

NWCR573

Roger Sessions

Symphonies 1, 2, and 3



Symphony No. 1 (1927).....	(18:45)
1. Guisto	(5:35)
2. Largo	(7:23)
3. Allegro vivace	(5:35)
Japan Philharmonic Orchestra, Akeo Wantanabe, conductor	
Symphony No. 2 (1946).....	(25:21)
4. Molto agitato—Tranquillo e misterioso	(9:23)
5. Allegretto capriccioso	(1:48)
6. Adagio tranquillo ed espressivo	(7:28)
7. Allegramente	(6:26)
New York Philharmonic, Dimitri Mitropoulos, conductor	
Symphony No. 3 (1957).....	(30:13)
8. Allegro grazioso e con fuoco	(6:21)
9. Allegro un poco ruvido	(6:21)
10. Andante sostenuto e con affeto	(10:29)
11. Allegro con fuoco	(6:46)
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Igor Buketoff, conductor	

Total playing time: 74:22

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Notes

The first time I saw **Roger Sessions** was on the porch of the Curtis Hotel in Lenox, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1980. The labyrinth old building (George Washington, they say, slept here) was bedecked with American flags, and a small but festive parade passed by on the Lenox—Pittsfield Road. It was pure Americana and in its midst sat one of our country’s great composers, calmly surveying the scene from a rocking chair. I watched, fascinated, half convinced that I’d fallen into some historical tableaux.

It was a perfect day and place to encounter Roger Huntington Sessions—a man who took enormous pride in his descent from colonial New England ancestry; who set the words of Walt Whitman in a manner that might well have confused the poet but did him rare justice all the same; who sometimes seemed to embody American music in all of its complexity, contradiction, and multiplicity.

Even had his own music been less eloquent than it was, Sessions would still have been a figure of considerable importance. In 1928, with Aaron Copland, he founded the Copland-Sessions concerts, which presented the first New York performances of works by (among others) Carlos Chavez, Walter Piston, Henry Cowell, Marc Blitzstein, Leo Ornstein, George Antheil, Paul Bowles, and Virgil Thomson. He was later closely involved with the League of Composers, serving with Copland as a co-chairman for many years.

As a professor of music at Princeton University, the University of California, and the Juilliard School, he taught an illustrious roster of pupils that included Milton Babbitt, David Dia-

mond, Leon Kirchner, Ralph Shapey, Eric Salzman, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich. Babbitt has testified to Session’s influence: “The work of those composers who have been his students ranges over the total technical and stylistic gamut, and demonstrates that Sessions has communicated that with which he is most concerned—complete craftsmanship, artistic responsibility to the past and present, and a concern with compositional dynamics rather than idiomatic superficialities.”

Finally, Sessions was the author of several influential books, including *Harmonic Practice*, *Reflections on Musical Life in the United States*, *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer and Listener*, and *Questions About Music*. A reader of sorts, *Roger Sessions on Music*, was assembled in 1979 by Edward T. Cone, who was originally a Sessions student and later a Princeton colleague.

But it is for his music that Sessions will be best remembered. There is quite a bit of it: nine symphonies; three enormously taxing piano sonatas, concertos for violin and piano, two string quartets, the incidental music for *The Black Maskers* (1923-28), a major oratorio *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed* (1970), a one-act opera *The Trial of Lucullus* (1947), and finally, the full-length opera *Montezuma*, on which Sessions labored for more than two decades (1941-63). Sessions was born in Brooklyn on December 28, 1896 and died in Princeton on March 16, 1985. He began taking piano lessons at the age of five. By the time he was thirteen, he had completed an opera, *Idylls of the King*, based on Tennyson. He entered Harvard at the age of fourteen, where he studied

music under Edward Burlingame Hill. In 1913, he made his first contact with “modern” music through some of Schoenberg’s piano pieces (which he learned to play) and Stravinsky’s *Petrouchka*, which had a profound effect on him.

At the age of eighteen, he graduated from Harvard and enrolled at Yale, where he studied composition with Horatio Parker, who had previously taught Charles Ives. However, the teacher whom Sessions credited with influencing him most was the Swiss-American composer Ernest Bloch, with whom he studied and whose assistant he became at the Cleveland Institute of Music in 1921.

