

The story behind my First Symphony

José Serebrier

The story behind my First Symphony goes back to the last years in my home town of Montevideo, Uruguay, before I went to the United States to study at Tanglewood and at the Curtis Institute of Music. I was aged 16 when I read an announcement in the press about a composition contest for an orchestral work. The winning piece would be played by the national symphony orchestra, known as OSSODRE. I thought that if I won, perhaps they would let me conduct it, which was then my main interest. For some reason the announcement was made at the very last moment, with only a couple of weeks' notice. I worked day and night on this, my first full orchestral work. Inspired by Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, which fascinated me at the time, *The Legend of Faust* was to be an overture-fantasy in the mould of Tchaikovsky's works of the same genre. To my amazement, I won the competition, but the task of conducting this 24-minute overture was given to a famous guest conductor, Eleazar de Carvalho, who had been Koussevitzky's pupil alongside Leonard Bernstein. It was a wonderful coincidence because I had already been accepted as his conducting pupil at Tanglewood for later that summer, while at the same time I would be studying composition with Aaron Copland.

That first summer at Tanglewood was idyllic. Copland's interest in my music, sparked by Virgil Thomson whom I had met briefly in Montevideo, gave me much needed encouragement in composing. Copland was a great teacher, especially in matters of orchestration. We also often discussed his own compositions, especially his latest works, and I conducted a few of them at the time, including his second and third symphonies, in his presence.

At the end of the six-week summer experience I went to New York for a month, to await the start of my first year at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. During those four weeks I wrote my first symphony. It was my second orchestral work. The symphony, together with my earlier saxophone quartet, went on to win the BMI (Broadcast Music Incorporated) Award in 1956. After discussing it with Copland, I had decided to write a one-movement symphony, with connected multiple sections in different speeds, since I felt that the idea of a multiple-movement symphony of largely unrelated sections no longer applied in the middle of the twentieth century. Anyway, that was the way I felt at the time. I had had very little exposure to new music, except for the festival of American music I had organised in Montevideo the year before, in which I included everything from Varèse to Cage. They both fascinated me. Curiously, I hadn't discovered Ives just yet.

Winning the BMI competition meant I got to know some of their composers, especially Alan Hovhaness. Oliver Daniel (who wrote a book about Stokowski) was in charge of classical music at BMI, and he never stopped talking about Hovhaness, and was constantly promoting his music. The three of us often had lunch together in New York, and I got to know many of Alan's works. I admired the fact that he had had the audacity to destroying all of his earlier compositions, apparently hundreds of them, when he decided to change styles, and refused to discuss his earlier works. Starting again, he was writing music non-stop. He and Milhaud, along with Villa-Lobos, may have been the most prolific composers of the twentieth century.

In the following year, 1957, while walking towards the Curtis Institute of Music, I bumped into a cellist, and my score fell to the floor. Harvey Wolf was on his way to the airport to join the Houston Symphony. He instinctively asked if he could carry the score along to show to Leopold Stokowski, who had just hired him as the last cellist in the orchestra. I had another copy, so I agreed, not expecting anything from this gesture. Few conductors would take such an idea seriously. Leopold Stokowski called a few days later. There was this highly accented voice telling me: “We tried doing the premiere of the Charles Ives Fourth Symphony but it proved impossible. Orchestra can’t get past first bars. Need a premiere. Press invited: *Time* magazine, *Life*, UP, AP. We do your symphony premiere instead. Please bring music. Rehearsals start in two days”.

The premiere of my first symphony took place in Houston on 4 November 1957. But another, more momentous event took place that evening: news from Soviet Russia revealed that USSR had launched the first man-made object in space, the Sputnik. Music and art therefore disappeared from the news for some weeks – although the symphony was a big success with the public and the critics. The interviews with *Time* and *Life* magazines never came out.

In 1962 Stokowski gave the New York premiere of my *Elegy for Strings* and in 1963 the world premiere of my *Poema elegiaco* to open the Carnegie Hall season. The Guild recording of symphonies premiered by Stokowski has many coincidences. While I never studied with Darius Milhaud, I met him several times in the United States. He seemed charmed by the fact that I was born in Uruguay, and in our long chats he often became nostalgic about his time in Brazil. He noticed that in two of my works, the Piano Sonata and my Symphony No. 2, *Partita*, I used Brazilian rhythms, and seemed to enjoy the idea. I was very surprised he knew them. The *Partita* had been recently recorded by the Louisville Orchestra, and he already had the recording.

It was with great surprise and joy that I learned of the release on CD of the Stokowski premiere of my First Symphony, taken from the original broadcast so long ago. Incredibly, it coincided with my own first actual studio recording of this early work for Naxos, to be released in August 2010. This is the central piece in a CD that includes the first recording of *Nueve*, a concerto for double-bass and orchestra featuring the incomparable Gary Karr, for whom I wrote it a long time ago when I was the composer-in-residence of the Cleveland Orchestra in George Szell’s time. This rather unusual concerto includes reciting of poems, an integral part of the score, performed with amazing artistry by Simon Callow, an off-stage chorus, jazz drummers, musicians in the audience, etc. The CD also includes one of my most recent works, *Music for an Imaginary Film*, which could not be more different from *Nueve*.