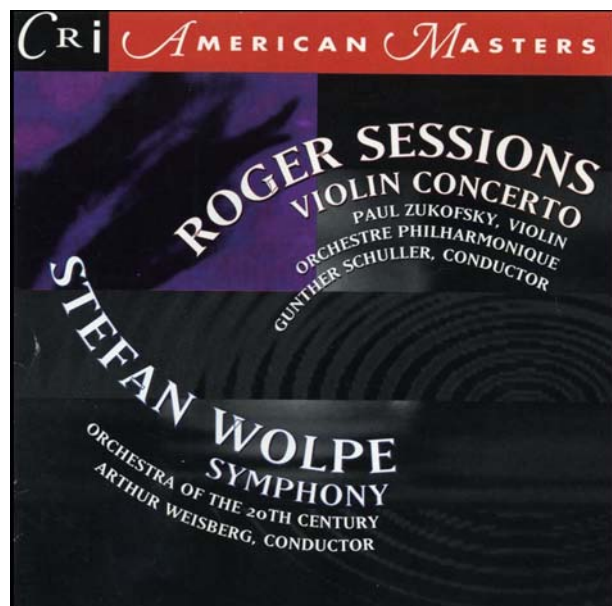


# Roger Sessions/Stefan Wolpe



## Roger Sessions (1896-1985)

- Violin Concerto (1935) ..... (28:53)
1. I – Largo e tranquillo ..... (9:04)
  2. II – Scherzo (allegro) ..... (5:55)
  3. III – Romanza (andante) ..... (3:53)
  4. IV – Molto vivace e sempre con fuoco ..... (9:53)
- Paul Zukofsky, violin; Orchestre  
Philharmonique de l'Office de la Radio  
diffusion-Télévision Française; Gunther  
Schuller, conductor

## Stefan Wolpe (1902-1972)

- Symphony (1956) ..... (25:53)
5. I – Not too slow ..... (5:11)
  6. II – Charged ..... (8:00)
  7. III – Alive ..... (12:34)
- Orchestra of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; Arthur  
Weisberg, conductor

Total playing time: 54:55

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## Notes

O to make the jubilant song!  
Full of music—full of manhood, woman hood, infancy!  
Full of common employments—full of grain and trees.  
O for the voices of animals O for the swiftness and  
balance of fishes!  
O for the dropping of raindrops in a song!  
O for the sunshine and motion of waves in a song!  
O the joy of my spirit it is uncages — it darts like  
lightning!  
It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time,  
I will have thousands of globes and all time.

—Walt Whitman  
excerpt from *A Song Of Joys*

Walt Whitman published these lines in 1860, when he was forty-one and when exclamation marks meant something now long lost in our landscape—enthusiasm. **Roger Sessions** wrote his Violin concerto in 1935 when he was thirty-nine. It was after the First World War but before the ravages of the Second: enthusiasm and energy and the sheer exhilaration of freedom had not yet been mowed down by weapons military and political. Both men lived insatiably; although their muses manifested in utterly different guises, both sought them unrelentingly. And both suffered the inevitable consequence of scorn and adulation from those only dimly aware of the muse part of the equation.

As for the human side, in both cases it was estimable. Each man stood as large as his time, filling it with contribution: Whitman, the wild-haired natural man claiming new ground for the nineteenth century in the actual ground of earth and in the emotional ground of unrestrained, authentic feeling; Sessions, the fusty academic, who, through his insistence on integrity and craft over nationalism or style, ruled the scholarly early roosts of twentieth-century America and

spawned pedagogical dynasties.

It's hard to understand a couple—man and muse—when the former is concrete and impressive and the latter is mysterious and invisible. Indeed, it is only in the successful intercourse between the two that the nature of the muse is revealed. In the case of Whitman, as his work progressed, the muse seemed to become ever more generous, like a body that has known and given life time and time again. For Sessions, who was born just before the beginning of this century and whose life spanned most of it (he died in 1985 at age eighty-eight), his muse arrived prodigiously early; he knew at age eleven that he wanted to be a composer, and he entered Harvard when he was fourteen and never left. But—perhaps because of the exigencies of mortal combat and cosmic revelation that crowd this century—the relationship, though continuous, was not an opulent one.

Compare this “song of joy” for violin and orchestra (craftily scored without a violin section) with the composer's later symphonies and operas, which inspired one of his colleagues to quip: “Everyone loves Roger except the public.” As his life progressed, Sessions's music became denser in texture, and, however finely tuned, it became ever more unmoored from tonality and other familiar guideposts for listeners. Its abstractions both required and inspired the control offered by serial techniques, of which he was a master. Sessions himself said in 1950: “I would prefer by far to write music which has something fresh to reveal at each new hearing than music which is completely self evident the first time, and though it may remain pleasing makes no essential contribution thereafter.”

