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**Alexander GLAZUNOV (1865-1936) - MusicWeb
Complete Symphonies and Concertos**

Rachel Barton-Pine (violin), Alexander Romanovsky (piano), Wen-Sinn Yang (cello), Marc Chisson (saxophone), Alexey Serov (horn)

Russian National Orchestra/Jose Serebrier

rec. Svetlanov Hall, Moscow International Performing Arts Centre, 3-7 April 2010 (concertos); Henry Wood Hall, Glasgow 2004-2009 (symphonies etc) DDD

Full contents list at end of review

WARNER CLASSICS 2564 66467 4 [8 CDs: c. 520:00]

MusicWeb International interviews with Jose Serebrier: [Ann Ozorio](#) [Gavin Dixon](#)

Full liner-notes for this set <http://www.warnerclassics.com/downloads/0825646646746.pdf>

Serebrier biography: http://www.joseserebrier.com/conductor_bio.html

Have you resisted the temptation to acquire Jose Serebrier's admirable Glazunov discs piece-meal? If so your restraint is now rewarded. For less than thirty GBP you can have them all in a clam-shell box with each disc in its own card sleeve and with a booklet setting out only the track details. You off-set gains in price and shelf space by the loss of detailed liner-notes. All is not lost, though: you can access the notes in a pdf on the Warner Classics site.

The conductor's perspective on Glazunov can be read in a fascinating interview by [Gavin Dixon](#). Serebrier tell us that Glazunov is a composer close to his heart. I can well believe that. You can hear his approach in the first two movements of the Fifth Symphony. In the first he builds tension and exposes structural cogency through mercurial spontaneity. It strikes me as instinctive but I am sure there is more to it than that. Hearing Glazunov from a *non-simpatico* conductor is like experiencing a flat and tepid wine designed to be enjoyed chilled and sparkling. A Glazunov Scherzo is a thing of wonder and Serebrier finds the *mot juste* in the Fifth. He unleashes a reeling kinetic excitement in the finale making links with Rachmaninov and Rimsky-Korsakov.

The Seasons is one his most Tchaikovskian works yet in Serebrier's hands escapes any suggestion of being a warmed-over *Swan Lake*. It's all touchingly pointed up

making the notes leap to attention. Warner is to be congratulated on separately tracking each section within each of the four seasons. The great curvaceous melody of *Spring* is most sensitively wielded. If you enjoy your Tchaikovsky ballets do not miss out on this version of the Glazunov – winning ideas tumble one after the other.

I owe it to Ann Ozorio that I heard the first disc in the cycle. She had received a copy of the Fourth Symphony after an interview with Serebrier. It is superbly judged, nudged and weighted. The finale has a belting acceleration from reflective to exuberant and impetuous. Serebrier treats the Symphony with a sort of loving respect which eschews self-indulgence. Serebrier's unerring judgment for pacing sweeps all before it in the finale of this glorious symphony.

The Seventh bubbles and lilts delightfully but although Serebrier gives it some steel especially in the Andante (II) and the Scherzo this is clearly a work with a shade less tension than its disc-mate, the Fourth.

I always felt affectionately towards the Eighth Symphony even if it has come in for some stick. It was his last completed symphony. My impressions and expectations were shaped by Svetlanov's rousing EMI-Melodiya LP. Serebrier has less of the soviet blare but just as much adrenaline. The wan delights of *Raymonda* attain charm but is not up to the standards of *The Seasons*.

The Sixth Symphony at first wears its tragedy heavily. Glazunov could never resist a Scherzo and he did them very well. This one is a shade more deliberate than its counterparts. The finale has the iron-shod tramping power of the Rachmaninov First Symphony.

The tone poem *The Sea* was written when the composer was in his twenties. It is a pleasingly stormily romantic work which after the tempests revels in a lighter lyric mood. It ends in what seems like a night-scene in which the sea glimmers poetically in the moonlight.

The long gait of the Third Symphony's first movement reminded me how the composer had, over the twenty year period spanned by the eight symphonies, held true to Russian nationalist style. It remains very enjoyable and full of the eager invention. It's the longest of his symphonies.

