

ROGER SESSIONS & DONALD MARTINO

New World Records 80546

Roger Sessions

Roger Sessions (1896–1985) became perhaps the most influential of all American composers because of the way he always unpretentiously but demandingly set an example of consistent formal mastery, fertility of invention, independence of mind, and adherence to the loftiest ideals of art. From the beginning, Sessions' music has never sounded like anyone else's, no matter what genre he was composing in and no matter what technique of expression he was exploring; it is a high compliment both to the individuality and integrity of his vision and to his open-mindedness that the music of none of his students (and Sessions was for more than half a century our most prominent professor of composition) sounds like his.

Sessions composed extensively in every form. Although he joked with the pianist Rebecca LaBrecque about his prowess at the keyboard (he said that in order to prepare his own Sonata No. 1 he would have to be fourteen again and study Czerny, Chopin, and Bach for twenty years), he wrote piano music throughout his long life, and at pivotal points in it. Sessions' first piano sonata dates from 1930, the second from 1946, the third from 1965. The four short pieces *From My Diary* (originally titled *Pages from a Diary*) from 1940 are balanced by the *Five Pieces for Piano* from 1975, composed in memory of his friend Luigi Dallapiccola.

The things you can say about all of Sessions' music are true of the Sonata No. 2—the music is full of proliferating invention, densely contrapuntal textures, and highly elastic rhythms and phrase structures; and a long, unfurling melodic line ultimately stretches from the beginning of the piece to the end. But when the listener considers the astonishing range of Sessions' music of which all these observations are true, he begins to ponder the limitations of verbal description.

The second sonata is in a way the complement of the first (just as the *Fantasies and Impromptus* of his pupil Donald Martino complements *Pianississimo*). The first sonata contains some of Sessions' most sustained lyric outpourings; among other things it is an exercise and expression of bel canto. The Sonata No. 2, on the other hand, is an explosion of energy, and everything in it contrives to throw the listener off center: even the closing harmony, "secure" in C major, is hardly heard after the eleven-fold pounding of the unsettling single-note repetitions with which the movement began. (When Sessions' Princeton colleague Milton Babbitt saw the manuscript he pointed out that the composer was on the brink of twelve-tone composition; Sessions resisted the implications of his own work for another seven years, until the solo violin sonata of 1953.)

The Sonata No. 2 is in three movements, marked *Allegro con fuoco*, *Lento*, and *Misurato e pesante*; they are played without interruption and are connected in other ways as well. The first movement begins with an extended phrase, eleven measures long, that presents the ideas that will dominate the sonata—drumming repetitions of notes against which syncopations stand out boldly; a highly unstable rhythmic center (there is a change of time signature in nearly every bar). Material that may seem like accompaniment, such as the insistent left-hand figure at the beginning, will later emerge as a dominating idea; ideas prominent at the beginning will retreat into the background. There follows a contrasting, more tranquil section and an extended development and altered recapitulation of the initial music before an extended and twisting sort of trill leads into the slow movement.

This, too, falls into three sections. The first music moves evenly through unequal measures, the melody confined to a relatively narrow register; in the second, a highly expressive coloratura melody ranges widely across the upper reaches of the keyboard and ends in an astonishing pianissimo suspension before returning to the first melody; which this time is intensified by its own shadow in the bass.

The finale is a kind of sinister toccata—there is no lightness of “touch” in the aggressive artillery of these repeated notes and their shrilling treble answer.

No composer has been more insistent on stressing the purely musical values of his work than Sessions; he actively discourages discussion of extramusical elements. In liner notes he wrote for the first recording of this sonata, in 1952, he said, "The composer's aim always is musical expression and he insists that the key to the expressive content is to be found in the music, not vice versa." Nevertheless the date of the Sonata No. 2, the fall of 1946, was highly significant, and there is no doubt that the music is in some sense the composer's response to the terrible revelations of the end of World War II. He told Rebecca LaBrecque that he heard in the finale a kind of “goose step”; though Sessions would probably cringe at the comparison, the finale has a kind of analogue in Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata.

