

John Corigliano's Bassoon Quartet

By James A. Grymes
Tallahassee, Florida

Those interested in bassoon quartets composed by Americans were no doubt pleased to read William Davis's article "Bassoon Quartets by Two Renowned American Composers" in the 1999 Journal issue of *The Double Reed*. This article discussed the bassoon quartets by Pulitzer Prize-winning American composers William Schuman and John Harbison (also mentioning Norman Dello Joio)¹. Bassoon quartet enthusiasts may also be interested to learn that a new bassoon quartet has been published by renowned American composer John Corigliano.

Corigliano composed his bassoon quartet *How Like Pellucid Statues, Daddy. Or Like A . . . An Engine* in 1994, and it was published by G. Schirmer in October 1995. It is a brief piece of approximately five minutes in length, and much

of its musical material is derived from row techniques. The quartet also includes several aleatoric elements that make performance somewhat difficult. For example, the majority of the second half of the quartet involves a slow accelerando that bears the instructions "Do not coordinate with others . . . As tempo becomes faster, *very gradually* line up with other players" [emphasis in the original].

Corigliano's bassoon quartet is the product of a commission that he, along with several other prominent composers, accepted to commemorate the 50th anniversary of WNYC-FM, which is one of New York City's classical music radio stations. Each composer was asked to set to music the poem "No Longer Very Clear" by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet John Ashbery (b. 1927):

It is true that I can no longer remember very well
the time when we first began to know each other.
However, I do remember very well
the first time we met. You walked in sunlight,
holding a daisy. You said, "Children make unreliable witnesses."

Now, so long after that time,
I keep the spirit of it throbbing still.
The ideas are still the same, and they expand
to fill vast, antique cubes.

My daughter was reading one just the other day.
She said, "How like pellucid statues, Daddy. Or like a . . . an engine."

In this house of blues the cold creeps stealthily upon us.
I do not dare to do what I fantasize doing.
With time the blue congeals into roomlike purple
that takes the shape of alcoves, landings . . .
Everything is like something else,
I should have waited before I learned this.²

In the program note to the score of *How Like Pellucid Statues, Daddy. Or Like A . . . An Engine*, Corigliano wrote,

In reading John Ashbery's poem, "No Longer Very Clear," I was struck by the contrasting imagery in the adjacent phrases "How like pellucid statues, Daddy, Or like a . . . an engine." The frozen translucent statues seemed to me to be a marvelous foil for the pulsating hot energy of an engine—both images, as seen through the

eyes of a child, readily evoked musical ideas.

The unique sound of double reeds seemed at once to be the right choice, and fulfilled a desire I have always had to write for multiple bassoons. The work utilizes row techniques, and is in two parts—the first a picture of the frozen pellucid statues, and the second, an aural portrait of the energy and acceleration inherent in the words "an engine."

Judging from Corigliano's outstanding

reputation as a composer and his self-proclaimed, long-term desire to write for multiple bassoons, it would seem that *How Like Pellucid Statues, Daddy. Or Like A . . . An Engine* is a significant addition to the bassoon quartet repertoire. This is, disappointingly, not so in the eyes of its composer. When Corigliano came to Tallahassee to participate in the Florida State University's Ninth Biennial Festival of New Music in February 1999, I took the opportunity to organize a bassoon quartet with **Jeffrey Keesecker** and two other graduate students to perform Corigliano's relatively new bassoon quartet. As part of his residency at the university, Corigliano coached the musicians who were going to perform his music during the festival.

During his coaching session with our bassoon quartet, Corigliano admitted that he does not care for the work. He told us that when he received "No Longer Very Clear" he was so displeased with the poem that he decided not to set the text, but instead composed the piece for bassoon quartet. He made it apparent to us that he had not taken the project very seriously and, contrary to the program note, had opted for a bassoon quartet only out of an effort to mock the poem, choosing as the quartet's title the lines that he found to be particularly ridiculous among an already incomprehensible poem.

Despite the fact that the composer himself holds a rather low opinion of the piece, it does contain some of the elements of greatness that a composer such as John Corigliano could not

help but stamp on one of his own creations. There are some moments, particularly in the "pellucid statues" section, that are quite striking to the analyst, performer, and listener. Perhaps *How Like Pellucid Statues, Daddy. Or Like A . . . An Engine* is a significant addition to the bassoon quartet repertoire, after all. ❖

Footnotes

¹ William Davis, "Bassoon Quartets by Two Renowned American Composers," *The Double Reed* 22:2 (1999), 115. This article first appeared in the *NACWPI Journal* 44:1 (Fall 1995), 13-14.

² The commission has yielded a song by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Morton Gould for baritone or mezzo-soprano and piano and a composition for one piano, six hands, by Peter Schickele, both entitled *No Long Very Clear*. Additionally, Joan Tower composed two solo short piano compositions, *Holding A Daisy* and *Or Like A . . . An Engine*. The poem can be found in the score to quartet *How Like Pellucid Statues, Daddy, Or Like A . . . An Engine* (New York: Schirmer, 1995) and in John Ashbery, *Can You Her, Bird* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

About the Author . . .

James A. Grymes is currently working towards a Ph.D. in Historical Musicology at The Florida State University, where he studies bassoon with Jeff Keesecker.