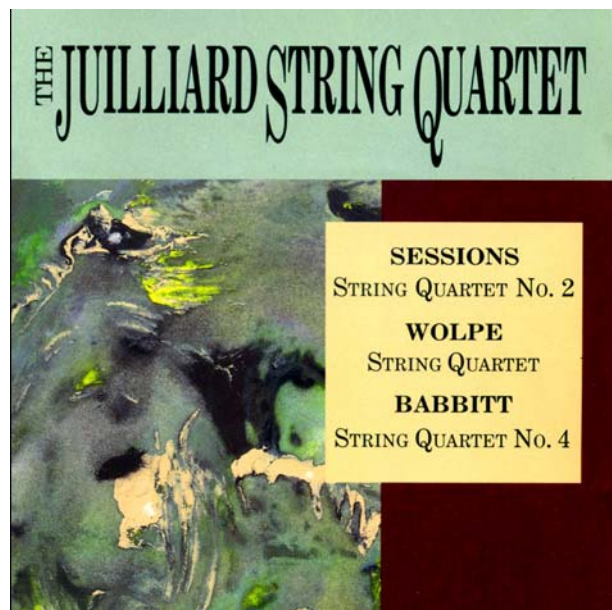


NWCR587

# The Juilliard String Quartet

Sessions / Wolpe / Babbitt



Roger Sessions (1896–1985) String Quartet		
No. 2 (1951) .....	(34:14)	
1. I. Lento .....	(8:20)	
2. II. Allegro appassionato, Alla breve .....	(5:52)	
3. III. Andante tranquillo .....	(9:14)	
4. IV. Presto .....	(5:12)	
5. V. Adagio .....	(5:33)	
Stefan Wolfe (1902–1972) String Quartet (1969) .....		(17:37)
6. I. ♩ = 92 .....	(7:38)	
7. II. ♩ = 44 .....	(9:56)	
Milton Babbitt (b 1916)		
8. String Quartet No. 4 (1970) .....	(18:58)	
The Juilliard String Quartet: Robert Mann, violin; Joel Smirnoff, violin; Samuel Rhodes, viola; Joel Krosnick, cello		

Total playing time: 70:57

P & © 1990 Composers Recordings, Inc.  
© 2007 Anthology of Recorded Music, Inc.

## Notes

Pity those composers who are victimized by the vagaries of musical taste. During the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of the avant-garde, atonal serialism was proclaimed as the path to the future, while tonal Americanists were viewed as hopeless anachronisms. But during the 1970s and 1980s, a revival of tonality saw neo-Romanticism and minimalism take center stage, while serialism was dismissed as arid and academic.

One of the unfortunate side-effects of this reaction against serialism has been a tendency to see the movement as monolithic, as if all those composers who wrote twelve-tone music sounded alike. But nothing could be further from the truth. For serialism is only a method of composition; it presupposes no style, and can embrace everything from the Bach chorale in Berg's *Violin Concerto* (1935), to the wide-open sonorities of Copland's *Piano Fantasy* (1957), to the boogie-woogie of Tobias Picker's *Keys to the City* (1983).

Nor are the mechanics of the method resistant to personal choice. In fact, serialism, despite its reputation for mathematical constraint, is hardly more restrictive than the tonal system, which dictates innumerable harmonic and melodic conventions that a tonal composer is obliged to accept. Roger Sessions, who did not adopt serialism until he was well into his fifties, often stressed that the method was anything but confining. "Serialism is neither the arbitrary nor the rigid set of prescriptions that it is often supposed to be," he wrote. "Precisely because it is a living process and not a dogma, it means something different and shows a different aspect in every individual personality."

And nothing better proves the flexibility of serialism than the three composers represented on this disc. Each reinterpreted serialism in a highly personal manner, and each turned the method to the service of a vastly divergent style. In our era, when serialism has seemingly gone out of fashion, their music makes a passionate case for the continued viability of an often

maligned musical movement.

**Roger Sessions** (1896–1985) came to serialism so gradually that the method seemed no more than a natural outgrowth of his compositional development. Like Ives, he studied with Horatio Parker at Yale; he then worked with Ernest Bloch in New York. After a stay in Europe (from 1926 to 1933), Sessions joined the faculty of Princeton University, where he taught almost continuously for three decades.