No American musician was more politically and historically aware than Sessions in the years before and during World War II. The seven essays collected under the heading "Music and World Conflict" in *Roger Sessions on Music* (Princeton University Press) are a powerful demonstration of this and of his convictions about the opposing powers and demands of art. One passage from “Vienna—Vale, Ave,” which originally appeared in *Modern Music* in 1938, can perhaps serve as an epigraph to the Sonata No. 2, and in fact to the nobility of Sessions’ entire life in music.

So it is Vienna as the center of all this that belongs now so definitively to the past—not because of the personalities that have been thrust out, since after all the exodus began long before this last March so much as because the whole aim of the totalitarian state is to destroy the integrity of the individual and the spirit of truth and of disinterested effort on which integrity depends. This, infinitely more than anti-Semitism, imperialism, or reaction, is the real menace of Fascism—its implacable hostility to everything toward which Western civilized man, pagan or Christian, has striven for the last three thousand years. It is this spirit to which the living artist, even more than other men, must remain mortally hostile, since, whether he be aware of it or not, it strikes at the foundations on which all spiritual activity rests, and which have never before been seriously threatened. Unfortunately the menace is by no means confined to Germany or even to adherents, national or otherwise, of the totalitarian creed. It is rather a malignant and ubiquitous infection to which the whole contemporary world is dangerously exposed.

Sessions goes on to welcome his European colleagues to America and to write about the salutary effect of their arrival on American music:

At all events profound changes will have to take place. The American composer, above all, must learn to take a more mature and serious attitude towards his art and

abandon the postures which, as we all secretly know, have offered such convenient havens of refuge up to this time. You realize, of course, that I am not speaking of a few outstanding and ripened personalities, but of a bewildered and groping "rank and file." The postures of which I speak are familiar enough—they take the form of feebly conceived artificial and quasi-academic standards, before the fact and beside the point, of the pseudo-provincial dilettantism of the "typically American style," of self-conscious conceptions both of Form and content, quite unnecessary to enumerate. Above all American composers will have to abandon resolutely chimerical hopes of success in a world dominated overwhelmingly by "stars," by mechanized popular music, and by the box-office standard, and set themselves to discovering what they truly have to say, and to saying it in the manner of the adult artist delivering his message to those who have ears to hear it. All else is childishness and futility—and unquestionably the moment has arrived when a real choice cannot be postponed much longer. It is our opportunity; and our responsibility, to carry on.

The first movement of the Sonata No.3 is marked *Adagio e misterioso—Sostenuto*. Although there are four sections, each making a climax and returning to the original tempo and low dynamic level, the listener would do well not to worry about locating the sections and to concentrate on the ebb and flow of the music. The phrases develop from the initial halting fragments (the whole-tone line of four descending notes in the opening measures plays a prominent role in the last movement as well) and extend themselves as the inner parts flower into independent lines with highly individualized rhythmic profiles. Sorting out the gestures leads to perception of the "long line"—a favorite Sessions phrase, and an essential characteristic of all his music.

The second movement, *Molto allegro e con fuoco*, is basically in the duple meter clearly articulated by the opening "rocket" motive, though it is subjected to a good deal of local stretching and shrinking. Two substantial contrasting sections intervene between reappearances of the initial material, making this virtuosic, scherzo-like piece a rondo in form.

The third movement, *Lento e molto tranquillo*, is marked "In memoriam: November 22, 1963"—the date of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The even-note melody, over an unevenly rocking accompaniment, begins with three ascending steps, the reverse of the sonata's initial whole-step motion; then both the texture and the melody are inverted. A gradual development and intensification emphasizes these three notes more and more, eventually achieving a stretto climax in which, both ascending and descending, gradually slowing, they constitute the entire texture. A transformed version of the movement's opening eventually leads back to the sound with which the sonata opened.

