

Tibor Serly

Tibor Serly was born in Losonc, Hungary on November 25, 1901. He began his musical studies with his father, Lajos Serly, a Hungarian patriot, theatrical composer, and pupil of Liszt. Due to financial hardships, Lajos Serly moved his family in 1905 to New York City, where Tibor spent his childhood. Until 1922 he gained experience as a violinist/violist in pit orchestras led by his father.

In 1922 he returned to Budapest to attend the Liszt Academy. There, he studied violin with Jenő Hubay, composition with Zoltán Kodály, and orchestration with Leó Weiner, graduating in 1925 with highest honors. During his years in Budapest, Serly first made the acquaintance of Béla Bartók who became his longtime mentor and friend.

Serly returned to the United States upon graduation and held positions as a violinist and violist in leading American orchestras, including the Philadelphia Orchestra under the baton of Eugene Ormandy and the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Arturo Toscanini. He also became close friends with several modernist poets, including William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting, and most notably Ezra Pound, whom Serly visited frequently at Pound's home in Rapallo, Italy, arranging concerts there.

In 1938, Serly retired from performing to focus on composing and teaching. In 1940, Béla Bartók and his wife emigrated from wartime Hungary to New York. Until Bartók's death in 1945, Serly devoted his energies to providing material and emotional support to the ailing exiled composer. Serly's papers include intimate photographs of Bartók and himself, as well as a home movie of an informal piano performance by Bartók. Serly arranged the "Mikrokosmos" suite for chamber orchestra, orchestrated the "Third Concerto for Piano," and posthumously completed the master's "Concerto for Viola" from sketches of the work. A talented decipherer and stylist, he also reconstructed a duet by Liszt and a section of Schubert's unfinished "Eighth Symphony."

From the 1930s on, Serly engaged in serious theoretical studies, developing a post-Schoenbergian enharmonic system called "Modus Lascivus," which divides the twelve-tone scale into two segments to create a multimodal chromatic scale system. Serly published two advanced theoretical texts, "A Second Look at Harmony" (1964) and "Modus Lascivus: The Road to Enharmonicism" (1976), and had just completed a third, "The Rhetoric of Melody", at the time of his death. Serly was also working on both a personal memoir and a biography of Bartók, the unfinished typescripts of which are included in his papers.

Towards the end of his life, Serly relocated with his second wife, the pianist Miriam Molin, to Longview, Washington, where he continued to teach and actively championed modernist music in the Pacific Northwest. At the end of his career, Serly was better known for his famous friends and collaborators, especially Bartók and Pound, than for his own musical and theoretical work, a fact about which he complained bitterly in later correspondence. He was, however, indefatigable in his commitment to both innovation in modern music and the preservation of the rich musical traditions in which he had played a central role.

Serly died on October 8, 1978 after being struck by a car on a visit to London. His devoted wife Miriam, who kept his work alive through her performances, compiled the papers in this collection.