

# 15 Questions to the Corigliano Quartet

**"John Corigliano: Music for String Quartet" (out on Naxos) is the simple name of a disc that has been hard to get out of my CD player these days. In my review of the album, there was so much to say about the music that the deserved praise for the instrumentalists bringing these pieces to life had to stay a mere sidenote. Which is something we hope to be able to remedy with this interview, which caught the Coriglianos at the brink of the summer festival season and a host of performances across the USA. Over the past ten years, they have grown into a tight unit made up of Melia Watras, Amy Sue Barston, Lina Bahn and Michael Jinsoo Lim - all respected musicians in their own right, whose individual forces melt into a powerful alloy in the combustion engine of the Corigliano Quartet. With their name and their choice of repertoire for their first record (which places Corigliano-pupil Jefferson Friedman next to his former teacher), the four-piece has made it clear that it remains on the search for exciting and unusual programs rooted in the 20th century and beyond. Their "American Voices" show, for example, includes Ben Johnston's "Amazing Grace" variations as well as Jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis' stab at Classical composing "At the Octoroon Balls". Major newspapers, such as the New York Times, have already smelled the rooster and dedicated more than just complimentary quotes to them - and with their Naxos CD receiving raving reviews all around, it looks like the record buying public is soon to follow. Try getting it out of YOUR CD player, if you can!**



*Hi! How are you? Where are you?*

Amy: I'm enjoying the summer, thank you. I'm in LA performing and teaching at the National Cello Institute.

Mike: I'm fine, thanks! Melia and I are in New York City right now, but we're leaving tomorrow morning to meet up with the Corigliano Quartet in Chicago.

*What's on your schedule right now?*

CQ: We're just about to start our summer festival season with stops in Chicago, Seattle, and upstate New York.

*If you hadn't chosen for music, what do you think you would do right now?*

Melia: If not a musician, I'd love to have been a visual artist.

Lina: Definitely something still in the creative field.

Amy: Sometimes I think I'd enjoy being a chef or a neuroscientist, but I know for absolute certain that being a musician is my ultimate choice!

Mike: In practicality, a chemist. If we're really talking about fantasy though, I'd be playing in the NBA.

*What or who was your biggest influence as an artist?*

Mike: Definitely Josef Gingold, my teacher in college. He taught me what it was to love the violin and to love music. Every note I play is shaped by the time I spent with him, and he was the nicest, most generous person you'd ever want to meet.

Amy: My older sister, who's a wonderful and disciplined violinist, and Jacqueline Du Pre, a cellist with unmatched imagination and creativity.

Melia: My former teacher, Atar Arad. He's so creative and always searching for something new, even in a piece or phrase he's done many times.

Lina: Past teachers.

*What's the hardest part about being a musician and what's the best?*

Amy: Hardest: how much time you always have to find to practice. Best: playing with other great musicians. THAT totally makes the time sacrifice worth it!

Lina: hardest: the commercial/economic side.... best: performing and collaborating music!

Melia: The best part is that we get to do what we love the most all the time and we get to share it with people.

Mike: The hardest is the amount of constant work it takes to play at a high level. The best is getting to share your music with an audience.

*What's your view on the classical music scene at present? Is there a crisis?*

Melia: Classical music is certainly changing, and hopefully for the better. I think classical musicians have an obligation to always reach new people and new audiences.

Amy: We go to a lot of music festivals where there are so many eager listeners and musicians of all ages, who are hungry to hear great music and to be inspired. So, from my view, there are many places that are full of classical music lovers.

Mike: I think the arts in general are in a difficult time, right now, at least in the US. And certainly with the political climate the way it is, the arts get pushed to the bottom of the barrel.

*Some feel there is no need to record classical music any more, that it's all been done before. What do you tell them?*

Lina: All been done before? so much new music hasn't even been performed, let alone recorded for others to hear!

Melia: Every artist is unique, so you can have 20 different recordings of the same Beethoven piece, all with something special to say. Also, there is so much classical music being written today, so there's a lot for a listening audience to discover.

Mike: Classical music is being written and created as we speak. There is so much great new music out there, and so much great music that has yet to be written!

Amy: There are so many different ways to be expressive, and one can always find a different interpretation of an old favorite that moves one in a new way. I just discovered a new recording of the Bach cello suites that makes me understand the music and listen to it in a totally new and inspired way, and I feel like the music is completely fresh again.

