

PHCD

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# SEBASTIAN

- 1 A Venetian Square - Barcarolle - Street Brawl  
Cortege and Procession - Sebastian's Dance 16:33
- 2 The Theft of the Veil - The Sisters' Dance of Vengeance -  
Incantation and Vigil - The Piercing of the Wax Image - Dance of  
the Wounded Courtesan - The Substitution - The Piercing of the  
Living Body - Death of Sebastian 20:05

By Gian Carlo Menotti  
Jose Serebrier, Conductor - The London Symphony Orchestra

3 Legend 10:53 4 Lyric Scene 6:11

By Otto Luening

Jose Serebrier, Conductor - Oslo Philharmonic

Total Timing 53:58 Per Oien, Flute • Erik Larsen, Oboe

A A D



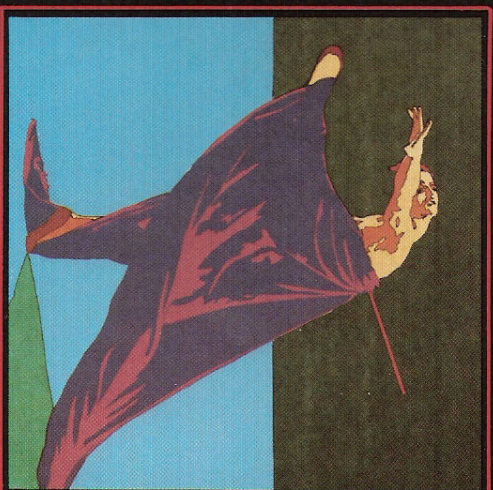
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# SEBASTIAN

By GIAN CARLO MENOTTI  
LYRIC SCENE • LEGEND by OTTO LUENING



Jose Serebrier, Conductor  
LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

# SEBASTIAN

It would be an understatement to say that great ballet music does not have to be great music. For its own sake obviously it had better be at least *good* music, dance being the most ephemeral of the arts. But rare indeed is the score that survives when choreography dies, as most of it does. The simple truth is that Theater music does not "travel" readily as a rule. And even those few exceptions that reach the concert hall must then confront another, entirely different battery of acoustical tables.

With ballet itself, much more complex criterion variables are involved, and they apply with fierce force. Longevity may be millennia (literally or figuratively) in painting, sculpture, architecture, drama, poetry, and even music — which *exists*, after all, awaiting only our sensory summons. But ballet is something else, and it will be until that distant day when dance notation is uniformly codified and universally accepted.

Meanwhile this omnibus aesthetic continues to yield something that is less a compound than a fragile colloid, occupying time and space in a configuration never identically replicated. Moreover (and hesitantly shifting metaphors), there is little venture capital for "growth stock" in this highest-risk domain of cultural commerce. A season or two can approximate light-years of posterity. Immediate success or failure is usually decisive, and in the latter category a second chance comes only to the fortunate; the law of supply and demand operates nowhere more classically than in the relationship between a balletomane and his box office.

Of course there are exceptions to this rule, also. Beyond doubt the most celebrated case is that of *Swan Lake*, which died horribly on the occasion of its 1877 premiere and might be dead yet if the triumph of *The Sleeping Beauty* had not set Marius Petipa to wondering how the same Tchaikovsky could have been responsible for a total fiasco only a dozen years earlier. As it turned out, what *Swan Lake* needed was a choreographer worthy of the music and the book. It got two: the elegant Petipa and his even more brilliant Lev Ivanov. Both perceived that Tchaikovsky had revolutionized ballet in this quasisymphonic conception, with *Leitmotive* underlining characterizations and myriad orchestral textures all but depicting in tone the situations unfolding onstage. Ivanov, in particular, rose to the challenge, creating movements and patterns that were virtually organic extensions of the music; his Act II may represent the most remarkable flash of genius in dance annals (in full productions it is of a piece with the whole, but so nearly perfect is this work within a work that it has lived an independent life as the "abridged version" that adorns many a repertoire). Thus it came to pass that *Swan Lake* was reborn in a blaze of glory

some eighteen years after its demise. And as everyone knows it has held its place among the handful of acknowledged full-length balletic masterworks down to this day.