Those years in Europe were crucial to Sessions's development, for they reinforced his international, non-Americanist tendencies. Unlike so many other American composers of the 1930s, Sessions had little use for folkloric musical nationalism. After an early flirtation with neo-classicism, in the 1930s and 1940s Sessions's music became increasingly chromatic, often verging on atonality. Sessions, who had once been opposed to serialism, soon found the method creeping up on him. "Other people saw it coming before I did. I remember Milton Babbitt asking me, after he saw my *Second Piano Sonata* (1946), "Do you realize you're on the verge of the twelve-tone system?"

Although Sessions did not acknowledge his use of serial technique until the solo *Violin Sonata* (1953), elements of serialism are already apparent in works such as the *String Quartet No. 2* (1950–51). The difficulty in pinpointing exactly when Sessions began using the method stems from the fact that serialism, adopted almost unconsciously, had little effect on his musical style. In fact, Sessions's work remained committed to the same conservative values: a belief in the lasting power of the European (primarily Germanic) tradition, a lofty sobriety that shuns all trivialities, and a faith in the continued potency of Classical forms and genres.

And all these elements are represented in Sessions's *String Quartet No. 2*. A work of nearly symphonic proportions, the *String Quartet No. 2*—like the quartets of Schoenberg—pours

its chromatic, primarily atonal language into traditional molds. The first movement is a double fugue; the second a quasi-sonata form (without development section); the third a theme and five variations; the fourth a scherzo and trio; and the fifth a haunting epilogue that summarizes previous material. Throughout, Sessions combines a Beethovenian motivic development with a sinuous, long-breathed counterpoint derived from the Second Viennese School.

Aside from the propulsive Bartókian scherzo, it is the ghost of Schoenberg that haunts this quartet. Some commentators have observed that the work is proto-serial; the fourteen notes of the opening fugue theme, for instance, embrace all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, although elsewhere the serial method is rarely used systematically. But far more important is the aura of this quartet—somber, densely textured, filled with the expressive gestures of German post-Romanticism. The overall effect is no less than a reinterpretation of the aesthetic legacy of the Schoenberg circle.

Sessions's student, **Milton Babbitt** (b 1916), also reinterpreted Schoenberg's legacy, but he was more interested in systematizing the method than in imitating the language. Babbitt, who was introduced to Schoenberg shortly after the latter's arrival in New York in 1933, developed an intimate understanding of the twelve-tone system at a time when the method was mostly unknown. Beginning in 1935, Babbitt studied privately with Sessions, and profited from the master's rich European experience. From 1938 to the present day, Babbitt has been almost continuously connected with Princeton University—whether on the music faculty, the math faculty, or (from 1959) as co-director of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center.

Babbitt's stint as a math professor is indicative of his inherently logical approach to composition. What attracted Babbitt to serialism was its potential for mathematical systematization. Webern, more than Schoenberg, provided guidance, for it was Webern who extended serialism to parameters other than pitch, and it was Webern who stripped away the lush Expressionist rhetoric that still characterized the works of Schoenberg. By the late 1940s, Babbitt created the first examples of "integral" or "total" serialism, in which the durational series, the dynamic series, and the vertical simultaneities were all determined by the pitch-set itself.

Such music is staggeringly complex in its structural logic, and can pose special problems for listeners who look for familiar guideposts. Babbitt himself has attempted to explain why his music is so daunting. First of all, it "employs a tonal vocabulary which is more efficient than that of the music of the past," efficient in that it "reduces the redundancy of the language." Second, "the number of functions associated with each component of the musical event also has been multiplied," since each event not only has a place in a pitch set, but in a rhythmic, dynamic, and timbral set. Third, each work is "self-referential"; unlike tonal pieces, one cannot bring to a Babbitt work any preconceived expectations of how it will function. Fourth, the structure of the music is so linked with analytical theory that the music demands a knowledgeable listener. The best Babbitt can offer the less-informed is to say "Listen, don't worry about whether or not the music sounds coherent to you the first time you hear it. What about the first time you hear a sentence in Hungarian?—assuming that you're interested in listening to and learning Hungarian."

