

ROGER SESSIONS

New World Records 80345

Symphony No. 4

Symphony No. 5

Rhapsody for Orchestra

Columbus Symphony Orchestra

CHRISTIAN BADEA, Conductor

An anomaly among his contemporaries, Roger Sessions (1896-1985) believed unwaveringly in an ideal that became anachronistic in his own time--that of a great and sustained and, above all, a *single* Western musical culture. Many of his colleagues (second-generation modernist composers who matured between the world wars) viewed the first explosion of modernism as a mandate (or at least an excuse) to chart largely divergent paths--pursuing the "ultra-modern," searching for an American idiom, rooting around for a "new objectivity," or transforming expressionism into an overtly political movement. Sessions, however, resolutely maintained a conservative and comprehensive vision of American musical culture. Thus, he viewed the immigration of European musicians to America, engendered by the crises of the wars, as an opportunity for Americans to assume responsibility for the continued sustenance of the Great Tradition. To this end, he often warned against American isolationism and the fragmentation of modernism:

If we are some day to have, as all of us hope, a great and luxuriant musical culture in America, it will not be because at one period in our cultural existence we became nervous and timid and exclusive and therefore impoverished, but because we have always had the courage to take and absorb whatever can be genuinely nourishing from any source whatever, to accept it and let it exert its leavening influence to the enrichment of our national inner life. For of great cultures the same must be true as of great individuals, as Emerson described so beautifully when he wrote "the greatest man is the most indebted man." ("Europe Comes to America," 1945)

Emerson's aphorism seems to have been a particular favorite of Sessions'; he quoted it often to bolster his own traditionalism. More important, his music exemplifies, perhaps for the last time, the ambitions and values of a unified European musical culture. Among his contemporaries, only his close friend Luigi Dallapiccola seems to have shared Session's view of tradition. Both composers seized upon the least disruptive and fragmenting features and interpretations of their immediate musical legacy. And each in his own way extracted the more localized polemics and sensibilities of the first phase of modernism to capture something more essential--as Sessions put it, the "energies which animate our psychic life":

"Emotion" is specific, individual and conscious; music goes deeper than this, to the energies which animate our psychic life, and out of these creates a pattern which has an existence, laws, and human significance of its own. It reproduces for us the most intimate essence, the tempo and the energy, of our spiritual being;...all, in fact, of the fine shades of dynamic variation of our inner life. ("The Composer and His Message," 1939)

This belief in the capacity of music to transcend the "specific, individual and conscious" and, presumably, all incarnations of parochial fashion, animates Sessions' music. Not surprisingly, then, Sessions channeled his thought into music for ensembles and genres associated with the culmination

of the central canon of European music, especially favoring the orchestral symphony—he wrote nine, over a fifty-year period.

Sessions did not take up the symphony for purposes of parody, nostalgia, or a mere simulation of the canonical works with which he identified. Rather, the symphonic format especially suited his penchant for extended forms in the "absolute music" tradition, the projections and differentiation of complex textures, and the broadest possible range of articulative resources. In turn, the extended forms and articulative opportunities afforded by the medium give special support to the characteristic gesture of Sessions' music, its often-noted "long line." As Elliott Carter described it,

More and more the notion of extended, continuously flowing sections during which ideas come to the surface, gain clarity and definition, and then sink back into the general flow has characterized Sessions' unique style. ("Current Chronicle," *The Musical Quarterly*, July 1959)

Carter observes this quality in Sessions' music beginning with the Violin Concerto, completed in 1935, midway between the First and Second Symphonies (which appeared in 1927 and 1946, respectively).

The emergence of "special continuity techniques" (to borrow one of Carter's phrases) signals Sessions' artistic maturity and seems to suggest a possible basis for categorizing his work. However, Sessions' music eludes such facile categorization, in large part because each piece is so comprehensive in its ambitions:

This presentation of the total musical personality in each work, whatever its ostensible object, must be regarded as an inseparable part of Sessions' creative strength. He does not, like other composers, thrive on the kind of limitation that maps out a specific musical area as the framework for the channeling of the creative appetite; for Sessions, the frame of reference is always the full range of musical material at his disposal. (Benjamin Boretz, "Current Chronicle," *The Musical Quarterly*, July 1961)