The foregoing divagation will be irrelevant for those who are just now getting acquainted with the fascinating history of ballet. Others will understand that no invidious comparisons are implied in noting that *Sebastian*, too, has had more than one chance. Doubtless there will be further productions also because this work has two things going for it; a really viable scenario and a superbly opposite score. Both are Gian Carlo Menotti.

It hardly needs to be said that Menotti with Benjamin Britten is the leading opera composer of our epoch. He wrote his earliest, *The Death of Pierrot*, at the age of ten (in Cadegliano, Italy, where he was born on July seventh, 1911). He was to write many others. But his fame was insured absolutely by the dozen variously successful operas beginning, in 1937, with *Ametia al ballo*. Each of those that followed was a contribution of consequence to the contemporary lyric stage, and several of them have endured so many hundreds of performances that they can be seen as fixed stars in the firmament: *The Old Maid and the Thief* (1939), *The Island God* (1942), *The Medium* (1946), *The Telephone* (1947), *The Consul* (1950), *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954), *Maria Golovin* (1958), *Labyrinth* (1963), *The Las Savage* (1963), and *Martin's Life* (1964).

Menotti meantime has composed substantial works in the traditional concert forms. These include especially the Piano Concerto (1945), the symphonic suite *Apocalypse* (1952), the Violin Concerto (also 1952), and *The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi*, a dramatic cantata for soprano, baritone, children's chorus, and orchestra (1963).

Because he is above all a man of the theater, it comes as no surprise that dance would be second only to opera in a quantitative rank-ordering of the Menotti catalogue. Not counting the crucial dance-mime role in *The Medium* or the equally important dance episode in *Amahl*, the total stands at three; and each composition is very different from the others. In 1947 he provided the score for Martha Graham's *Errand into the Maze*, a powerful modern-dance duet (originally with Mark Ryder) based on the myth of Theseus. In 1956, on commission from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, Menotti composed music to his own libretto (as it was described) for *The Unicorn, the Gorgon, and the Mantichore*, an exquisitely wrought "Madrigal fable" mounted by the New York City Ballet in choreography by John Butler. But the most extended of Menotti's dance scores, and arguably his most significant achievement in this genre, remains the first: *Sebastian*.

Ironically, if logically, the vicissitudes of this ballet perhaps offer the most conclusive external evidence of its musico-dramatic value. *Sebastian* has been intermittently extant in at least six successive productions for a full quarter-century. The performance data so beloved of balletomanes may be summarized as follows:

The original production of *Sebastian*, choreographed by Edward Clifton (a gifted dancer turned

ballet master, but out of his depth as a choreographer), was given on October thirty-first, 1944, by the erstwhile Ballet International. The company had been founded only a few months earlier by that fantastic patron-impresario of Chilean birth and Spanish-Danish parentage whose name in its sonorous entirety was The Eighth Marquis de Piedrablanca de Guana de Cuevas and whose fortune (actually his wife's — she was the granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller) helped to keep ballet alive through World War II and for some years afterward. For *Sebastian* the title role was created by the incomparable Francisco Moncion, that of the Courtesan by Viola Essen, that of the Prince by Kari Karnakoski. Oliver Smith was entrusted with the decor, and the costumes were by Milena. John Martin of the *New York Times* was unable to attend the premiere, but he did review a subsequent performance. Predictably, he was not impressed by Caton's contribution, though "considered as the first work of a new choreographer [it] is a creditable effort." Predictably, also, the *Times* critic was considerably less restrained in his appraisal of the score: "The music... by Gian Carlo Menotti, is by all odds the best part of the work, and in its excursions into unblushing melodrama it is brilliantly effective."