Sessions’s earliest music is written in a chromatic idiom that owes much to German romanticism. The composer then passed through a wry, neo-Classical phase in the 20s and 30s before adopting the complicated, densely contrapuntal language that would characterize most of his later work.

He was often referred to as a “difficult” composer. Nicholas Kenyon, reviewing the premiere of the ninth symphony for the *New Yorker* observed that it was a “tough, dense score and, as with so much of Sessions’s music, difficult to like at first hearing. But, something compels one to listen and to listen hard.... The most striking aspect of the music is its constant state of flux, and its perturbed restlessness.”

Once, in an article for the *New York Times*, Sessions addressed the issue head on. “I once asked [Italian composer] Alfredo Casella, who had pointed out the technical difficulties in my Violin Concerto, what could be done to make it easier. He answered that nothing could be done; for you see, he said, ‘e nato difficile,’ it is born difficult.”

Still, few contemporary listeners should have much trouble with the first three symphonies. The Symphony No. 1 was written in 1928, the initial year of the Copland-Sessions concerts. It is in three movements—Giusto, Largo, and Allegro Vivace—and a charming, lively work indeed.

“The music of Roger Sessions has always been, to one degree or another, closely allied with the predominating ‘intellectual style’ of a given era,” the late composer and critic William Flanagan wrote in his liner notes for the *Allegramente*, the final movement of Sessions’s Symphony No. 2. “I feel the second symphony as a point towards which I had been moving in a number of previous works,” Sessions wrote, “and one which forms, as it were, a point of departure for the music I have written since. Those who desire a clue to the

‘emotional content’ of the symphony, I would refer the indications at the head of the various movements and sections, though the hearer may perhaps find the *Adagio* predominantly dark in color and mood and feel that the finale at its climax acquires a character to which the indication *Allegramente* no longer corresponds. I do not wish to go further than this. My music is always expressive in intent and often has very concrete associations but the impulsion of the musical ideas have infinitely more substance, more specific meaning and a more vital connection with experience than any words by which they can be described. The hearer must therefore get from the music whatever it may have for him.”

Ten years elapsed between the second and third symphonies. The Symphony No. 3 was commissioned in celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra by the Koussevitzky Foundation. It was first performed on December 6, 1957, under the direction of Charles Munch. (Sessions would write his last major work, the *Concerto for Orchestra*, in celebration of the BSO’s centenary in 1981.)

“My third symphony is larger in conception and scale than the first and does not contain the sharp and even violent contrasts of the second,” Sessions wrote in a program note for the world premiere. “In saying this, I am simply noting a difference in character, not implying a fundamental change of artistic direction. I regard this symphony as belonging very definitely among a series of works which began with my second string quartet. It contains new elements, however, even with respect to these works.” The symphony is in four movements, marked *Allegro grazioso e con fuoco*; *Allegro, un poco ruvido*; *Andante sostenuto e con affetto*; and *Allegro con fuoco*.

The San Francisco-based critic Alfred Frankenstein once called Sessions’s Symphony No. 2 “a complex of forceful and fruitful ideas which can be studied for a long time before they yield all their secrets.” Much the same might be said for Sessions himself who, five years after his death, continues to challenge and inspire us.

—Tim Page

Tim Page is the chief classical music critic for *Newsday* and the host of a radio program on WNYC-FM in New York City. His books include *The Glenn Gould Reader* (1985) and *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson* (1988). He is a faculty member of the Juilliard School.

Production Notes

Symphony No. 1

Published by Kalmus (BMI)

Symphony No. 2

Published by Associated Music Publishers Inc. (BMI)

Symphony No. 3

Published by Edward B. Marks Music Corp. (BMI)

Digital mastering by Paul Zinman at New York Digital Recording, Inc., NYC.

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This compact disc reissue was made possible with a generous grant from the Koussevitzky Music Foundation, Inc. CRI gratefully acknowledges general operating support from the New York State Council on the Arts, which makes this and all other CRI recordings possible.