The emergence of twelve-tone works in the early 1950s might also appear to be an unambiguous point of reference in Sessions' output; but his incorporation of twelve-tone methods was sufficiently gradual and undogmatic so as to belie any sense of a revolutionary change at that point. However, viewed retrospectively, the composition of the short piano pieces *Pages from a Diary* at the end of the 1930s, in the wake of the Violin Concerto and the String Quartet No. 1 (1936), seems truly decisive. In describing the second of the published *Diary* pieces, Andrew Imbrie presented an inventory of crucial developments in Sessions' music:

[Sessions' style] has divested itself of all symptoms of eclecticism, and sounds like the music of no other composer. We become aware of the sustaining power of extended phrases, especially now that the accompanying rhythms have become so much more elastic—to the point, in fact, where they can now adequately set off the principal melodies. They are spun out with such inventive fantasy that the co-operation of a truly responsive accompaniment is needed: one which is rhythmically complementary rather than neutral or indifferent. The sense of key is still quite strong, although interesting ambiguities arise...(Andrew Imbrie, "The Symphonies of Roger Sessions," *Tempo*, 1972)

Such "interesting ambiguities" were more fully revealed in the Second Symphony, a work in which the rapprochement between vestigial tonality and nascent twelve-tone thinking was unforced but perhaps

indicative of a "transitional stage"-arguably unsustainable over an extended body of works. Characterized by the dramatic opposition of more violently contrasting materials, the Second Symphony integrated Sessions' concern for unified, large-scale line and gesture with a broader expressive range and more deeply etched articulations than much of his earlier music had contained.

The decade following the Second Symphony, during which Sessions consolidated his approach to twelve-tone compositional thought, culminated in the Third Symphony (1957), the String Quintet (1957-58), and the Fourth Symphony (1958). The three movements of the latter work were originally conceived as a set of character pieces, the outer movements developing as companions to the central Elegy, which in turn was originally inspired by the death of the composer's brother, in 1948. (As with many of Sessions' works, the material of this movement developed over a long gestation period. Such gradual crystallization of a particular musical idea is indicative of the long-term consistency of Sessions' compositional thought. In fact, much of the material for both the Third and Fourth Symphonies was sketched in 1950, significantly before the full composing-out of either work.)

While the movement titles of the Fourth (Burlesque, Elegy, Pastorale) indicate something of its idiosyncratic expressive domains, Sessions' conception of Burlesque is at once too knotty and long-breathed to suit stereotypes of expression. Similarly, the Elegy is too episodic and fitful--its high contrasts finally reconciled only by processes of extended transition--and the Pastorale too stark. Overall, the structural features of the Symphony--its rich motivic-developmental fabric, largeness of scale, and complexity of detail--overshadow the expressive conceits of its movement titles, despite its high expressivity and vivid surface gestures.

By comparison, the Fifth Symphony (a characteristic "late Sessions" work) is more concentrated in various respects: the pace of transformation is quicker, both in its play of motives and its progress within and between sections. A particularly broad range of associations, refinement of pacing, and skillful transformation of thematic materials contribute to the compelling coherence of the Symphony, taken in its entirety. The opening, oscillatory figure in bassoons and muted horns emerges throughout the three movements (which are played without pause) in various guises and under various transformations. Ultimately the opening motive is revealed as the destination as well as the source of all of the Symphony's material--its muscular, motoric rhythms as much as its mercurial figuration.

The period from 1963 to 1971--bordered by the opera *Montezuma* on one side and the completion of the monumental cantata *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (NW 296) on the other--was especially productive for Sessions. Within that period, he composed four full-scale symphonies (beginning with the Fifth in 1964), along with the magnificent Third Piano Sonata (1964-65; 80307), a set of Six Pieces for Violoncello (1966), and the Rhapsody for Orchestra (1970).

As dense and richly detailed as it is, the Rhapsody was something of a diversion from the composition of the big works of that period; by Sessions' own description, it is a "work of essentially lyrical and quasi-improvisatory character, in which strong contrasts appear on a relatively small scale." At first blush, the Rhapsody seems to be a tripartite condensation of a "typical" Sessions orchestral work. Although there is little developmental fussing over the highly contrasted material of the piece, its proportions and processes hint at the unfolding of a miniature symphony--until the epilogue, with its startlingly new material and abrupt reference to the work's opening gesture. The ultimate asymmetry and explosiveness of the Rhapsody are rendered especially eloquent by this adumbration of classical shapes and the consequent unanticipated and willful denial of such shapes.

