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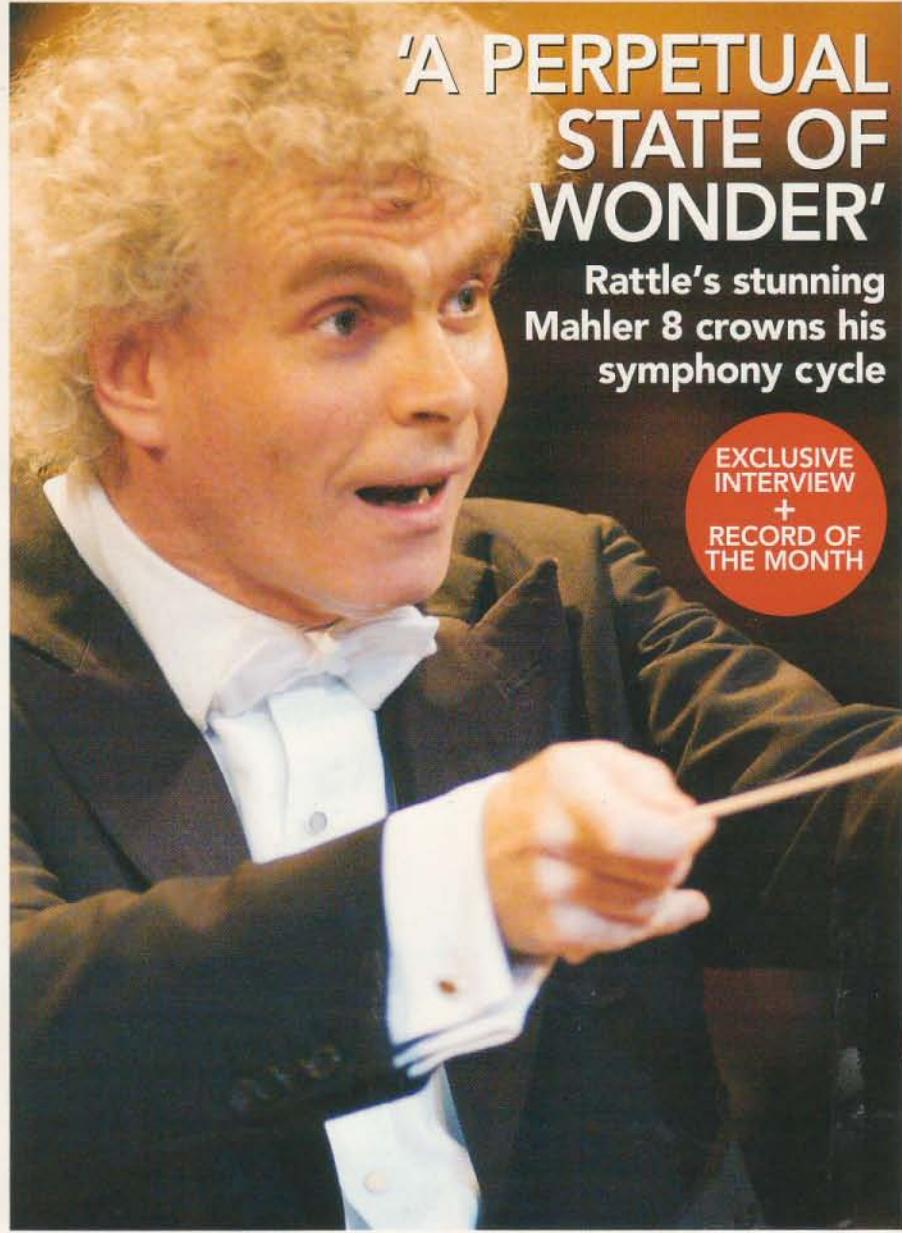
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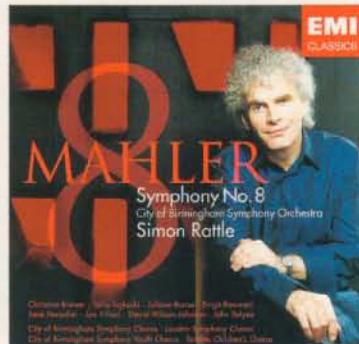


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of this month's most
outstanding new disc

APRIL 2005

THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE *The* GRAMOPHONE

INTERVIEW SHARON ISBIN

THE GUITARIST ON A REAL PARTNERSHIP OF MUSIC AND TECHNOLOGY

Given the sheer size of the classical catalogue, it's unusual these days for a major artist and a major orchestra to achieve a genuine recording first in mainstream repertoire. But guitarist Sharon Isbin and the New York Philharmonic have managed just that: America's oldest orchestra has just made its first solo guitar recording (it's also 26 years since the orchestra last collaborated with a guitarist on stage).

Which seems something of an oversight, given the number of guitar concertos the 20th century saw, not least the three works on the Warner disc – from Joaquín Rodrigo, Manuel Ponce and Heitor Villa-Lobos. Isbin is more forgiving. 'With any relatively young instrument – and you have to consider the guitar to be younger than the violin, cello or piano – it takes time to develop the repertoire, develop the technique, and in this case, the technology, in order to be able to compete on the main stage as do other mainstream instruments. I feel that that has now happened.'