By the 1960s, Sessions was revered and homaged as a mentor by many of the distinctive musical minds of our time—Milton Babbitt, Ralph Shapey, David Diamond, Leon Kirchner, and

Earl Kim among them. He also was, particularly after the bombshells of Cage and minimalism, increasingly scorned by younger composers as being academically elite and out of touch with musical reality. Critics respected the man, but one looks long and hard to find red blooded excitement about his music (Andrew Porter, for one, felt the connection exquisitely). Later, certain of the critical and music community couldn't even manage respect, taking his "crabbed" complexity and impenetrable discourse as gratuitous impediments to the listener.

And yet. In an interview with John Rockwell in the *New York Times* in 1981, Sessions said: "There's too much talk about music, too much self-consciousness. Some composers outlive that and others don't. A composer has to be part of his music, to be totally involved with it. I couldn't write a piece I wasn't in love with—you have to go to bed with it."

Whether Sessions outlived his considerable self-consciousness or became pinned under its weight can only be answered by the ears of the beholder. (Today, there are perhaps more opportunities than ever to hear his music, as new recordings of his orchestral and chamber works continue to be issued.) In any case, the question is quintessential for this century. Writing in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, John Harbison says: "Sessions's works often become clearer to the listener some time after they have been heard: when the demanding textures are recalled synoptically, a flash of insight may occur. *They are pieces that occupy more than their moments in time.*" [Emphasis added by RD] In an age when we have probed every corner of this earth and beyond, and we have looked at time until it bent into relativity, it is a poignant revelation to hear in twentieth century sound Whitman's proud, omnivorous boast of a century ago: "I will have thousands of globes and all time."

Listening to Roger Sessions's Violin concerto, given here by the young Paul Zukofsky (who was twenty-four when he made the recording), and Gunther Schuller with the French Radio and Television Orchestra, one's breath is taken away by the sheer audacity of a youthful composer coupling joyously, openly and accessibly with his muse.

—Ruth Dreier

Born in Berlin in 1902, **Stefan Wolpe** came to artistic maturity during the aesthetic and political ferment of the Weimar Republic. In 1920, he was admitted as a diploma candidate in composition to the Berlin Hochschule für Musik, but he found studies there too restrictive and he left after one year. Wolpe came in touch with Busoni, who he admired enormously and who gave him considerable encouragement. He also was involved briefly with the Berlin Dadaists, and more closely with the Melos Circle of leftist expressionists around Hermann Scherchen. It was at the Bauhaus of Weimar, where he attended lectures by Itten, Klee, and Schlemmer, where Wolpe found the radical new approaches to art that lacked in his formal schooling.

During the 1920s, Wolpe composed songs to texts by Hölderlin, Kleist, and Tagore, and then he became involved with the radical socialists, providing music for agitprop troupes and theater and dance companies. Several of his *Massenlieder* became as widely known as those of Eisler, and many of his songs in free twelve-tone idiom were heard in the Berlin cabarets.

Wolpe fled from Germany in 1933 and made his way to Vienna where he studied for a few months with Webern. In the next year he immigrated to Palestine, where he settled in Jerusalem and taught at the Palestine Conservatory. His twelve-tone compositions at this time synthesized

Schoenberg's thematicism, the tropes of Hauer, and the intervallic processes of Webern. Wolpe's discovery of his ethnic roots in Palestine had a powerful impact on his music, particularly in settings of Hebrew texts from the Bible and from contemporary poets. He was also deeply influenced by Arabic classical and folk music, and the folk songs of the Yemenite Jews.

Wolpe emigrated again in 1938 and came to New York City where he taught at several schools in the New York and Philadelphia area. Among his students from the forties and early fifties were Elmer Bernstein, John Carisi, Morton Feldman, Tony Scott, and Ralph Shapey. During the late forties Wolpe associated with the painters of the New York School and attended their meetings at the Eighth Street Club, and then in 1952, he became director of music at Black Mountain College. There he composed many of his major works.

In the later 1950s, Wolpe established contact with the European scene by attending the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music where he gave an important series of lectures. During the 1960s, Wolpe returned to New York as chair of the Music Department of C.W. Post College, Long Island University. Through a new series of works for chamber ensemble he became an important influence of the next generation of composers, including Mario Davidovsky, Harvey Sollberger, and Charles Wuorinen. Wolpe died on April 4, 1972 from the effects of advanced Parkinsonism, five months before his seventieth birthday.

Wolpe composed *Symphony* during 1955, while teaching at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and on a commission from Rogers and Hammerstein through the League of Composers/ISCM. *Symphony* is a radicalization of the American symphony, which at that time was flourishing in the concert halls in the works of Copland, Creston, Diamond, Harris, Piston, and Schumann. It was not until Leonard Bernstein programmed the New York Philharmonic season of 1963–64 with works by John Cage, Earle Brown, and others that a new aesthetic began to be heard in the American orchestra. Wolpe's *Symphony* was scheduled to premiere on January 16, 1964 under the baton of Bernstein's assistant, Stefan Bauer-Mengelberg. Bernstein explained in his prefatory words that due to the difficulty of the music only the first two movements of *Symphony* would be performed. Thus the first complete performance was given in Boston by the New England Conservatory Orchestra under Frederick Prausnitz on April 29, 1965, and the first complete New York performance, the one heard on this recording, was heard under Arthur Weisberg on September 1, 1975.