The incomplete Ninth was left in piano score and passed to a cousin of the pianist Mariya Yudina. He orchestrated the single movement in 1947-48. It has an Elgarian *nobilmente* and not unsurprisingly seems to be from the same notebook as the finale of the Eighth.

The Second Symphony is five minutes shorter than its successor . It was premiered at the 1889 World Exhibition in Paris. The lugubriously romantic second movement recalls the Balakirev First Symphony.

The First Symphony is in the accustomed four movements with several moments particularly reminiscent of Rimsky and of Borodin. The invention is a step down from the finest symphonies and the finale occasionally succumbs to bombast.

Over the years there have been several recorded cycles of the symphonies. There's a rather good one from Rozhdestvensky (once available complete and slip-cased on Olympia OCD5001). Then again there's Järvi's 1980s cycle on individual discs on Orfeo (not reviewed here unfortunately). Otaka recorded the eight symphonies for [Bis](#) though the results were mixed. Polyansky recorded most of them for Chandos. Many of these, alongside some from Butt (ASV) and Otaka (Bis), found their way into a bargain-priced set from [Brilliant Classics](#). Even the long-lost Fedoseyev Soviet (Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra) set can be had as an mp3 download via [Amazon](#) for as little as £5.99. Though not without merit the least attractive and sadly torpid cycle of the symphonies came from Naxos (Anissimov [review review](#)) although no company has recorded as much Glazunov. Svetlanov's fine but long inaccessible set can now be had in a SVET box ([review symphonies](#); [review orchestral works](#)).

The Brilliant box is inexpensive and deploys mostly Chandos sound quality. It's pretty good though Polyansky can hit the occasional patch of lassitude. The Svetlanov SVET box can be difficult to source (it is available from MusicWeb) but may be too old-sounding and wild and woolly for some; I have not heard the Warner Svetlanov Edition box but that should be easier to access. Even with all that heritage, Serebrier and Warner have the finest modern premium price symphony cycle available.

No one has previously offered a set of the complete concertos. The rather uneven Naxos set using Russian forces included them but dotted around various CDs mixed in with other orchestral pieces.

Soloist and orchestra launch the Violin Concerto in a tender yet insinuatingly seductive way. They have a deeply fulfilling way with the solo filament and the orchestral canvas. Barton-Pine is an elite act with steady tone and an aptitude for dynamic variation. She achieves this without disturbing the even production of her silvery thread which has a very agreeable viola-accented sepia overtone. Her *con slancio* death-defying double-stopping in the finale is done with ease. It sounds terrifying. It is totally fluent and utterly and intricately secure like a divine music-box – not machine-like. I would not want you to turn your back on Shumsky, Krasko or Sivo; the latter resplendent in 1966 Decca analogue stereo reborn by [HDTT](#).

However the more I hear Barton-Pine the more I am confirmed in my initial appraisal that this has to be first choice among modern versions. It even harries golden age Sivo.

The Second Piano Concerto is a work written in 1917, a decade after the last complete symphony (No. 8). You can hear something of that symphony mixed with oriental spices in the finale. With its heart's-ease opening theme this is a work that combines siroccos of Tchaikovskian drama with the decorative delights of the Saint-Saëns concertos.

The longest concerto is the First Piano Concerto. It's all storm, dancing delicacy and grandstanding blazon. If you love the Arensky and Scriabin concertos you must hear this. Time and again these recordings satisfy with their technical qualities – the saw-toothed bite of the brass is just one example on display in the finale of the First Concerto. Romanovsky has the necessary tempestuous command as well as reserves of quiet tenderness and a way of spinning filigree to connote fruity substance.

Marc Chisson suaves and soothes his way through the Saxophone Concerto. It is touching, joyous, smoothly melancholy, whistleable and very distinctive. Here there are a few transient reservations: on occasions Chisson falls into a sort of fluty quiet flutter and his velvety key action can be heard; still what do we expect: keys need to be depressed and released to play this glory-saturated instrument.

The *Chant du Ménestrel* is done with real pathos. The lovely little *Reverie* is a charmingly romantic brevity. Serov's masterly French horn takes the role of serenading lover rather than buffoon huntsman. Barton-Pine is back centre-stage in the nostalgic *Méditation*, a work mildly in hock to the *Siegfried Idyll*. She plays us out in a soothing sunset.

