

**ROGER SESSIONS &
FRANCIS THORNE**

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In a laudatory essay written in 1944 entitled "Arnold Schoenberg in the United States," Roger Sessions celebrated the European émigré composer's impact on the American scene. Sessions spoke in fervid, hopeful terms--of renewal, grand purpose, essential qualities:

He has given to many young musicians by direct influence, and to others through his disciples, a renewed sense of all that music is and has been, and it is hardly overbold to foresee that this is going to play its role, perhaps a mighty one, in the musical development of the United States....What is essential now is to recognize the need our world has for the qualities that Schoenberg possesses, and how admirably he supplies our need....(from *Roger Sessions on Music: Collected Essays*, ed. Edward T. Cone, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.)

Given his previous pronouncements on Viennese modernism, Sessions' optimistic assessment may seem curious. A decade earlier, the younger American composer had excoriated both Schoenberg and his school, referring to the "definitively esoteric character" of their music, its "tortured and feverish moods," its embodiment of "a decaying musical culture," and its diverse symptoms of "an art that is rapidly approaching exhaustion." Of course, in the early 1930s Sessions could not foresee the coming war, the dissolution of the Vienna Composers' School, or Schoenberg's emigration to the United States. Nor could Sessions anticipate the great works Schoenberg would produce during his early American years--among them the Violin Concerto and the Fourth String Quartet. In the Schoenberg essay, Sessions is explicit about this latter point: His reappraisal of Schoenberg (and of the viability of the twelve-tone method, which he had previously viewed with suspicion) occurred very much in light of these "American" compositions.

However, there is a second emphasis in Sessions' reassessment and his prophecy that Schoenberg, above all other European modernists, would provide a paradigm for music in the United States. In the 1944 essay, Sessions places special emphasis on Schoenberg's impact as a teacher who had a crucial message for his American students. He describes Schoenberg's *Models for Beginners in Composition*, a diminutive textbook compiled from the composer's UCLA class notes, with eloquence and passion. "[T]he little book," Sessions writes, "has for me a special significance as a moving testimony to Schoenberg's relationship to the American musical scene, and his brilliantly successful efforts to come to grips with certain of its problems." Sessions' locution is, again, curiously elevated. The *Models for Beginners*--for the most part a compilation of musical examples demonstrating techniques of phrase construction, motivic processes, harmonic progression, and short forms--makes no claims to address the particular problems of its time or place; beyond a preface, a "syllabus," and a glossary of terms, it contains no prose at all. In what sense, then, did *Models* testify to Schoenberg's heroic efforts, and what American problems did it address?

Sessions may have turned to Schoenberg's "little" textbook not only for evidence of the émigré master's pedagogical acumen and his commitment to cultivating American composers but, more crucially, to validate the utopian meanings he found in its approach to compositional technique. Acutely attentive to the profusion and plurality of American music, Sessions seemed to regard

Schoenberg's *Models* as a touchstone for musical quality--a textbook demonstration, with no overt ideological inflections of just those common techniques that could be shared between various compositional idioms and styles claiming viability in American music at mid-century. It is hard to imagine a more concrete discussion than Schoenberg's of the qualities Sessions admired and emulated so persistently--principles of the articulation, progression, and shape that function in concert to produce the "long line" in music.

In the half-century since the publication of "Arnold Schoenberg in the United States," Sessions' hope for a new communality in Schoenbergian models of phrasing, line, and form has hardly come to fruition. Still, the Sessions/Schoenberg ideal of compositional craft has persistently resurfaced in a broad range of American musical idioms--as the pairing of Sessions' own and Francis Thorne's piano concertos on this disc amply demonstrate. The two works provide an object lesson in the way shared principles of phrasing, line, and form may pervade works of differing style and temperament. Thorne's Third Piano Concerto--with its expansive forms, extroverted neoclassical quirks, flirtation with jazz, and, in its concluding passages, overtly burlesque gestures--offers a marked contrast to the compression and gestural economy of the Sessions work. But the musical utterances of both compositions unfold in extended, continuous spans, sustained by the techniques of expansion and development detailed in Schoenberg's little American textbook.

