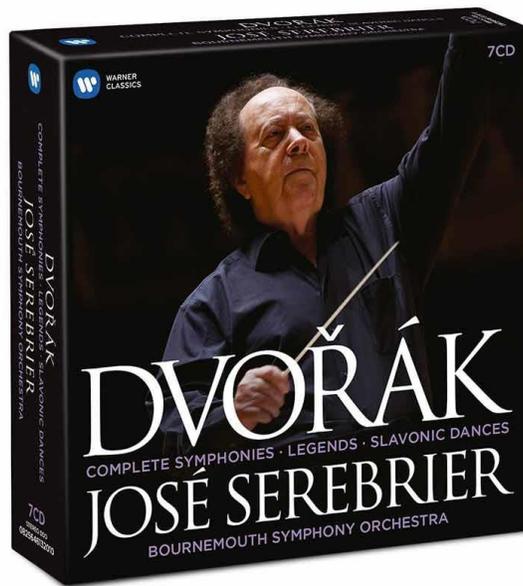


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José Serebrier conducts Dvořák's Complete Symphonies [Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra; Warner Classics]

Reviewed by Colin Anderson



José Serebrier has been working his way through Antonin Dvořák's Nine Symphonies. The recordings are now boxed and include first-releases for No.1 and the coupled-together Fourth and Fifth. Those who have been collecting the individual issues may feel let-down because (as far as I know) the only way to complete the cycle is to buy the set and duplicate five discs, which remain as originally issued.

Those five releases have all been reviewed on The Classical Source (links below), mostly by myself, and I can only concur with Robert Matthew-Walker's enthusiasm for Serebrier's account of Symphony No.8, which elsewhere I described as being "flexible, loving and scrupulously detailed ... splendid in character and insight."

It remains then to pass comment on the three Symphonies that are new to the catalogue as conducted by Serebrier. The First is addressed by him in his note for the booklet. He refers to the "glaring harmonic errors in the last movement, which I have corrected for this recording ... had he heard the work and revised the score, Dvořák would have done the same." Serebrier goes on to say that he listened to numerous versions of this work (to see how his conductor-colleagues dealt with these passages – they didn't!) and consulted widely. He has combined the revisions by Clark McAlister (the Editor-in-Chief at Kalmus, the publisher of the work's Critical Edition) with his own emendations.

'The Bells of Zlonice' is large-scale and ambitious, 56 minutes from Serebrier. He conducts it with great conviction and energy, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra vibrant in response. Although it may not be Dvořák's greatest music there is much drama and poetry enshrined in it, powerfully and sensitively conveyed here, the lengthy first-movement exposition indivisibly repeated (typically), the 20-minute playing-time for this opener not a second too long; there is some glorious music here. So too in the restless Adagio, given Brucknerian space by Serebrier, and the Scherzo dances vivaciously with pointed rhythms, then proudly marches into the Trio. As for the finale, effectively unique given Serebrier's additional alterations (even if recent recordings such as by Jiří Bělohlávek and Karel Mark Chichon use the Critical Edition), it emerges as purposeful and resplendent, sometimes jaggedly so.

The disc is completed by two Slavonic Dances, No.4 and – with a fond farewell – No.8, both from Opus 72 (bringing the box's total to eight, including four from Opus 46); both are given with pride and, where appropriate, pathos and also a cuckooing clarinet! The resonance of the A-flat Dance is cut off a little too soon.

The other new disc couples Symphonies 4 and 5 (if strangely in reverse order), wonderfully delectable works both, bar none. No.5, with claims to be Dvořák's unofficial 'pastoral symphony' (like Brahms 2), is seen in a slightly tougher light by Serebrier, certainly rhythmically, while not denuding its flora and fauna, and open air, aspects. There is a love of life here, a celebration of beauty and exuberance, the orchestration full of beguiling detail. The Andante con moto sings an eloquent song, but the link into the Scherzo is poorly edited – 'black-hole' silence for a few seconds in music that should flow one to another (the yearning introduction to the third movement is also marked Andante con moto) – yet once it is into its stride there is plenty of joyful liveliness. Dvořák reserves the greatest striving, and some ominous clouds, for the finale, and also one of his most expansive melodies; come the end, all is imperious triumph, fanfares to the fore, relished eagerly by those in Bournemouth.

Quite why Symphony 4 is so little played is a mystery; it overflows with tunes and high spirits: life-enhancing music tinged with soulfulness in the slow movement (quite Wagnerian in its Tannhäuser-like scoring, but with Dvořák's greater humanity). Then the Scherzo (once used as the signature-tune for BBCTV's *The Expert*, which first aired in 1968 and starred Marius Goring) really struts the dance-floor and gets even more foot-tapping in the Trio ... and if this isn't enough the finale sweeps the listener along infectiously and also touches the heart with yet-another of Dvořák's generous melodies.

Serebrier's Dvořák cycle is an excellent set, good and varied, to rank with such classic versions as those conducted by Kertész, Kubelík, Rowicki and Suitner – and others – and with some initial sonic shortcomings overcome for the more-recent releases. If the concert-goer is denied many of this composer's riches, the record-collector is well-served and has the enlightenment of knowing music beyond those scores that are habitually trotted out. My listening ended with the Fourth Symphony, its coda making one want to get up and jive! And how emphatic Serebrier makes the final chords: Dvořák at his most outgoing.