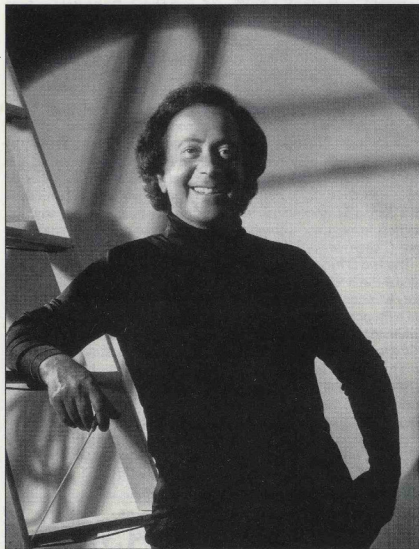


JOSÉ SEREBRIER

By Robert Matthew-Walker



Fantasia for Strings and a short orchestral piece, *Winterreise*, alongside his earliest published work, the *Sonata for Solo Violin*.

This varied collection of recordings demands an in-depth consideration of aspects of this gifted musician's work, in which some background information might not be out of place. José Serebrier was born in Montevideo on 3 December 1938 into a family of Russian and Polish extraction. As a child, his musical inclinations quickly showed themselves. For example, when he was 9 years old, not a terribly young age for the discipline, he began studying the violin. His progress was so remarkable that less than two years later he made his debut as conductor of a local orchestra; and by this time, he had already composed the first version of his Opus 1, the *Solo Violin Sonata*, which he revised slightly in 1954. This impressive piece is dedicated to Serebrier's first violin teacher, Miguel Pritsch, and structurally consists of a continuous set of variations upon a theme of somewhat indeterminate tonality, whose G minor basis is only revealed at the end of the work, through the only *pizzicato* in the piece. Gonzalo Acosta's performance, on the Reference CD, is magnificent.

In High School, Serebrier organised, trained and conducted the first Youth Orchestra in Uruguay, with which he thereupon toured the country, thanks to Civic and Governmental support, giving around 100 concerts in less than four years. Thirty years later, history virtually repeated itself in reverse, when Serebrier toured Uruguay and other South American countries with a hand-picked orchestra of students from the Juilliard School; with such success that the orchestra was obliged to give six encores at one concert in Buenos Aires alone.

If some conductors aspire in their private moments to be composers, some composers, having heard their music rendered, if that is the word, by various conductors, think they can do a better job of conducting their own music themselves. However, there are very few established conductors who often have several new albums released internationally on various labels, covering a wide repertoire which includes recordings of their own music alongside interpretations of standard and unusual works.

A member of this select band of genuine conductors who are also genuine composers is the Uruguayan-born, American-trained, internationally-experienced José Serebrier, and a clutch of new CDs demonstrate the extraordinary range of his creative and recreative talents.

Amongst these new releases is a coupling of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* and *Russian Easter Festival Overture* with the London Philharmonic Orchestra on Reference Recordings RR-89CD, a distinctive and compellingly fresh interpretation entirely faithful to the score, and an all-Kodály album of the *Galanta* and *Marosszék Dances*, the *Háry János Suite* and the *Peacock Variations* with the Bmo State Philharmonic and Baden-Baden Sudwestfunk Symphony Orchestras on BIS CD 875, a notable disc indeed and the first of what is planned to be a significant series of recordings on this much-admired label.

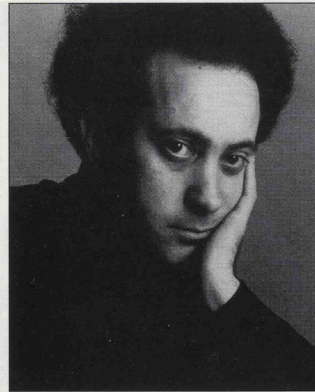
In addition, BMG-RCA has reissued one of the most famous recordings ever made of 20th-Century music on their High Performance label: a coupling of Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony, with the London Philharmonic and John Aldis Choir conducted by José Serebrier, and Ives's Second Symphony by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy on 09026-63316-2. Reference Recordings have also released a new CD devoted entirely to Serebrier's own music, also with the LPO, and containing the first complete recording of the Second Symphony, sub-titled *Parita*, the

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"The impact of Serebrier's performance as a whole is notably enhanced by its recorded quality which is of great impact and brilliance..." Gramophone 1974

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On graduation from Montevideo's Municipal School of Music in four disciplines at the age of 15, and having seen Fritz Busch and Erich Kleiber conduct in the *Uruguayana Capital*, Serebrier was determined to become a conductor, although his Solo Violin Sonata was

followed by a symphonic Overture *The Legend of Faust*, which won a Competition organised by the Orquesta Nacional. Serebrier was not permitted to conduct the work, as he was still only 15, so the *Premiere* was given by Eleazar de Carvahlo. In 1955, Serebrier received a Koussevitsky Award at Tanglewood and won a BMI Composers' Award for his First Symphony. The following year he was granted a United States State Department Fellowship to study conducting with Pierre Monteux and Antal Dorati and composition with Aaron Copland and Vittorio Giannini at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. This fellowship was followed by two consecutive Guggenheim Fellowships in Philadelphia.