The Thorne Concerto declares a grand, boisterous ambition at the outset, in which the piano pounds out two three-note groups. These, taken together, comprise the first movement's motto, which gives way in very short order to a hammered toccata passage, in turn colliding with an upward scale that thrusts into a syncopated, contrapuntal orchestral tutti. Various figures (particularly the motto) and figurations (especially ascending scales) surface and subside ingeniously in variant contexts throughout the movement which, taken as a whole, demonstrates the rhetoric, if not the full scaffolding, of a sonata form. An overarching fluctuation of angular figuration and calm lyricism cuts across the movement's large sectional divisions, its contrasting theme areas and larger processes and contrasts: exposition, development, cadenza, and peroration.

The second movement opens with an evanescent suggestion of the neoclassical Stravinsky (I especially hear hints of the climactic *Pas-de-deux* of *Orpheus*). There is here a kind of inversion of the priorities of the preceding movement, with softened references to the toccata textures of the former subsumed within primary passages of lyricism. The solo piano often triggers the toccata texture, the string choir of the orchestra initiates passages of lyricism. The movement as a whole achieves closure only after a culminating piano solo passage, a quasi-recitative that dissolves into a sequence of simple lyric gestures.

In the concluding movement, toccata textures predominate, though in comparison to the first movement their intensity is ratcheted up in all respects: The passagework is faster and more syncopated, the play of instrumental combinations more mercurial, the dialectic of contrasts speedier. Again, an echo of the second movement--its lyrical string choir music--is folded into the progress toward final culmination and cadence.

By contrast, Sessions' only concerto for piano and orchestra begins in tranquility, with an apparently innocent oscillation of chords in the solo instrument. This is soon revealed as an accompaniment to an unfurling, cantabile theme for solo clarinet. The oscillating piano figure of the opening loses its

innocence quite quickly (and then again, quite slowly) in the first of the Concerto's interconnected three movements. Both tune and oscillation are passed around orchestral solo instruments and ensembles, respectively, progressing to a passage of structural compression and intensification--an anacrusis that spills into the main body of the movement and its first loss of tranquility--the onset of a volatile, motoric, and entirely uninnocent passage of rapid orchestral and soloist textural reconfigurations. This in turn gives way to a calmer, contrasting area initiated by the piano alone: a theme and accompaniment in the solo instrument, which somehow sounds, in this context, as though the piano's capacity to accompany itself was something that has never been heard before.

There is a slower loss of innocence over the course of the Concerto, as the original, almost bland, oscillation continues to recur deliberately, even inexorably--as an orchestral motive, an interval, a pianistic accompaniment, or a trill. The deceptively neutral figure of accompaniment becomes the weightiest motivic presence in the piece: Just as the oscillating figure is lost and recovered meaningfully throughout the work, variants of the opening clarinet theme recur, for example, to kick off a development section in the first movement, and to initiate a peroration after a bracing climax in the lyrical second movement. The latter passage echoes and extends the opening of the first movement, presenting a clarinet tune first accompanied by an oscillatory figure in the piano, and then, in a novel gesture of complementation, reversing roles: the clarinet takes up the oscillating figure and accompanies the piano. This crossing of voices, so to speak, leads (via a brief bassoon recitative) to a low piano trill, itself a variant of the oscillation figure. Thus, the twin narratives of oscillating figuration and recurring melody exchange places, merge, and develop in a single passage.

After the stunning accomplishments of the second movement, the third (like Thorne's, a kind of syncopated toccata in alternating episodes of delicacy and brute force) seems to be a release from the strategies of development and variation that permeate what came before. And the unhinged energy of this release projects the work as a whole toward its final point of accentuation and arrival in octave unisons.