Donald Martino

Critics routinely praise Donald Martino (born May 16, 1931, in Plainfield, New Jersey) for the "seriousness" of his music. He has studied with formidable teachers (Ernst Bacon, Milton Babbitt, Roger Sessions, Luigi Dallapiccola); won major commissions and awards, culminating in the Pulitzer Prize in 1976; and taught at some of the most prestigious schools (Princeton, Yale, the New England Conservatory, Brandeis, and, since 1983, Harvard). He has written large, ambitious, and difficult pieces full of the kinds of complex musical procedures, precisely and elegantly handled, that delight analysts.

But it won't do to classify Martino with the "academic" composers just because he has spent much of his career in ivied halls. Anyone approaching his music unbiased by preconception will respond immediately to the play of fantasy in it, to the sense of instrumental and vocal color, and to the sheer ebullition of intelligence, feeling, and wit. Yes, Martino has taught at Princeton, Yale, and Harvard and has mastered every intricacy of serial technique. But he has also played in jazz bands, written pop songs, and balanced his *Seven Pious Pieces* (anthems for mixed chorus, New World 80210-2) with the simultaneous preparation of his decisively impious *Augenmusik: A Mixed Mediocritique* "for Actress, Danseuse, or uninhibited Female Percussionist" and electronic tape.

Martino has composed a few works for amateurs (the *Pious Pieces*; the *Ritorno* for community orchestra and/or concert band), but his most characteristic music has stretched the limits of virtuosity. Some of his works have consequently had to wait years for their first performances (*Contemplations* for orchestra); others were composed for specific state-of-the-art virtuosos (*Parisonatina Al'Dodecafonia* for solo cello, written for Aldo Parisot). Martino's own instrument is the clarinet, and he has written extensively for it—a sonata (1951), the *Set for Clarinet* (1954), a clarinet quartet (1957), a trio for violin, clarinet, and piano (1958), and that astonishing and dazzling entertainment, the *Triple Concerto* for clarinet, bass clarinet, contrabass clarinet, and chamber orchestra.

But he has written as much, and with as vital originality; for an instrument he does not play, the piano—a piano quartet (1951), a sonata (also 1951), a fantasy (1958), a concerto (1966), the astonishing and dazzling *Pianississimo* (1970), the brief *Impromptu for Roger* (1976; a tribute to Roger Sessions on his eightieth birthday), and the work recorded here, *Fantasies and Impromptus*.

Martino says that his first music for piano was in a "mélange" of styles; between 1951 and 1958 he wrote nothing for the instrument because he was going through a Bartokian phase and "didn't find the piano useful" for his purposes. He returned to the piano in 1958 when William Masselos asked him for a concerto; the six-minute Piano Fantasy was a kind of sketch for it. Charles Rosen ultimately premiered the Piano Concerto, still one of the composer's favorite works, though it was not initially a success. Then Easley Blackwood asked him for a piece, which resulted in the prodigious half-hour *Pianississimo*, an exploration of the history and literature of the instrument, a celebration of its every tonal and technical possibility, and an exploitation of every potential of the instrumentalist. "My intention was to write a piece for a real virtuoso, not for a college student, but for someone grand and old, who knows the literature and where it comes from, who commands a demonic technique and the greatest passions," Martino says. An inevitable result of the difficulties of *Pianississimo* is that it has not often been played.

So when the Koussevitzky Foundation approached Martino with a commission in 1980, the composer's thought was to write a piano piece that would be shorter, simpler, and lighter than *Pianississimo*, a complement to it, really, and of a quarter-hour's length—something between the length of the Fantasy and *Pianississimo*. That piece grew into the half-hour *Fantasies and Impromptus*, a work full of difficulties and challenges all its own, which Martino completed on June 14, 1981. Dwight Peltzer played the premiere at the Library of Congress the following November. A number of pianists have taken the work up since, and the composer speaks with particular respect of the "elegant and passionate" performances by Randall Hodgkinson, with their "diversity of color."