Are we, then, simply to throw up our hands in dismay and accept that Babbitt's music will make no more sense to us than Hungarian? Not at all. For although Babbitt is disinclined to discuss his music in terms of aural or aesthetic pleasure, it undoubtedly provides both. And no work better proves this than the String Quartet No. 4, composed in 1970 and

dedicated to the Juilliard Quartet. Cast in a single movement, the quartet's musical surface is filled with widely-spaced pointillistic gestures, some of bleak austerity, some of ferocious intensity. Textures are constantly in flux, but always possess a luminous transparency redolent of Webern. Individual voices are embroidered by an ornate filigree of dynamics, timbres, articulations, and performing techniques, all of which change from note to note. Lines are fragmented, leaping precipitously from one register to another, dislocated by the absence of metrical pulse. Never doctrinaire in his employment of twelve-tone theory, Babbitt turns repeated pitches into a recurring motive, and uses an increasing amount of doubling as the quartet progresses. All of these elements, of course, may be found in the music of other composers, but the dizzying speed with which they shift and the concentration with which they are deployed are unique to that of Babbitt.

Far more than Webern's, Babbitt's language has been severed from the Classic Romantic tradition that nurtured the Second Viennese School. But in its aesthetic stance his String Quartet No. 4 does not really stand far apart from that tradition. String quartets have always been repositories for works of structural logic and motivic concentration, for refined, if occasionally disputatious, discourse. And into this tradition—one traceable from Haydn to Bartók—Babbitt's quartet fits perfectly. To be sure, it demands an informed listener to fathom its depths, but so, after all, do the late quartets of Beethoven.

To a great extent, both Sessions and Babbitt worked within the Second Viennese orbit, the former with its language, the latter with its method. But **Stefan Wolpe** (1902–72), although profoundly affected by the Viennese legacy, chose an independent path. Born in Berlin, Wolpe was influenced by a succession of radical artistic movements—the Dadaists, the Bauhaus group, the "young classicism" of Busoni, the Schoenberg circle, and the agitprop of the Communists. Wolpe fled Berlin in 1933 and, after a brief stopover in Vienna (where he studied with Webern), moved on to Palestine. In Jerusalem, he set about developing his unique approach to serialism, one that would occupy him for the remainder of his career. Arriving in New York in 1938 Wolpe stayed there for the rest of his life—a life cut short by the debilitating effects of Parkinson's disease.

These bare facts, however, cannot suggest what a maverick Wolpe was. Whether in his notoriously dense, complex works of the 1950s (such as the Symphony [1956]), or in his leaner, more economical works of the 1960s (such as the String Quartet [1969]), Wolpe's goal was the "projection of adjacent opposites." Rather than aim for a Classical continuum, in which dissimilar material is gradually introduced by means of meticulous transitions, Wolpe sought a discontinuum, in which traditionally-conceived opposites would be juxtaposed. The resulting art possesses an almost improvisatory spontaneity, what Wolpe called a mixture of "surprise and enigma, magic and shock, intelligence and abandon."

What holds the music together is an idiosyncratic variety of serial technique, one that avoids the constant circulation of all twelve pitches. "The saturated balance of twelve tones is partly very mechanistic and neutral in quality," Wolpe wrote. "No amount of transposition (and) permutation...can relieve the ear from hypertrophic abundance of a pitch totality that, in this exclusive form, must stagnate." To avoid such stagnation, Wolpe worked with either brief row segments, or with rows of greater than twelve notes. But Wolpe remained suspicious of an over-rational approach to art: "Don't get backed too much into a reality than has fashioned your senses with too many realistic claims. When art promises you this sort of reliability, this sort of prognostic security, drop it."

Certainly Wolpe's String Quartet offers anything but "prognostic security." Commissioned by the Juilliard Quartet

in 1947 but not completed until more than two decades later, the Quartet is cast in Wolpe's preferred two-movement design.