These two concertos for piano and orchestra are grounded in differing experiences of American music, musical culture, and the musical vocation. While Sessions recognized his compositional calling at any early age and thereafter never flinched, Thorne was seriously daunted by the first phase of his formal studies at Yale, where he worked with Hindemith and Richard Frank Donovan: He left the field altogether in the late Forties and early Fifties. For Sessions, the imperative concept of the "long line" in a musical composition often seemed to merge with a conception of the "great line" of music history. By contrast, Thorne, who was born in 1922 (a quarter century after Sessions) seemed, at least after his encounter with Hindemith, serenely untroubled by the long shadow of European tradition. His music frankly incorporates elements of the American vernacular, and his career was jump-started and sustained by his experience as a jazz performer more than by first-hand connections to the masters of European modernism. (By contrast, Sessions not only studied with Bloch but cultivated relationships with Stravinsky and Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, and Luigi Dallapiccola, as well as with Thomas Mann, among others.) While Sessions exerted enormous influence as a teacher of younger Americans (and composed his own grand textbook on harmonic practice), Francis Thorne has served the American musical community as an administrator and patron rather than as a pedagogue. Thorne has been tirelessly devoted to such American musical institutions as the American Composers Alliance, the MacDowell Colony, and the American Composers Orchestra. In the mid-Sixties he established the Thorne Music Fund, which supports the

work of such diverse composers as Stefan Wolpe, Lou Harrison, and Jacob Druckman.

The point of contact in these contrasting musical biographies was David Diamond, Sessions' student in the early Thirties and Thorne's teacher twenty years later. Although they were briefly estranged when Diamond chose to study with Nadia Boulanger, Sessions' letters to his prodigal student (excerpted in Andrea Olmstead's fine edition of the Sessions correspondence, published by Northeastern University Press) suggest the intensity of the sympathies and expectations that informed their pedagogical relationship. In turn, Thorne's studies with Diamond, coming after a concentrated period of work as a jazz performer, contributed crucially to the resumption of his vocation as a composer of concert music. Given the palpable differences in the three composers' work, this compositional genealogy may seem incongruous. (There are, of course, numerous other significant paths to trace from Sessions' teaching of his interpretation of the Schoenbergian legacy to younger American musicians.) But the connections linking (and radiating from) composers as diverse as Sessions, Diamond, and Thorne comprise a compelling testament to the scope, power, and enduring hope of renewal in the Schoenbergian legacy of phrase, articulation, and the long line.
—Martin Brody

Composer Martin Brody has written extensively about American music, especially the music of Roger Sessions, Milton Babbitt, and Stefan Wolpe. Brody is the Catherine Mills Davis Professor of Music at Wellesley College.

Paul Lustig Dunkel has been music director and conductor of the Westchester Philharmonic since its inception in 1983. He left a career as a flutist to become a conducting fellow with the National Orchestra Association and studied with Erich Leinsdorf and Kresimir Sipsusch. A champion of American and twentieth century music, he was a founder of the American Composers Orchestra in 1975, where he is resident conductor. Maestro Dunkel also serves as music director and conductor of the Denver Chamber Symphony and principal conductor of the Vermont Mozart Festival.

The Westchester Philharmonic (formerly the New Orchestra of Westchester) was founded in 1983 by residents and businesses that saw a need for a fully professional symphony orchestra in that suburban county. The orchestra's musicians also perform with the American Composers Orchestra, the New York City Ballet and Opera Orchestras, the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, and other ensembles. The Westchester Philharmonic performs works from both the classical repertory and works by living composers.