The Casals-dedicated *Concerto Ballata* sports the sort of title we might have expected of a cello concerto by Medtner. Its rounded and undulating contours are completely surrendered to lyrical inclinations. Its tunes are not as instantly catchy as those in the other concertos but it is not without drama. There are other capable recordings by Rudin (Naxos), Rostropovich, 1964 (EMI), Shallon (Koch Schwann 311 119 H1) and Yegor Dyachkov (Chandos CHAN 9528).

This set goes straight to the top of the recommended versions of the symphonies and concertos. It has no direct competition; no-one else has a single box with all the symphonies and all the concertos. The life-enhancing poetic spirit which suffuses and courses through these works is remarkable. It combines consistently inspired interpretative insights, Imperial Russian style and superb audio-technology. I cannot imagine these recordings being surpassed by a single

conductor and orchestra (OK, two), so strong and sympathetic are they.

Rob Barnett

Earlier review of the symphonies alone – issued individually

http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2010/May10/Glazunov_symphonies_Serebrier.htm#ixzz1uFE5VM00

Earlier review of the Concertos – 2 CD set

http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2011/Apr11/glazunov_ctos_2564679465.htm

Alexander GLAZUNOV (1865-1936)

Complete Symphonies and Concertos – Jose Serebrier

Full contents list:-

CD 1 [58.53]

Symphony No. 3 in D major, op. 33 (1890-92) [48:12]

Symphony No. 9 in D major, *Unfinished* orch. Gavriil Yudin (1909) [10:32]

CD 2 [77.48]

Symphony No. 2 in F sharp minor, op. 16 (1886) [43:22]

Symphony No. 1 in E major, op. 5, *Slavyanskaya* (1881) [34:17]

CD 3 [69.59]

Symphony No. 4 in E flat major op. 48 (1893) [33:31]

Symphony No. 7 in F major op. 77 *Pastoral* (1902) [36:21]

CD 4 [70.31]

Symphony No. 5 in B flat major op. 55 (1895) [32:36]

The Seasons - ballet in one act - op. 67 (1901) [36:38]

CD 5 [66.48]

Symphony No. 6 in C minor op. 58 (1896) [35:51]

The Sea - Fantasy in E major op.28 (1890) [15:22]

Salome - Introduction and Dance op.90 (1908) [15:19]

CD 6 [78.50]

Symphony No. 8 in E flat major op. 83 (1905) [42:28]

Raymonda- suite from the ballet op. 57a (1898) [36:42]

CD 7 [56.11]

Concerto in A minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 82 (1904) [20:18]
Chant du Ménéstrel (for cello) Op. 71 (1901) [3:55]
Concerto No. 2 for Piano with Orchestra in B major Op. 100 (1917) [18:30]
Concerto in E flat for Saxophone and String Orchestra Op. 109 (1936) [13:11]

CD 8 [57.48]

Concerto No. 1 for Piano with Orchestra in F minor, Op. 92 (1911) [30:15]
Reverie Op.24 (for French horn) (1890) [3:12]
Concerto Ballata for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 108 (1931) [19:52]
Méditation, Op. 32 (for violin) (1891) [4:11]

Big Boxes: Complete Glazunov Symphonies and Concertos

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 10 Sound Quality: 10*

Glazunov's symphonies hover on the edge of the repertoire. You almost never see them programmed in live concerts, but every couple of decades a complete cycle comes out. Curiously, none of the Russian recordings are very good. The performances are uniformly heavy and dull, whereas Glazunov's music, symphonic or not, demands a balletic lilt and a light touch. His symphonies are full of good tunes and are beautifully crafted, but despite exciting moments they aren't terribly dramatic and so need to be played swiftly and vivaciously. The sound clip below offers a sample of the delightful "toy" music from the trio of the Fifth Symphony's scherzo. It's just a taste of the many captivating moments you'll find in these works.

