, 1976, by James Tocco, at the Kennedy Center, Washington, DC.*

My *Etude Fantasy* is actually a set of five studies combined into the episodic form and character of a fantasy. The material in the studies is related most obviously by the interval of a second (and its inversion and expansion to sevenths and ninths) which is used both melodically and in building the work's harmonic structure.

The first etude is for the left hand alone — a bold, often ferocious statement that introduces both an opening six-note row (the first notes of the work) and a melodic germ (marked "icy" in the score) that follows the initial outburst. This etude reaches a climax in which both the row and the thematic germ are heard together, and ends as the right hand enters playing a slow chromatic descent that introduces the next etude — a study of legato playing.

In the short second etude, both hands float slowly downward as the constant

crossing of contrapuntal lines provides melodic interest. Sustaining the sound and maintaining the clarity of the crossing voices are both important here. The third etude is a study on a two-note figure: a fleet development on the simple pattern of a fifth (fingers one and five) contracting to a third (fingers two and four). In this section, there is much hand crossing, during which a melody emerges in the top voices. A buildup leads to a highly chromatic middle section (marked "slithery") with sudden virtuosic outbursts, after which the melody returns to end the etude as it began. The fourth etude is a study of ornaments. Trills, grace notes, tremolos, glissandos, and roulades ornament the opening material (Etude I) and then develop the first four notes of the third etude into a frenetically charged scherzando where the four fingers of the left hand softly play a low cluster of notes (like a distant drum) as the thumb alternates with the right hand in rapid barbaric thrusts. This leads to a restatement of the opening six-note row of the fantasy, now highly ornamented.

After a sonorous climax comes the final etude, a study of melody. In it, the player is required to isolate the melodic line, projecting it through the filigree that surrounds it. Here the atmosphere is desolate and non-climactic, and the material is based entirely on the melodic implications of the left hand etude, with slight references to the second (legato) study. The work ends quietly with the opening motto heard in retrograde accompanying a mournful two-note ostinato.



John Corigliano  
Photo by J. Henry Fair

## JOHN CORIGLIANO

American composer John Corigliano continues to add to one of the richest, most unusual, and most widely celebrated bodies of music any composer has created over the last forty years. Corigliano's numerous scores — over one hundred chamber, vocal, choral, and orchestral works, including three symphonies and eight concertos — have been performed and recorded by many of the world's most prominent orchestras, soloists, and chamber musicians.

Recent scores include *Winging It* (2008) for solo piano, written for Ursula Oppens; *Conjurer* (2008) for percussion and string orchestra, commissioned for and introduced by Dame Evelyn Glennie; Concerto for Violin and Orchestra: *The Red Violin* (2005), developed from themes in the score to François Girard's eponymous film, which won Corigliano the Academy Award for Best Original Score in 1999; *Mr. Tambourine Man: Seven Poems of Bob Dylan* (2000) for orchestra and amplified soprano, which won the Grammy Award for Best Contemporary Composition in 2008;

Symphony No. 3: *Circus Maximus* (2004), scored simultaneously for wind orchestra and a multitude of wind ensembles; and Symphony No. 2 (2001), which won that year's Pulitzer Prize for Music. Other important scores include his String Quartet (1995: Grammy Award, Best Contemporary Composition); Symphony No. 1 (1991: Grawemeyer and Grammy Awards); the opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* (Metropolitan Opera commission, 1991; International Classical Music Award, 1992); and his Clarinet Concerto (1977).

One of the few living composers to have a string quartet named for him, Corigliano serves on the composition faculty at the Juilliard School of Music and holds the position of Distinguished Professor of Music at Lehman College, City University of New York, which has established a scholarship in his name. For the past fourteen years, he and his partner, the composer-librettist Mark Adamo, have divided their time between Manhattan and Kent Cliffs, New York. More information is available at [www.johncorigliano.com](http://www.johncorigliano.com).