Perhaps the key word among many that might describe this music is "Omagglo," the title Martino has given to the symmetrically placed, and lusciously romantic, fifth and seventh impromptus. These

sound like half-remembered Schumann but in fact contain some of the strictest twelve-tone music in the work. They also reveal a characteristic cast of mind—both the *Paradiso Choruses* and the *Seven Pious Pieces* contain analogous passages of atonal music that sounds tonal and vice versa.

There is a sense in which all the fantasies and impromptus form a completely contemporary "homage" to the forms of Romantic piano music and to the poetry of its many moods. The work is full of Schumannesque impetuosity, pearly Lisztian cadenzas, Chopinesque melancholy. There is also something of the heightened rhetoric of the nineteenth-century Italian opera that is a part of Martino's ethnic heritage; one of his little jokes is an operatic "Addio!" written over a brief phrase in the first fantasy that does not return. Strict as the technical and formal procedures are in this work, the composer's mind was also crowded with other kinds of associations—one passage, for example, reminded him of an episode in Fellini's film *8½*.

Martino composed *Fantasies and Impromptus* with the utmost precision of ear and notated it with the exactness that has embroiled the composer in some controversy. Hardly a note is without its own detailed expression marks—not only technical (tempo, marked by frequent changes of metronome mark; volume; attack; and touch) but also emotional (the score is full of markings like "carezzevole," "velato," "sognando," "pomposo," "meccanicamente," "sentimentale"). Some performers have found this irritating and circumscriptive; Martino says his experience is that the more of an editorial nature he puts into his music, the more musical the performance will be. (This same attention to detail led Martino to become his own publisher.) The pianist David Burge has commented interestingly on the notational aspect of Martino's work, comparing it to the proliferation of detail in late Beethoven (the opening of the third movement of the Opus 110 piano sonata, for example). "Immediately the pianist is (1) given important clues as to the composer's ideas of the character of each gesture and (2) challenged to find a way to project not just the notes but (more important) these specific moods as effectively as possible. . . . (Martino) knows exactly what he wants and lets you know it."

In *Fantasies and Impromptus*, six short impromptus are framed by three longer fantasies, which begin and end the work and stand at its still center. The composer prefers the work to be played in its entirety but has foreseen that pianists might want to program excerpts, so he has supplied alternative concert endings for some of the pieces.

The pieces embrace the widest diversity of texture and range, character and emotion. The first impromptu, for example, is primarily a treble piece, descending into the bass only in the last measures. There are no simultaneities in it; each note is struck separately. Martino uses this pointillist technique to paint entirely opposite musical characters—adjacent instructions to the performer are *Sospeso* ("Suspended"), *espressivo*, and *vago*; followed 3.5 seconds later by "meccanicamente." "Alla misura" is immediately followed by "Tempo rubato." In a sense the piece is "about" the juxtaposition of opposites like these, just as *Fantasies and Impromptus* as a whole is "about" reconciling them.

The work as a whole is full of such opposites. The first "Omaggio" is tranquil, the second, stormy; perhaps the most characteristic juxtaposition appears in the opening fantasy—"ansioso" ("anxious") and "sorridente" ("smiling") recur throughout the work. At the end all these contrasts and juxtapositions, large and small, sound revealed as part of one piece, generated out of the same ideas and tracing a journey. On the last page is an extraordinary ostinato passage, the register fixed, the sets moving around in their foreordained journeys, two tempos simultaneously maintained and

gradually reconciled, "melody" and "accompaniment" becoming one, sweet and strident handbells in concert, the bizarre giving way, growing into, the majestic, the end an echo. This music, so full of evocations of and homages to the past, finally sounds like nothing else in the world; the stars are singing in their courses.

The composer's own note for the work follows.