Characteristically, any sense of traditional motivic development is supplanted by that principle of adjacent opposites." Chordal gestures clash with linear ones, static with active, violent with languid, elongated with truncated, commonplace with original. Although these gestures are far more familiar than Babbitt's—and thus closer to the Classic-Romantic tradition—their shocking juxtaposition renders them alien. But what is not alien is a compelling, overriding unity, for Wolpe's seeming chaos is of the most artful kind. The first movement of the String Quartet, for instance, is built around a row fragment of six pitches that gradually enlarges to the full chromatic as the movement progresses. It is serial technique, to be sure, but of a sort that Schoenberg would have barely recognized. And it proves once again just how absurd are those claims that serialism is too confining. For those composers—like Sessions, Babbitt, and Wolpe—whose art exceeds mere technique, serialism is more a liberation than an imprisonment.

—K. Robert Schwarz

### **The Juilliard String Quartet**

Known as America's "first family of chamber music," the Juilliard String Quartet has had a long and fruitful association with American composers since it was founded in 1946 by composer William Schuman, then president of the Juilliard School. The Quartet's acclaim confirms that they have lived up to Schuman's original desire for "a quartet that would play the standard repertoire with the sense of excitement and

discovery of a new work and play new works with a reverence usually reserved for the classics."

The Quartet's efforts on behalf of American composers are virtually unparalleled. Its many first performances include Elliott Carter's Pulitzer Prize winning second and third quartets, and works by Schuman, Sessions, Piston, and many others. Its discography of American works includes Donald Martino's String Quartet, Fred Lerdahl's First String Quartet and Irving Fine's String Quartet (1952), all on CRI, and works of Barber, Copland, Gershwin, Ives, Lees, Schuman and Thomson on CBS.

First as students and currently as soloists, the individuals who comprise the Quartet's current membership have also had important associations with American composers. Robert Mann, who is the only remaining member of the original Quartet, was a student of Stefan Wolpe. He commissioned the work on this disc and was a major force in helping Wolpe see it to completion. Samuel Rhodes studied composition with Roger Sessions and Earl Kim. Joel Krosnick has premiered works by Ralph Shapey and Gerhard Samuels, among others. The newest member of the Quartet, Joel Smirnoff, made the premiere recording of Joan Tower's *Platinum Spirals*, also on CRI.

Of the classical literature, the Juilliard String Quartet is known for its two recordings and numerous performances of the complete Beethoven string quartets. It has also recorded three times the five quartets of Bartók, in mono, stereo and digital. The Quartet maintains an active touring schedule, performing its trademark programs of modern and main stream works at major festivals and in international capitals. It is represented by Colbert Artists in New York.

---

## Production Notes

Producer: Christopher Oldfather  
Engineer: Curt Wittig  
Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton

Recorded in the Coolidge Auditorium of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.  
Sessions recorded live in April, 1987; Wolpe recorded in May, 1990;  
Babbitt recorded live in April, 1988.

Sessions: Sting Quartet No. 2 Published by Edward B. Marks (BMI)

Wolfe: String Quartet Published by M.C.A. Inc. (Presser, ASCAP)

Babbitt: String Quartet No. 4 Published by C.E Peters Corp. (BMI)

Special Thanks: Gail Morgan, Virgil Blackwell, Austin Clarkson, David Olan, Rachel Siegel, Howard Stokar, Charlotte Schroeder, Christine Brander, James W. Pruett, Ann McClain and Ruth Foss of the Music Division of the Library of Congress.

Art Direction and Production: Brian Conley Cover Design: Cecelia Smith  
Graphic Design: Trudi Gershenov  
Photograph of The Juilliard String Quartet by Don Hunstein.

The Juilliard String Quartet appears courtesy of Sony Classical Productions, Inc.

America's premier new music label, Composers Recordings, Inc. (CRI) is a nonprofit, tax exempt corporation, founded in 1954 and dedicated to the discovery, distribution and preservation of contemporary music. The operations of CRI are supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts and private foundations and individuals.

Managing Director: Joseph R. Dalton

Partial funding for this recording has been provided by the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust.

Additional support has been provided by the Stefan Wolpe Society, Inc., which supports the performance and the preparation of editions of the works of Stefan Wolpe.