## URSULA OPPENS

Ursula Oppens is one of the very first artists to program traditional and contemporary works in equal measure. An enduring commitment to integrating new music into regular concert life has led Ms. Oppens to commission and premiere countless compositions. In addition to her long and productive association with Elliott Carter, she has premiered works by such leading composers as Luciano Berio, William Bolcom, John Corigliano, John Harbison, Julius Hemphill, Tania Leon, Harold Meltzer, György Ligeti, Witold Lutoslawski, Conlon Nancarrow, Tobias Picker, Frederic Rzewski, Joan Tower, Amy Williams, Christian Wolff, Amnon Wolman, and Charles Wuorinen.

Ms. Oppens has performed with virtually all of the world's major orchestras. She has been heard with the American Composers Orchestra and the major orchestras of Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York, and San Francisco. Abroad, she has appeared with such orchestras as the Berlin Symphony, Orchestre de la

Suisse Romande, Deutsche Symphonie, and the BBC Scottish and London Philharmonic Orchestras. She has also performed as the piano soloist for the Mark Morris Company's *Mozart Dances*. An avid chamber musician, Ms. Oppens has performed with the Arditti, Juilliard, Pacifica, and Rosetti quartets, among others. She is a prolific recording artist, many of whose discs, including her recording of the landmark Frederic Rzewski work, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, are phonographic classics.

Ms. Oppens launched Elliott Carter's year-long 100th birthday celebration by performing a solo recital of his works in January 2007, at Symphony Space in New York City. In fall 2008, Ms. Oppens took up her post as Distinguished Professor of Music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City. From 1994 through the the 2007–08 academic year she served as John Evans Distinguished Professor of Music at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

## JEROME LOWENTHAL

Born in 1932, Jerome Lowenthal continues to fascinate audiences, who find in his playing a combination of youthful intensity and eloquence born of life-experience. He is a virtuoso of the fingers and emotions.

Mr. Lowenthal studied in his native Philadelphia with Olga Samaroff-Stokowski, in New York with William Kapell and Edward Steuermann, and in Paris with Alfred Cortot, meanwhile traveling annually to Los Angeles for coachings with Artur Schnabel. After winning prizes in three international competitions (Bolzano, Darmstadt, and Brussels), he moved to Jerusalem where he played, taught, and lectured for three years.

Returning to America, he made his debut with the New York Philharmonic playing Bartók's Second Piano Concerto in 1963. Since then, he has performed virtually everywhere, from the Aleutians to Zagreb. He has appeared as soloist with celebrated conductors including Barenboim, Ozawa, Tilson

Thomas, Temirkanov, and Slatkin, and with such giants of the past as Bernstein, Ormandy, Monteux, and Stokowski. Mr. Lowenthal has played sonatas with Itzhak Perlman; piano duos with Ronit Amir (his late wife), Carmel Lowenthal (his daughter), and Ursula Oppens; and quintets with the Lark, Avalon, and Brentano Quartets. He recently recorded *Two-Piano Music of Messiaen and Debussy* with Oppens and the complete *Années de Pèlerinage* of Liszt in a 3 CD set released in November 2010. Other recordings include concertos by Tchaikovsky and Liszt, solo works by Sinding and Bartók, and chamber music by Arensky and Taneyev.

Teaching is an important part of Mr. Lowenthal's musical life, including twenty years at the Juilliard School and forty-two summers at the Music Academy of the West. Mr. Lowenthal has worked with an extraordinary number of gifted pianists, whom he encourages to understand the music they play in a wide aesthetic and cultural perspective — and to project it with the freedom which that perspective allows.

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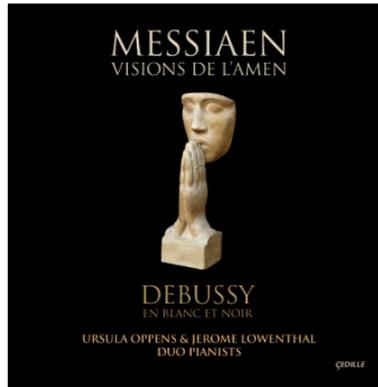


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