My *Fantasies and Impromptus* represent a return to movement form and to a melodious and homophonic style of piano writing. While the impromptus are short, single-idea pieces, the fantasies are long and extensively developed.

Each fantasy is differently made. The first is a sonatina: A, B, development, B, cadenza, and coda. (A is not recapitulated since its initial function was introductory.) The centrally placed fantasy begins as a meditation; time is suspended. But as the variation process unfolds, as time is filled with more and more notes, melodic fragments emerge coalescing about midway into long melodic lines. The final fantasy is a rondo.

The macrostructure of the work is tripartite. The first four movements, though single and separate, form a group. The fifth movement stands alone. And the last four movements are not only played without pause but are linked as successive episodes of which the first three form a long introduction to the final fantasy.

—Notes by Richard Dyer (except Piano Sonata No. 3, by David Hamilton)

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Donald Martino

- Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra. Kenneth Radnofsky, alto saxophone; New England Conservatory Symphony Orchestra, Richard Hoenich conducting. New World 80529-2.
- Concerto for Wind Quintet. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble; Arthur Weisberg conducting. CRI CD 693.
- Fantasy-Variations*. Paul Zukofsky, violin. CRI CD 693.
- Impromptu for Roger*. David Holzman, piano. Albany TROY 169.
- Paradiso Choruses*. New England Conservatory Chorus, opera department, children's choir, repertory orchestra, and audio department; Lorna Cooke de Varon conducting. New World 80529-2.
- Parasonatina Al'Dodecafonìa*. Andrew Mark, cello. New World 80518-2.
- Quodlibets*. Samuel Baron, flute. CRI CD 693.
- A Set for Clarinet*. Michael Webster, clarinet. CRI CD 693.
- Seven Pious Pieces*. John Oliver Chorale; John Oliver conducting. New World 80210-2.
- Trio*. Paul Zukofsky, violin; Arthur Bloom, clarinet; Gilbert Kalish. piano. CRI 240.

Roger Sessions

- Concerto for Orchestra. Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa conducting. Hyperion CDA 66050.
- Concerto for Piano and Orchestra. Robert Taub, piano; Westchester Philharmonic, Paul Lustig Dunkel conducting. New World 80443-2.
- Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. Paul Zukofsky; RTF Orchestra, Gunther Schuller conducting. CRI CD 676.
- Rhapsody for Orchestra. Columbus Symphony, Christian Badea conducting. New World 80345-2.
- On the Beach at Fontana*. Bethany Beardslee, soprano; Robert Helps. piano. New World 80243-2.
- Sonata No.1. C. O'Reilly, piano. Albany TROY 038.
- Symphony No.1. Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, Akeo Watanabe conducting. CRI CD 573.
- Symphony No.2. New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting. CRI CD 573.
- Symphony No. 4. Columbus Symphony, Christian Badea conducting. New World 80345-2.
- Symphony No. 5. Columbus Symphony, Christian Badea conducting. New World 80345-2.
- The Black Maskers: Suite*. Eastman Rochester Symphony Orchestra, Howard Hanson conducting. Mercury Living Presence 434310-2.
- When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. Esther Hinds, soprano; Florence Quivar, mezzo-soprano; Dominic Cossa, baritone; Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa conducting. New World 80296-2.

Piano Sonata No. 3 was originally issued on Acoustic Research 0654 086.

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ROGER SESSIONS

1 *Piano Sonata No. 2* (publ. Edward B. Marks Music Corporation) 12:22

Randall Hodgkinson, piano

Piano Sonata No. 3 (publ. Edward B. Marks Music Corporation)

2 I Adagio e misterioso—Sostenuto 8:33

3 II Molto allegro e con fuoco 8:52

4 III Lento e molto tranquillo (In memoriam: November 22, 1963) 5:54

Robert Helps, piano

DONALD MARTINO

5 *Fantasies and Impromptus* (publ. Dantalian, Inc.) 29:21

Randall Hodgkinson, piano

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