

Peter Serkin An Appreciation by Rick Masters

The American pianist Peter Serkin (July 24, 1947-February 1, 2020) has died at the age of 72.

Serkin once told *New York Times* critic Donal Henahan, “I used to think I was boring, so I came on, I guess, trying to be interesting. Now I don’t care about all that. I’ve just decided to be who I am.” Who was Peter Serkin? Music lovers unfamiliar with his work may know him solely as the son of the great Rudolf Serkin. Once you have heard enough of Peter’s playing, however, it is easy to forget that connection and think of him entirely on his own terms. Although his physical appearance later in life and some performance mannerisms often brought Serkin *père* to mind, the two did not have as much in common as one might expect. The pianist’s travails as the son of a famous father and his struggles to find himself and carve out his own path are well-documented, and do not need rehearsing here. I would like to focus on Serkin’s work and his legacy as a pianist.

Peter Serkin’s solo repertoire was enormous, reaching across the centuries from Josquin and the English virginalists to Beethoven Sonatas, from Mozart to scores written by Serkin’s friends, scores such as the Variations op. 24 of the late Oliver Knussen, or the Fantasy Pieces by Peter Lieberson. His programming was always fascinating, placing Chopin alongside Wuorinen, Stravinsky’s piano sonata before the *Diabelli* Variations. Serkin made a name for himself early in his career as a pianist willing to tackle difficult contemporary music. The complete Messiaen *Vingts Regards sur l’enfant-Jésus* was performed from memory in recital in the early 1970s and then [recorded by RCA](#), all to great acclaim. The ethereal music of Tōru Takemitsu was a specialty of Serkin’s, as was the music of gnarly serialist Stefan Wolpe.

Above all, Serkin was curious, always willing to explore music (and musical concepts) that other classical pianists wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole. His father must have taught him to love the music of Max Reger, for Serkin begged conductors to allow him to perform the piano concerto with their orchestras (often to no avail). He also played the Reger Variations and Fugue on a theme of Bach, op. 81 a number of times over the years, making a solid case for a work that in some hands can come off as a sterile academic exercise. Serkin experimented with the *fortepiano* in the 1980s, and recorded the final six sonatas of Beethoven and a selection of Schubert dances on a Conrad Graf instrument. Later in his career, he enjoyed performing on modern pianos that had been tuned to a non-equal temperament (seventh-comma modified meantone temperament, to be exact, according to an online [testimonial](#) given to his friend, piano technician and salesman Tim Farley). It was wild to hear the 2006 New York premiere of Elliott Carter’s *Intermittences* on a piano that sounded a bit honky-tonk, but somehow, in Serkin’s hands, it worked.

Unlike some of the well-known solo pianists of his generation, Serkin reveled in playing chamber music. The group TASHI (Ida Kavafian, violinist; Fred Sherry, cellist; Richard Stolzman, clarinetist, and Serkin) was founded with the express intention of performing Messiaen’s *Quartet for the end of time*, and toured the world in the 1970s with that piece as a central part of its repertoire. He famously collaborated with the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, their work culminating in a Harmonia Mundi release of a live recital from the 2004 Ravinia Festival which is one of the greatest recordings of its kind ([review](#)). There were many performances with string quartets, as well as renowned soloists like Harold Wright, Pamela Frank, and others.

Serkin’s playing was always arresting, even when you disagreed with his musical ideas. A [YouTube video](#) from a 2017 performance in New Jersey captures what is one of the slowest renditions of the Mozart Adagio in B Minor on record. It takes him 14:40 to traverse the score. Compare his timing to that of some of his musical brethren:

Giesecking:	6:24
Hess:	6:54
Horowitz:	7:54
Perahia:	9:40
Brendel:	10:11
Uchida:	10:45

(Only Claudio Arrau bests him in the slow sweepstakes, taking a whopping 16 minutes, 42 seconds.) Even at such a slow pace, Serkin's performance features sensitive shaping, a lovely singing tone, a masterful use of rubato, and above all, what sounds like a deep emotional connection to this heartbreaking score. In Serkin's hands, the piece is operatic and soaring, a major work that deserves its place alongside the better-known Rondo in A Minor, K. 511. If I heard this performance live, I wouldn't think twice about the slow tempo; the amount of detail in the playing fascinates, even if ultimately this is not a performance I would take to a desert island with me.

Readers unfamiliar with Serkin's work who wish to seek out his recordings should consider the following performances.

Beethoven: Sonata no. 29 in B-flat Major, op. 106, "Hammerklavier" (Live in Tokyo – YouTube)

Serkin's performances of this sonata were always of the white-knuckle variety. When I heard him play the piece at Carnegie Hall in 2006, he seemed to be striving for Beethoven's frenetic metronome markings. He nearly came to grief at the beginning of the final movement, and had to pull the tempo back after an unfocused start. This live recording is tighter, less scrambled than that 2006 performance (though some notes still fall by the wayside, as happens in any live performance of this piece), and it is more exciting than his 1980s ProArte fortepiano recording. The slow movement is shaped with great care, and the very specific voicing brings a great deal of clarity to the score.