Part of the battle was overcoming the instrument's sonic limitations: how to retain its subtlety, nuance and sensitivity when competing against an orchestra.

Eleven years ago Isbin had a special wireless sound system designed for her, which she's used ever since. A resonating soundbox is placed roughly two metres behind her on the floor, facing the audience. 'It provides such a natural reinforcement of the guitar sound that most of the time people in the audience don't even know that there's any additional amplification. They are just amazed that they can hear the guitar so well.'

That said, Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* was actually written to work with an orchestra, and still be heard. 'Of course, Rodrigo succeeded,' says Isbin, even if 'there are a few spots in the work where one has to be especially careful'. One of the century's most famous works – the haunting, nostalgic second movement was even adapted by Miles Davis, thus entering the jazz canon. Isbin says 'it broke all the ground to make it possible for the guitar to be accepted as a concerto instrument with orchestra'.

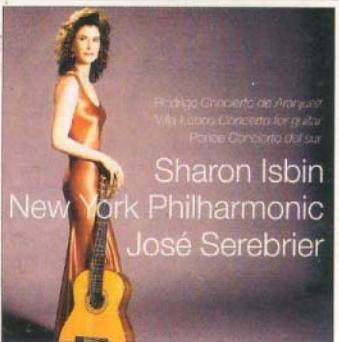
The disc, conducted by José Serebrier, also contains Villa-Lobos's *Guitar Concerto* and Ponce's *Concierto del sur*, works which Isbin points out are 'rarely performed and recorded'. 'Each delves into the folk element with

marvellous Latin melodic and rhythmic elements in the writing, and certainly Villa-Lobos was skilled not only as a composer but as one who could capture the song and dance forms of his country and integrate them within a classical context. Being a guitarist, he really knew the instrument.

'It's like handing on a silver platter the three top entrées of one of the best restaurants in the world.'

Recording the guitar poses different technological challenges again. Placing a speaker in the middle of the orchestra would have affected the recording. Instead, Isbin sat a 'little further from the orchestra than I would normally, and I was facing them'. A semi-sound-proofed microphone pointing towards her, and away from them, produced a separate track of guitar for use in the production process. If orchestral players needed to hear Isbin more clearly, they each had an earpiece linked to the guitar mic.

Isbin hopes that with this recording she and her production team have set 'a new technical standard for how guitar and orchestra recording is achieved,' – one which maintains the 'depth, clarity and fullness of the orchestral sound while not eclipsing the guitar. A real partnership is what I strove to achieve,' she says. **Martin Cullingford**



**RODRIGO. PONCE.
VILLA-LOBOS**
Guitar Concertos
Sharon Isbin; NYPO
/ José Serebrier
Warner Classics



For many, maybe most, people Joaquín Rodrigo means the *Concierto de Aranjuez* coincidentally receiving a magnificent new recording from Sharon Isbin this month.

This, amazingly, is the first time the New York Philharmonic have ever recorded with a solo guitar. This, then, is quite a first because between them and the soloist Sharon Isbin, they bring these often hackneyed works to life. As well as the ever-popular Rodrigo, Isbin plays the delightful Villa-Lobos concerto, premiered by Segovia in 1956 – it's a tremendous work and it would be good if her advocacy helped it gain a stronger foothold in the concert-hall.

Film music

Where does the music come from? In Shore's case, from New York's finest

Shore

The Departed – Original soundtrack
Sharon Isbin, Marc Ribot, Larry Saltzman,
GE Smith gtrs orchestra / Howard Shore
Silva Screen F SILCD1225 (42' • 000)

It takes four to tango as Shore teams up with Scorsese again



For Martin Scorsese's new thriller of duplicitous goings-on on the murkier side of Boston, Howard Shore has come up with a guitar-fest featuring four of New York's finest guitarists with their Gibson, Dobro, Spanish and acoustic guitars. The memorable main theme, a compelling tango heard in the opening track played by GE Smith and Larry Saltzman, is the

score's *leitmotif*. It returns as an elegy for "the faithful departed" (tr 4), in heavy-metal guise (tr 11) and at the end in an elaborate showcase for Dobro player Marc Ribot, his colleagues and percussion.

Sharon Isbin receives star billing and the score's most substantial piece, "Billy's Theme", named after the film's odd man out played by Leonardo DiCaprio. This insistent, plucked theme accompanied by *pianissimo* strings builds over a string ostinato that, under Isbin's fingers, is transfigured into a poetic study of a man struggling to express his inner anguish. "Boston Common" is in similar thoughtful vein, a sarabande in which Isbin brings off the intricate part-writing with consummate ease.

As with *The Aviator*, the last Shore-Scorsese collaboration, the music on this soundtrack is confined to Shore's original work. Those in search of a favourite Scorsese track, "Gimme Shelter", will have to see the film or buy the DVD when it appears. Make no mistake though, this CD compels attention. Shore's best to date, I'd say. Adrian Edwards

Now departing:
Leonardo di Caprio,
Martin Sheen and
Mark Wahlberg