Previously, the best Glazunov cycle available was Järvi's on Orfeo. It had the right energy, but was very expensive. Some discs (all at full price) contained a single symphony and the fillers, a couple of concert waltzes, were most ungenerous. This box features performances, ironically with one of Järvi's previous orchestras, that easily set the new standard for these pieces. Serebrier plays the music like he really cares about it, touchingly in the slow movements, but with real Russian fire in the first movements and finales. The concertos are equally well done, with Rachel Barton Pine superb in the Violin Concerto, and Alexander Romanovsky confidently swaggering through the two piano concertos. These latter works are scarcely known, but they are both excellent and deserve to enter the repertoire. In addition to these major pieces, you also get all of the shorter concerted works (including the Saxophone Concerto), the tone poems *La mer* and the Introduction and Dance from *Salome*, a superb rendition of *The Seasons* (sample below), and an excellent extended suite from the ballet *Raymonda*. This box, in short, gives you all of the music that you'll ever need if you want to get the most important Glazunov works in one handy package. You even get the unfinished Ninth

Symphony—quite a deal.

Glazunov: Symphony No. 5/Serebrier-ClassicsToday

Review by: Victor Carr Jr *Artistic Quality: 10* *Sound Quality: 8*

No sooner had Tadaaki Otaka's BIS recording of Glazunov's Fifth Symphony hit the market than this superior version by José Serebrier appeared. Serebrier's vibrant and vital rendition lifts Glazunov out of second-rate status and reveals his work to be one of the finer symphonies from 19th century Russia. The conductor's animated tempos lend the first movement a joyful verve similar to Schumann's Rhenish Symphony. In the finale, Serebrier's swift pace highlights the music's celebratory air and makes Otaka's performance seem comfortably stodgy by comparison. But it's not just speed that makes Serebrier's performance exciting (as his moving and serene rendition of the beautiful Andante will attest), but the Scottish National Orchestra plays with more enthusiasm than its BBC counterpart, especially the brass, who deliver a beefy sound similar to that of Russian orchestras.

This release is even more enticing due to the inclusion of the whole of Glazunov's ballet The Seasons. Serebrier turns in another excellent performance, drawing highly colorful playing from the orchestra while ideally capturing the music's varied moods, from festive to bucolic. Warner Classics' recording, though fine in the quiet passages, becomes excessively reverberant when the music gets loud—but don't let this dissuade you from these highly enjoyable, exemplary performances. [12/07/2004]

Glazunov: Symphonies Nos. 4 & 7/Serebrier-ClassicsToday

Review by: David Hurwitz *Artistic Quality: 9* *Sound Quality: 9*

It's a pity that these symphonies—so beautifully made and full of good tunes—don't get more respect. Perhaps they are a bit too good, in the sense of being emotionally tame; but that's not an impression that strikes you so much on listening as is a certain lack of memorability afterward. Anyway, that's a personal issue, and without doubt these are extremely fine performances. José Serebrier never lets the music bog down in Russian heaviness, and so comes close to Järvi's benchmark interpretation on Orfeo. The two scherzos, highpoints of every Glazunov symphony (the Fourth doesn't even have a slow movement), are wonderfully vivacious here—but then Serebrier doesn't put a foot wrong anywhere.

The Royal Scottish National Orchestra plays very well, with some of that slight rhythmic imprecision from the strings that seems to come with the territory. Terrific brass, though, and excellent sound, make this easily recommendable.
[1/26/2007

GLAZUNOV Symphonies: No. 3 in D; No. 9 in D (orch. Yudin); **No. 2 in f#; No. 1 in E** • José Serebrier, cond; Royal Scottish Natl O • WARNER 68904 (2 CDs: 136:36)

The impact Glazunov's Symphony No. 1 had on a distinguished audience at its St. Petersburg premiere on March 17, 1882, is difficult for us to comprehend without some context. Few native Russian symphonies of worth existed before 1882: Tchaikovsky's first four were available, as well as the completed pair of Borodin, and on a lower level, the first five by Anton Rubinstein. That's all. Nor were performances of this small group more than an occasional feature of Russian concert life, thanks to an absence of ongoing professional orchestras, and a critical establishment that was equivocal at best to its native-grown classical music. Glazunov's accomplishment was thus all the more startling in its folk-based inspiration and self-assuredness. Having the 16-year-old composer accept the audience's thunderous applause in his college uniform, emphasizing his age, certainly helped heighten the drama of the occasion, but it also led to gossip that Glazunov's wealthy parents had ordered the work premade from one of several other composers.