That opening (and only) season of Ballet International cost the Marquis an estimated \$800,000 in less than two months. For the moment, that was the end of *Sebastian*. (In the months following, Menotti prepared a concert Suite in five sections. It was introduced at a Lewisohn Stadium concert by the New York Philharmonic, Alexander Smallens conducting, on August eighth, 1945.)

In 1946, when the so-called Original Ballet Russe returned to New York after a four-year sojourn in South America, *Sebastian* was revived for its gala season at the Metropolitan Opera House. That October 13th, Moncion again assumed the title role; Rosella Hightower was the Courtesan, George Skibine the Prince. A year later the so-called Grand Ballet de Monte Carlo, which had just absorbed the whilom Ballet International, once again mounted the original production of *Sebastian*. But this time George Skibine moved up to the title role.

Those who are not fanatic in such matters need not be detained by the constant cross-pollination of personnel and particularly the semantic highinks that complicate the chronicle of twentieth-century ballet: So that the Ballets de Theatre de Monte Carlo became the Ballets Russes de Carlo, which then dropped the s's, which then splintered into — after still further changes of company names — the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Original Ballet Russe. Nor does this begin to unravel the skein of unavoidably or deliberately similar sobriquets.)

None less than Agnes de Mille choreographed the next production of *Sebastian*. It was given by the American Ballet Theatre Workshop on May twenty-seventh, 1957, with John Kriza and Lupe Serrano as the leading dancers. It received but a single performance, Miss de Mille's eminence notwithstanding. The American Ballet Theatre itself did not attempt to produce the work.

The third choreographer to be associated with *Sebastian* already had collaborated with Menotti: John Butler. His entirely new version was mounted by the Netherlands Dans Theater on October twenty-second, 1963. The reception was favorable. The same choreographer then adapted and refined his handiwork for the Harkness Ballet. This production was given its premiere at the Casino Municipal, Cannes, on March fourth, 1966. It was introduced to the United States later that year. The principal dancers were Lawrence Rhodes, Brunilda Ruiz, Roderick Drew, Hester Fitzgerald, and Sarah Thomas. Both decor and costumes were, and continue to be, credited to Jacques Noel.

It remains to discuss the *Sebastian* scenario. The subtleties in its story line do not lend themselves to succinctness, but in any case it would be presumptuous in this context to do other than reproduce the Harkness Ballet's own approved précis:

"This ballet in one act and three scenes is set in Venice at the end of the seventeenth century. The Prince, in love with a notorious courtesan, has two possessive sisters, Flora and Maddalena, who are determined to disrupt the alliance. They steal the courtesan's veil, knowing that its possession will enable them to exercise their Black Magic over her. Constructing a wax image of the woman, they cover it with her veil and plan to kill her by piercing the image with arrows. But the Moorish slave, Sebastian, who has loved the courtesan, substitutes himself for the wax figure and takes the deadly arrows. By his self-sacrifice he breaks the evil power, renouncing the Prince and his beloved."

To which a proper postscript might be this excerpt from an article by the composer:

"Nothing in the theatre can be as exciting as the amazing quickness with which music can express a situation or describe a mood... It is this very power of music to express feeling so much more quickly than words which makes libretti, when read out of context, appear rather brutal and unconvincing." Yes.

When the aforementioned Suite from *Sebastian* was first heard in New York, critic Mark A. Schubart reported in the *Times* that the music "is prettily orchestrated, and the more violent portions are filled with elaborate percussion effects, flutter-tonguing on the brasses and carefully balanced, effective sonorities." He noted also the "attractive melodies, simple in intent and immediate in appeal."

Naturally these remarks would obtain also as to the ballet score itself, of which this is the first *integral* recording. But in fact the score does not call for analysis, and probably (as the composer implies) no amount of descriptive prose could evoke the special Gestalt of *Sebastian*. For anyone who has scanned the scenario summary, there is enough verisimilitude in Menotti's music to tell the tale.