In 1957 Leopold Stokowski announced that he was to give the World *Premiere* of Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony. The legendary complexities of this score were soon apparent, and the *Premiere* had to be abandoned, owing to the large number of additional rehearsals the work demanded. Rather than replacing the Ives with a repertoire piece, Stokowski announced that he would, instead, *Premiere* Serebrier's First Symphony, taking the 19-year-old completely by surprise, and thus began a long association between Serebrier and Stokowski, the maestro giving the World *Premiere* of several subsequent works by the young composer-conductor.

In 1963 Stokowski opened the American Symphony Orchestra's Season at Carnegie Hall with the World *Premiere* of Serebrier's *Poema Elegiaco*, which is now the third movement of the Second Symphony. Stokowski termed "the greatest master of orchestral balance" and appointed him Associate Conductor of the American Symphony Orchestra in 1962, a position he held for five years. On April 26th 1965 the historic and long-delayed *Premiere* of Charles Ives's Fourth Symphony was finally given at Carnegie Hall, with Stokowski and Serebrier as two of the three conductors who directed the work at various points. Although the Symphony was taped by CBS with the original performers, Serebrier subsequently recorded the work for RCA with the LPO without any assistant conductors, an interpretation that *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* hailed at the time as being "one of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the gramophone." It is this tremendous performance that RCA have just reissued.

Despite Serebrier's championship of this and other 20th-century works, it would be wrong to classify him as an Ives specialist or modern music specialist. In Australia, for example, where he is much in demand, he is regarded as a Mahler and Austrian specialist, after having directed a Mahler Festival there for three successive years. In Scandinavia he was regarded as a French and Russian music specialist, and in South America his interpretations of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov have won him continental acclaim.

His repertoire embraces little-known British music by Britten and Delius and also Carlo Martelli's Symphony which is yet to be released. Martelli is a British composer whose qualities are being recognised by major conductors and it is no surprise that Serebrier should be championing his music. Another of Serebrier's finest recordings is an incomparable version of Peter Menin's magnificent Ninth Symphony. Among outstanding interpretations of music in the standard repertoire are award winning performances of Mendelssohn's *Scottish* and *Italian Symphonies* that of the *Scottish* being, in my opinion, the most penetrating and deeply satisfying I have encountered in over 40 years of listening to music. Another interesting disc is an all-Gershwin CD which includes Serebrier's orchestrations of the *Three Preludes*, made at the request of the composer's sister, Frances Gershwin, a fine account of *An American in Paris* and the Piano Concerto, in which the soloist is Leopold Godowsky III, Gershwin's nephew, and grandson of the great pianist Leopold Godowsky.

It was George Szell who appointed Serebrier Composer-in-Residence of the Cleveland Orchestra under a Grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for the 1968-69 and 1969-70 Seasons. Szell had been impressed with Serebrier when the young conductor jointly won the Ford Foundation American Conductors Award with James Levine whom Szell appointed Assistant Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra. As a young musician, therefore, Serebrier was fortunate enough to work with some of the greatest conductors of the day: Stokowski, Szell, Monteux, Dorati, Fausto Cleva and others. At one Montevideo rehearsal Serebrier attended, he was surprised when the great man ended by saying "Thank you for playing so well, and don't forget the order of the programme." On asking Monteux why he had emphasised the order of the programme, the answer was that on two occasions the musicians had begun with some of them playing the Overture and some the Symphony! Serebrier has also conducted opera regularly, but does not agree with "the popular belief that operatic conductors are the best, but the opposite is shown in practice. Operatic music is generally simpler than symphonic music." He made his operatic debut with *La Bohème* at the Mexico City Opera in 1973 and more recent successes include the American *Premiere*'s of Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta* and Massenet's *Chérubin*. He recently conducted Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at the Opéra de Nantes. For the 10th Anniversary of the reunification of Germany, Serebrier conducted a highly-successful tour of the country with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra, including music by Hans Werner Henze and a new work by Rolf Riehm, which Serebrier regards very highly. The soprano soloist in the Henze was the conductor's wife, Carole Farley who has her own distinguished career on the international opera circuit. They obviously look forward to working together where possible and together, they have made a number of notable recordings and videos, among the most recent being an all-Grieg disc of songs with orchestra, including 14 new orchestrations by Serebrier himself which have been published by Peters Edition.

The new Reference Recordings CD of Serebrier's music ends with the first recording of his latest work, a short orchestral tone-poem entitled *Winterreise*. As the composer has written: "To give it Schubert's title was daring, but in time the piece becomes *Winterreise*, like some people's names become them. In fact, the piece quotes from almost every composer but Schubert. Towards the climax of the piece, the first quote is *Winter* from Haydn's Seasons, which has a mysterious ambience. Then a heroic quote from *Winter* in Glazunov's *The Seasons*, in counterpoint with Tchaikovsky's First Symphony, subtitled *Winter Dreams*." The work is a spin-off, so to speak, of Serebrier's 1991 Violin Concerto, subtitled *Winter*, which was his first large-scale work for many years. One should also mention the dazzling *Symphony for Percussion*, of which a new recording is long overdue. The Violin Concerto was written within a month for a record of 20th-Century Violin Concertos, played by Michael Guttman for ASV with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, each one related to a Season of the year. Thus, Milhaud's *Concertino de Printemps* is followed by Rodrigo's