That rumor died under repeated assaults of the truth as Glazunov's career began its ascent. While the First Symphony was expansive, luxuriant, and brilliant, the Second, composed in 1886 and premiered three years later in Paris, placed far more attention on thematic linkage and developmental complexity. It also displayed a characteristic of Glazunov's more ambitious compositions that would come to the fore over the next few years: an earnest desire to incorporate new structural and expressive elements into a nationalist framework. The results were to become increasingly uneven in the Third Symphony, completed in 1890, and the Fourth, in 1893. The Symphony No. 5 of 1895 represented a temporary resolution at a more ambitious compositional level, but by the Eighth Symphony of 1906, Glazunov was attempting a second synthesis between the conventional Russian symphony, and his increasingly wayward harmonic language.

His Ninth Symphony was to prove a victim of the intense creative energy placed into directing the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he took a personal interest in all classes and each student. Only the first movement was completed (1910), and that, in piano score. He left it in 1928 to his friend and fellow Rimsky-Korsakov student Maximilian Steinberg, shortly before moving to France. Conductor Gavriil Yudin orchestrated it in 1947-48. It offers up a fascinating landscape of emotionally shifting and tension-laden contours, with a preference for

contrapuntal procedures that had always been present in his music, but seldom to this extent. A shame the Ninth was never completed, given how far Glazunov had traveled in his own very personal direction, and along his road to mastery of unconventional form.

The composer's symphonies fell into phonographic disregard following the collapse of the Soviet Union. (At one point there was even a U.S. LP series release on Columbia of several Soviet-era Glazunov symphonic recordings, with extensive liner notes by a critic who personally disliked nearly all the works.) Matters have improved of late, but the style of conducting required to make the most of this music has been sadly lacking. Anissimov/Moscow SO is crude and sketchy; Polyansky/Russian State SO is interested in nothing but a rich, undifferentiated string sound. Svetlanov/U.S.S.R. SO lacks discipline and inspiration. Järvi/Bamberg SO is sometimes unfocused, and features a second-rate orchestra. Otaka/BBC Natl O of Wales offers a fine ensemble and eloquent slow movements, but moves through everything else with a somnambulant, even tread.

Serebrier has provided a consistently bright spot amidst all this. His handling of color is notable—as his use of flutes and clarinets in the First Symphony's finale demonstrates, or the carefully limned tripartite of textures at the entry of the trio in the Second Symphony's Scherzo. The RSNO has drawn applause from me in the past for its warmth and technical polish, but under Serebrier, the various solo and sectional entries acquire distinctive character. One bonus to this approach is that the occasional inconsistency in compositional quality stands out less. Thus the First Symphony's overlong Andante convinces far better because of the beauty Serebrier clearly relishes in its immediate detail.

The most impressive thing about these performances, however, is the conductor's understanding of Romantic musical theatricality. He doesn't simply perform the notes, as some do who think a score is literally the entire work. Instead, he brings into play the full panoply of rhetorical devices available to the modern orchestra—phrasing, balance, flow, etc.—to create a convincing performance. As this is Russian music on a grand scale, Serebrier scales his interpretations accordingly, and such flourishes as the repeated changes in tempo during the first thematic statement of the Second Symphony's Andante make eminent sense.

I only very occasionally question some tempo choices, especially that set for the Third Symphony's finale; Khaikin/Moscow RSO (long deleted) was less stolid.

Overall, however, these performances set standards that beat my old favorites, including Yevgeny Akulov/Moscow RSO in the First, Khaikin in the Second and Third, and Yudin, the orchestrator, in the Ninth. As the Akulov and Yudin in particular suffered from atrocious sound, the transparent, close miking Phil Rowlands provides for all four works is all the more appreciated.