According to the composer's program notes, *Symphony* is a series of transformations of the two-bar melody that begins the first movement. Indeed, the first themes of the second and third movements are derived from the eight tones of the opening two-bar theme. Wolpe describes the music as "a structured field of pitches, the various tones standing in relation to one another... as physical bodies in a force field." At the outset of a movement he establishes concrete, tactile, memorable shapes that he proceeds to manipulate in a structured, constellatory space as though they are the moving elements of some mobile sculpture by Alexander Calder. These mobile shapes, surfaces, and masses rapidly expand and contract, fade and reemerge, interrupt and coalesce in all sectors of the musical space. The music gains its dynamic force from a drama of contrasted qualities:

To renew expressiveness: the cold, the shabby, the hard, the sudden, the lifeless, the rigid, the confused, the joke,

the excessive, the dense, the collapsed, the most general, unlayered, smooth, extraordinary, stratified, intensified, slack, shredded, disorganized, nothing-much, continuous, constantly interrupted, the shock, and the ever-increasing contrast, the simultaneous and the noise. (Wolpe, "On new and not-so-new music in America.")

For Wolpe, *Symphony* was a crucible in which he examined old habits of thought in order to escape the discursive logic of developing variation, and to move toward a new music of conjoined opposites. His notes for *Symphony* continue:

The material is such as to admit of manifestations that vary widely in nature, and in fact often contradict each other. Thus there are treatments of complexity and of simplicity, of tension and of calm, animation and of ebbing activity.

The traditional symphony orchestra mirrored for Wolpe the hierarchical structure of society with its fixed categories and relationships that limit individual freedom of behavior and expression. With *Symphony*, he sought to break up the familiar associations of timbre and material in order to release fresh possibilities. Thus, each musician in the orchestra is confronted with quite new technical and musical challenges. Sonorities are scored with delicate differences of articulation, voicing, dynamics, and textual density. Shades and hues of timbre are rapidly changed and combined to produce a shimmering texture that anticipates Morton Feldman's concept of "abrash." This is not simply the technique of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, by which a line is split up among various instrumental colors. Rather it is working on the borderline between timbre and content. By analogy to painting, it is similar to canvases where the painter scrubs and blends the borders, or lets colors drip and run between areas so as to erase the differences between figure and ground.

The first movement is an essay in intimate lyricism. Although many contrasting, interrupting gestures, shapes, and qualities are drawn out of the source melody, the movement never strays far from a quietly chanted flow. When a reprise comes, it is as if we have never been very far away from the principle theme. At the coda, beside the reprise of the theme in the flutes, Wolpe wrote the words, "Like a kind greeting," that convey the warm essence of the movement.

"In contrast to the first movement," Wolpe wrote, "the second represents a vast arc-like expansion of the root materials. It

begins with a unison passage that sets a tone of emotional intensity, which is sustained up to the closing bar." The movement is a contest among competing spheres of action. Where the first movement is more or less smoothly flowing, gathering action, the second is a highly energized, conflict-filled centrifugal action. The first subject is striding, angular, and abrupt. The second subject, stormy and arcing, rises with strident tremolandi ever higher in the strings, and it closes with a gently rising whole tone cadence. These figures are splintered and dispersed with increasing intensity until the third theme enters: a deluge of percussion plus two long held tones on the baritone horns. Wolpe wanted these sounds to be like the foghorns of ships that he heard on the Hudson River, "a roaring, anguished, 'ancient' sound." The third subject admits an element of turmoil that disperses elements from the three subjects into a chaotic disorder. The movement closes with a passage that transforms and partially reconciles the three themes.

The third movement is an exuberant, joyful, athletic piece that uses elements from the first two movements. It combines the gathering action of the first movement and the scattering action of the second movement into an expansive panorama of multiple interactions. The opening theme is a balanced, rather Stravinskian shape surrounded by split-off fragments of itself. The exposition is scherzando, impish, and trickster-like, until an insistent figure of repeated eighth-note unisons in the woodwinds rushes in "like hot winds" to disrupt the main material. The wind figure unleashes a closing section of disruptive actions that brings the first section to a grand pause, after which the figure is repeated. The second section increasingly breaks into disruptive actions that build to a D-major chordal structure that Wolpe labels in the pencil score "utterly sunlike." The principal theme is immediately reprised, radiantly transparent and Mahlerian. The thematic and scalar materials then recur in destabilizing concatenations that reach an unprecedented intensity of collisions and ricochets among careening sound masses. After this, the coda plays coolly, unconcerned with the rudimentary details and the remains of the material. The last measure brings *Symphony* to a close with a curt, emphatic farewell.

—Austin Clarkson

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## Production Notes

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