Notes by James Lyons  
Editor, *The American Record Guide*

## JOSE SEREBRIER

When Leopold Stokowski hailed Jose Serebrier as "the greatest master of orchestral balance", the 22-year-old musician was Associate Conductor of The American Symphony Orchestra in New York. That year his Carnegie Hall debut was hailed by the American press for the "great intensity, precision and clarity" of his music-making. Said The New York Times: "Jose Serebrier, who is at least 50 years younger than Stokowski, let the music storm the heavens, and sing, with great emotional vitality."

By the time Serebrier had made his debut recording with the Symphony No. 4 by Charles Ives, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, he was winning accolades from music critics and the public all over the world. Hi-Fi News insisted that "Serebrier's recording of the Ives Symphony is one of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the Gramophone." In the US High Fidelity Musical America had this to say: "We had renditions by Stokowski and other conductors. Now Serebrier has recorded the work on his own with the London Philharmonic, and his performance is unquestionably the cleanest, most precise, and most decisive that we have on disc. The clarity is quite extraordinary."

Since his early years with Stokowski's American Symphony, and after several seasons with George Szell as "Composer-in-Residence" of the Cleveland Orchestra, Jose Serebrier has been conducting regularly every major orchestra in America and Europe. He made enormously successful debuts with the Philadelphia, Pittsburgh Symphony and Cleveland Orchestras. Wrote the Cleveland Plain Dealer: "Jose Serebrier made a triumphant return to Cleveland... it was an exhilarating evening... Serebrier shapes an interpretation of controlled excitement, and the players perform magnificently for him. With the Cleveland Orchestra at his fingertips, the exuberant conductor seemed to be having the time of his life. He threw himself into the music unselfconsciously. In the slow movement, he abandoned the baton and conducted from the heart. Serebrier's enthusiasm communicated brilliantly and the orchestra played with enjoyment. The Tchaikovsky 5th Finale was so hair-raising that the large crowd burst into spontaneous cheers."

Besides recording with the London Philharmonic and the London Symphony Orchestras, Serebrier has recorded with the Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide Symphony Orchestras during his tours of Australia.

## OTTO LUENING

Otto Luening was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1900. He heard about electronic sound in production as a possible compositional tool from Ferruccio Busoni with whom he was studying in Zurich in 1918.

Luening's career has been distinguished by his versatile activities. He has been active as flutist, opera and orchestra conductor, accompanist, and Professor of Composition at Columbia.

Since 1952 he has been an active pioneer in the field of tape and electronic music, often in collaboration with Vladimir Ussachevsky.

Luening's more than 200 works in other categories include much chamber music, symphonic works, an opera "Evangeline," piano music, songs and choral works. His compositions have been played throughout the world by such orchestras as the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Chicago, St. Louis, Mexico City, Montevideo, and the Haerlem Orchestra of Holland.

He is a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, a Trustee of the American Academy in Rome and is a member of the Educational Advisory Board of the Guggenheim Foundation.

"**LYRIC SCENE**" for flute and strings and "**LEGEND**" for oboe and strings show many varied contemporary ways of using these conventional media without introducing radical materials. Although the tonal material is old it is used in new ways.

The "Lyric Scene," in memory of Ferruccio Busoni, begins with the flute with string accompaniment used somewhat in the manner of an 18th Century aria. In the second section the flute soars over what becomes melodic and contrapuntal string writing. Further lyric variations let the flute soar again but now to its higher register. The flute restates previous material which the strings and then the flute expand. The strings alone, later joined by the soloist, reach the lyric climax of the composition. The opening subject, somewhat abbreviated, ends the "Lyric Scene."

The "Legend" composed for Robert Bloom and the New Chamber Music Society in New York in 1951 opens with a slow, melodic narrative statement played by the soloist. Its contrasting phrases and developments are over an independent rhythmic-melodic string accompaniment. A variation of this section follows. The tempo changes to *Allergro con spirito* — a dance-like section in three four meter begins with the strings later joined by the oboe. An initiative lively section is played by strings alone. It is followed by a folksonglike oboe tune with accompaniment. The work closes with variations of section one followed by the dance in four four meter, and altered rhythmically.