Top marks, in other words, and a must for fans of the composer. Let's look forward to the rest of the cycle; and then, who knows? Perhaps Balakirev, Kalinnikov, or Glière's *Ilya Murometz*? The first version of Rachmaninoff's Third? Glazunov's concertos? There are no conductors as well suited to this music nowadays as

Serebrier. **Barry Brenesal**

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GLAZUNOV Symphonies: No. 3 in D; No. 9 in D (orch. Yudin); **No. 2 in f#; No. 1 in E** • José Serebrier, cond; Royal Scottish Natl O • WARNER 68904 (2 CDs: 136:36)

I have the feeling that I've written this review before, and in a sense I have—four times, in fact (28:3, 29:3, 30:3, 32:2). Yet what I've said bears repeating: Serebrier's revelatory Glazunov cycle makes the strongest possible case for a composer who, in the West at least, remains just at the fringe of the repertoire. (The New York Philharmonic, for instance, has only performed three of his eight complete symphonies—and hasn't performed any of them for 80 years.) And this latest installment (which completes the symphonies—the concertos will be coming soon) fulfills the high expectations generated by the first four (see, in addition to my reviews, the equally enthusiastic welcomes from Barry Brenesal in 28:3, 29:3, and 30:4, as well as in several Want Lists).

For those of you tuning in late: Serebrier—uniquely among conductors, in my experience—manages to find just the right balance in this potentially gooey music, savoring the lushness of Glazunov's post-Rimskian colors and harmonies without letting the music sag. In part, that's because of his exceptional sense of rhythm, his ability to expand and contract without losing the music's underlying heartbeat (even the potentially clunky fugal material in the finale of the Third dances along deftly). In part, it's because of his exceptional sense of phrasing, his ability to shade the melodic curls so that they seduce even the skeptics. Most of all, though, it's because of his exceptional ear, the sense of texture and color that allows him to point up the secondary lines without puncturing the luxurious surfaces. Listen, for example, to the beginning of the Second's Andante—to the tremor of the strings beneath the woodwind tendrils at the beginning, to the sparkling woodwinds dancing over the string lines at rehearsal letter A, to the sensitive weighting of the stopped horns after C. This is one of those typical Glazunovian meditations of the sort that can seem to meander even in the best of hands; here, however, there's a paradoxically quiet eventfulness that keeps a gentle grip on your attention.

Granted, Glazunov is not a man of many voices. He didn't develop much from his prodigy years (even Dohnányi grew more): if any composer emerged fully formed, it was Glazunov. His admirers may regret that, in essence, he stopped composing well before he died in 1936 (his Ninth symphony, left as a single movement in piano score, dates from 1910, and he wrote little of significance after the First

World War). But we don't really wonder—as we do with Sibelius—into what new terrain further compositions might have ventured. Mature Glazunov is, by and large, early Glazunov with a bit more polish. Nor do his individual works have the kind of inner variety we hear in Prokofiev or Mahler; whatever else you can say about Glazunov, he was not mercurial.

That said, Serebrier draws out what diversity there is in the music—the cheekiness of the Third's Scherzo, the gleaming enunciations that launch the Second, the kick of the First's opening movement, the celebratory vigor that crowns the Third's finale. He makes the most, too, out of Glazunov's trademark qualities: the silky orientalisms of the first movement of the Third are so gorgeously rendered that *Scheherazade* seems like mere denim by comparison. And if even Serebrier can't hide the prolixity of the Second's finale, the performance offers such moment-to-moment pleasure that it's hard to complain.

As on the previous recordings in the series, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra plays gloriously, with exceptional ensemble (listen, as but one example, to the tight discipline in the opening of the Second), superb solo work, a luxurious depth of color, and the kind of give-and-take you get with a first-class chamber ensemble. Hearing their commitment and confidence, it's hard to believe that all of this material—none of which the orchestra had played before—was set down over four days in June 2009. Even given the care with which Serebrier prepares orchestral parts (for some discussion, see the interview in 28:3), this is a stunning feat reminding us that this is surely one of the world's top orchestras. The engineering is excellent as well. Is this for you? Just try the exposition of the first movement of the Third, with its combination of yearning Tchaikovskian lyricism and Mendelssohnian chatter—you'll fall in love. **Peter J. Rabinowitz**

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