The power of Sessions' example, as a teacher as well as a composer, may have contributed to a kind of complacency in the first public responses to his work. Especially during the 1950s and '60s, when many of his major pieces appeared, and when American music in the academy (much of which was conceived in his image) enjoyed its greatest prominence, Sessions' achievement was too often accepted passively and unthinkingly as a *fait accompli*. However, amid the unmediated diversity of the current scene (which has, perhaps, much in common with the ideological landscape of Sessions' early adulthood) the breadth of his vision and the uncompromised values underlying his work are more dramatically revealed. Like all of his mature compositions, the works presented on this record manifest courage as much as conviction, exemplifying one of the most comprehensive conceptions of artistic craft that the twentieth century has produced.

—Martin Brody

The composer Martin Brody, Associate Professor of Music at Wellesley College, has written extensively about Roger Sessions.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY OF WORKS WITH ORCHESTRA

- The Black Maskers* (suite). Eastman-Rochester Orchestra, Howard Hanson conducting. Mercury SRI-75049.
- . Vienna Symphony, Walter Hendl conducting. Desto 6404E.
- Concertino for Chamber Orchestra. University of Chicago Contemporary Chamber Players, Ralph Shapey conducting. Desto 7155.
- Concerto for Orchestra. Boston Symphony, Seiji Ozawa conducting. Hyperion A-66050.
- Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. Paul Zukofsky, violin; French Radio and Television Philharmonic Orchestra, Gunther Schuller conducting. CRI SD 220.
- Divertimento for Orchestra. Louisville Orchestra, Peter Leonard conducting. Louisville LOU 776.
- Idyll of Theocritus*. Audrey Nossaman, soprano; Louisville Orchestra, Robert Whitney conducting. Louisville LOU 57-4 (out of print).
- Rhapsody for Orchestra. New Philharmonia Orchestra, Frederick Prausnitz conducting. Argo ZRG-702.
- Symphony No. 1. Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, Akeo Watanabe conducting. CRI SD 131.
- Symphony No. 2. New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting. CRI SD 278.

Symphony No. 3. Royal Philharmonic, Igor Buketoff conducting. CRI SD 451.

Symphony No. 7. Louisville Orchestra, Peter Leonard conducting. Louisville LOU 776.

Symphony No. 8. New Philharmonia Orchestra, Frederick Prausnitz conducting. Argo ZRG-702.

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd. Esther Hinds, soprano; Florence Quivar, mezzo-soprano; Dominic Cossa, baritone; Tanglewood Festival Chorus; Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa conducting. New World 80296.

Christian Badea has been music director of the Columbus Symphony since 1983. He has conducted the orchestras of Detroit and Pittsburgh, the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique in Paris, and the Metropolitan, Netherlands, and English National operas. From 1977 to 1986 he was music director of the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, and Charleston, South Carolina, and conducted the Spoleto Festival's Grammy Award-winning recording of Samuel Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* for New World (80322/323/324).

The Columbus Symphony Orchestra was founded in 1950. It is one of the largest regional orchestras in the United States, and is rapidly growing. The orchestra performs in several concert series. In 1985 the orchestra added a summer season; it has also participated in the Lancaster Festival USA. This is the orchestra's recording debut.

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Assistant engineer: Edward Abbott

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String Quartet No. 1 Pro Arte Quartet. 80302.
Piano Sonata No. 2. Randall Hodgkinson, piano. 80320.
Piano Sonata No. 3. Robert Helps, piano. 80307.

Roger Sessions
Symphony No. 4
(publ. Edward B. Marks Music Corp.)
1- I. Burlesque (5:40)
2- II. Elegy (8:54)
3- III. Pastorale (9:04)
4- Symphony No. 5 (18:21)
(publ. Edward B. Marks Music Corp.)
I. Tranquillo
II. Lento
III. Allegro deciso
(played without pause)
5- Rhapsody for Orchestra (11:43)
(publ. Merion Music, Inc.)

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Christian Badea, conductor

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