Brahms: Three Violin Sonatas, op. 78, op. 100, op. 108 – with Pamela Frank (Decca)

Serkin's recorded chamber repertoire reflects only a small portion of his work in that area. The performances on this disc of the Brahms sonatas are "Schnabelian" (recalling the pianist Artur Schnabel); the fast movements are quite fast, and the slow movements are quite slow. Both Frank and Serkin make interesting choices with their articulation and phrasing. Frank utilizes quite a bit of white sound (no vibrato), though always to good effect. Although these are not sentimental readings by any means, Frank and Serkin are not afraid to use healthy amounts of rubato, sometimes in surprising places (the third movement of op. 108 is a good example). Overall, this is one of the best modern recordings of these sonatas.

Debussy: Four Études (Live in Chicago, 2009 – YouTube)

Étude 1 - pour les cinq doigts d'après Monsieur Czerny

Étude 8 - pour les agréments

Étude 6 - pour les huit doigts

Étude 11 - pour les arpèges composés

Few piano enthusiasts would think of Peter Serkin as a Debussy pianist, but here are these four stellar études. Full of humor, colorful, fleet of finger, perhaps spikier than classic performances by "Debussytes" such as Walter Giesecking or Martino Tirimo, these études sparkle. Unlike some pianists who hide behind a massive wash of pedal, Serkin prioritizes clear textures, allowing the listener to perceive many interesting details in the music. One can hear a scampish sense of humor in these études, his articulation and phrasing creating interpretations that dance where others remain earthbound.

Messiaen: Quartet for the End of Time (TASHI) (RCA Gold Seal)

This is the gold standard recording of Olivier Messiaen's magisterial *Quartet for the End of Time*. The four performers dig into Messiaen's masterpiece like their lives depend on it, their fervent playing kindling the apocalyptic music into blazing existence. Every movement possesses special linear tension. There is a line, an always forward-moving line that gives the faster movements nervous energy, and bestows upon the slow, meditative movements a feeling of blooming vibrancy. It is difficult to explain, but to give an example, in the cello solo *Louange à l'Éternité de Jesus*, the sound seems to expand outwards. It is tremulous and delicate, floating slowly from the speakers into infinite space, never hesitating or resting, just shimmering away. Fred Sherry's passionate declamation is underpinned by Serkin's perfectly-voiced chords, which support the cello in every moment of this emotionally-naked movement. The strength of Messiaen's faith is heard in every bar of this recording.

Schubert: Sonata in G Major, D. 894 (RCA Victor LM2874, LP - 1966)

This was Serkin's second recording for RCA, following his debut Goldberg Variations. It is almost unbelievable that this is a teenaged pianist. The haunting first chords are impeccably balanced, played with a long, arching phrase that carries the listener forward while never hurrying. The second movement is plain-spoken, appropriately so. The third movement is perhaps a bit too slow, sounding cautious in its approach to the bumptious Minuet, but the final *Allegretto* has just the right amount of energy and sly good-humored insolence. The overall gentleness and color of the pianism on display in this performance set apart Peter Serkin from his father, whose Schubert was more muscular, and frankly harder-toned.

***The Ocean That Has No West and No East* (Koch International Classics 3-7450-2H1)**

One of Serkin's strengths was his ability to make serial or otherwise "difficult" modern music comprehensible to listeners who were not necessarily receptive to that language. This was achieved not only by careful programming in concert (the previously-mentioned couching of modern music amongst more audience-friendly scores), but also via his carefully-considered interpretations. Serkin shared with his older American colleague David Burge (1930-2013) a skill for intelligible, shaped performances of pieces that many other pianists struggled to play, let alone interpret. Even in the most demanding of modern works, Serkin was always calm, cool, and collected, playing with beautiful tone and a clear sense of phrasing. This disc brings together piano works of Stefan Wolpe, Tōru Takemitsu, Oliver Knussen, Anton Webern, and Peter Lieberson. Although all of the pieces are given strong performances, it is the Wolpe works that are a revelation. Wolpe developed his own peculiar brand of serialism that focused on specific intervals rather than an equivalent use of the twelve tones of the scale. The result is music which is challenging yet somehow more lucid than other mid-20th century modernists. Serkin liked these pieces (Toccata, Pastorale, Rag-Caprice, Form #4: Broken Sequences) and performed them throughout his career. For a listener who wants to dip his toes into the modern music pool, this disc is an excellent place to start.

Serkin recorded most of his career for RCA, with some side trips to ProArte, Arcana, Koch, Vivace Records, and several other companies. His RCA recordings of Mozart sonatas and concerti are highly regarded by critics, and were recently released in a cheap 6-CD box set by Sony Music. A number of the earlier RCA LPs such as his first recording of the Goldbergs and the Schubert D. 894 have never been released on CD. It appears that Sony will be putting out a complete box set in May of 2020, a fitting tribute to this wonderful pianist who is gone far too soon.