*What constitutes a good live performance in your opinion? What's your approach to performing on stage?*

Mike: When a performer has truly given everything to the performance and has connected with an audience. This is how I approach performing. Josef Gingold once told me that even though you may be performing something for the 100th time, it's probably the first time for most of the people in the audience. They paid for a ticket and deserve your absolute best.

Melia: A great live performance is when something special, possibly unexpected, happens. As a performer this can only occur when the technique is rock solid. However, one should not be afraid to make mistakes, because they will happen.

Lina: Best live performances are when things line up- all the hard work one has done in rehearsals plus a spontaneity and spark of the moment

Amy: Being really present in the moment is important; being flexible in your mind and body, so you can react effectively to the cool things your partners might be doing. Being really prepared is essential -- it gives you the confidence to let go.

*What does the word "interpretation" mean to you?*

Amy: Making the music come alive in the way that feels the most sincere to both the composer's intentions and your creativity.

Melia: It's what we, as musicians, are always doing. We're given a roadmap by a composer, and our job is to interpret these instructions left by the composer in order to create a satisfying performance.

Mike: Taking the notes on the page and bringing them to life.

Lina: Each performer comes to a sheet/score of music with a different reference, education, background and personal artistry. how they play that piece of music bringing those things together is what makes each experience different.

*How do you balance the need to to put your personal emotions into the music you play and the intentions of the*

*composer?*

Lina: hopefully, when you understand the score and have rehearsed carefully, personal emotions do not conflict with the wishes of the composer.

Amy: If you follow the composer's directions, your emotional understanding is likely to be heightened by them, not in conflict.

Melia: It varies from composer to composer. Some composers are very free about how much of yourself to put into the music, others not as much. In the end, you just try to give each piece the love and respect it deserves.

Mike: Well, I hope my personal emotions are not in conflict with the composer's intentions and that they amplify the impact of the piece. Most composers want the performer to bring something personal to their music. I just try to show an audience why I love the piece I am playing.

*True or false: People need to be educated about classical music, before they can really appreciate it.*

Melia: Simply going to concerts and enjoying the music can be education enough. I think it's important to not have an elitist viewpoint on whether one is educated enough to appreciate something.

Mike: False, mostly. While it is true that you need some sort of familiarity or context to enjoy any work of art, and that education can help increase interest and appreciation, I think anyone can enjoy classical music and have their own level of personal appreciation for it.

Lina: educating is a tricky word- any work of art can be appreciated on many different kinds of levels, which doesn't make one experience worse or better than another.

Amy: Additionally, people feel comfortable with what's familiar. If music is new to them, or complicated, (or even just more complicated than simpler popular music) sometimes just a little bit of explanation or previewing helps make them more comfortable. What we want is to give the audience a great experience with the music, so we're thrilled to frame it in a way that makes them open to hearing something new and unfamiliar. Someone might call that frame "education." I might call it setting up an readiness to receive.

*You are given the position of artistic director of a concert hall. What would be on your program for this season?*

Amy: Music that makes the audience hear old things in a fresh way, and have a musical experience they've never had before.

Lina: As varied and eclectic in the modern classical repertoire as possible.

Melia: Some concerts of completely newly commissioned works.

Mike: A really interesting series for kids. The future of classical music really depends on developing an audience, and that starts with getting children interested in music early on. I have the Leonard Bernstein/NY Phil Young People's Concerts from the 1960's on DVD, and I think they are so inspiring and bring classical music to kids in a smart, entertaining, non-condescending way. We need something like this right now!

*How would you describe the relationship with your instrument?*

Lina: like an appendage to my body.

Melia: It's my voice.

Mike: My violin is part of who I am.

Amy: Obsessive.

*Have you ever tried playing a different instrument? If yes, how good were you at it?*

Melia: Growing up, I played a lot of different instruments: baritone, piano, trumpet, bass. I was pretty bad at all of them except for the bass and the viola. Viola came naturally.

Lina: guitar, voice, drums, flute: for me, I just don't have the time to put into the practice another instrument demands -- that is to really get proficient enough to make music. (terrible at voice, others were ok)

Amy: I'm so committed to my instrument, there's not enough time in the day to learn another!

Mike: I'm pretty good at the viola, but I'm the world's worst pianist (just ask my secondary piano teachers in college). I'm currently fascinated by the mandolin and am thinking of trying my hand at it.

## **Discography:**

Corigliano - Music for String Quartet (2007) Naxos

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