Ursula Oppens received her Master of Music degree at the Juilliard School, studying piano with Rosina Lhevinne, Leonard Shure, and Guido Agosti, and chamber music with Felix Galimir. She won first prize at the 1969 Busoni International Piano Competition and the 1970 Diploma d'Onore of the Accademia Chigiana. In 1971 she co-founded the contemporary music ensemble Speculum Musicale. Ms. Oppens has premiered works by Anthony Braxton, Anthony Davis, John Harrison, Conlon Nancarrow, and others. She has recorded for Vanguard, New World, Music and Arts, Nonesuch, CRI, CBS Masterworks, and others.

Robert Tub is an internationally acclaimed leader in the new generation of virtuoso pianists. He has performed throughout Europe, the United States, the Far East, and Latin America. His repertory in recital and with leading orchestras embraces music from the Classical era to the present day and he has collaborated with several American composers to create their music. He is the winner of major

international prizes including the Peabody-Mason Award of Boston. He has recorded music by Beethoven, Schumann, Scriabin, Milton Babbitt, Vincent Persichetti, and Mel Powell, among others. He made his debut on the Great Performers at Lincoln Center in February 1994.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Roger Sessions:

Suite from *The Black Maskers*. Juilliard Orchestra, Paul Zukofsky, conductor. New World 80368-2.

Concerto for Orchestra. Boston Symphony, Seiji Ozawa, conductor. Hyperion CDA 66050.

Quartet No. 2 for Strings. Juilliard String Quartet. CRI CD 587.

Rhapsody for Orchestra. Columbus Symphony, Christian Badea, conductor. New World 80345-2.

Sonata No. 1 for Piano. C. O'Reilly. Albany TROY 038.

Sonata for Solo Violin. Curtis Macomber. Koch International Classics 3-7145-2.

Symphony No. 1. Japan Philharmonic, Akeo Watanabe, conductor. CRI CD 573.

Symphony No. 2. New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor. CRI CD 573.

Symphony No. 3. Royal Philharmonic, Igor Buketoff, conductor. CRI CD 573.

Symphony No. 4. Columbus Symphony, Christian Badea, conductor. New World 80345-2.

Symphony No. 5. Columbus Symphony, Christian Badea, conductor. New World 80345-2.

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd. Esther Hinds, soprano; Florence Quivar, mezzo-soprano; Dominic Cossa, baritone; Tanglewood Festival Chorus; Boston Symphony, Seiji Ozawa, conductor. New World 80296-2.

Francis Thorne:

Burlesque Overture. Polish National Radio Orchestra, William Strickland, conductor. CRI CD 586.

Fanfare, Fugue, and Funk. Springfield Symphony, Robert Gutter, conductor. Opus One 19.

Liebesrock (A Parable for Orchestra). G. Fuller, electric guitar, electric bass guitar, electric bass; Royal Philharmonic, James Dixon, conductor. CRI CD 586.

Lyric Variations II. Boehm Quintet; Richard Fitz, percussion. Serenus SRS 12058.

Nature Studies (Three Poems of Howard Moss). Jubal Trio. CRI CD 586.

Nocturnes. Catherine Rowe, soprano; Francis Thorne, piano. Serenus SRS 12035.

Rhapsodic Variations No. 1. Francis Thorne, piano; Polish National Radio Orchestra, William Strickland, conductor. CRI CD 586.

Simultaneities. American Brass Quintet. Serenus SRS 12035.

Symphony No. 5. American Composers Orchestra, Dennis Russell Davies, conductor. CRI CD 552.

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Robert Taub, piano/Ursula Oppens, piano

The Westchester Philharmonic
Paul Lustig Dunkel, conductor

Roger Sessions: Concerto for Piano and Orchestra
(publ. E. B. Marks Music Corp., BMI)

- 1 1. Tranquillo (7:05)
- 2 2. Adagio (7:17)
- 3 3. Allegro (4:07)

Francis Thorne: Piano Concerto No. 3
(publ. Theodore Presser Co., BMI)

- 4 1. Allegro spiritoso (9:21)
- 5 2. Adagietto cantabile (9:40)
- 6 3. Presto con zesto (6:45)

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