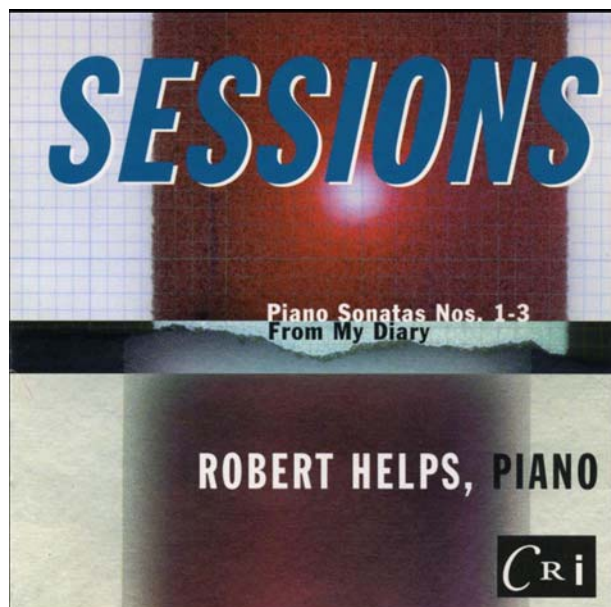


# Sessions

The Piano Sonatas; *From My Diary*

Robert Helps, piano



Roger Sessions (1896–1985)

Piano Sonata No. 2 (1946) .....	(14:24)
1. I – Allegro con fuoco .....	(3:59)

2. II – Lento .....	(5:50)
3. III – Misurato e pesante .....	(4:35)

Piano Sonata No. 1 (1930) .....	(14:53)
4. Andante .....	(2:05)
5. Allegro .....	(4:23)
6. Andante; Poco meno mosso; Tempo I .....	(4:25)
7. Molto vivace .....	(4:00)

<i>From My Diary</i> (1937-1940) .....	(7:54)
8. Poco adagio .....	(2:49)
9. Allegro con brio .....	(2:32)
10. Larghissimo e misterioso .....	(1:36)
11. Allegro pesante .....	(00:57)

Piano Sonata No. 3 (1965) .....	(22:02)
12. I – Adagio e misterioso, sostenuto .....	(7:51)
13. II – Molto allegro e con fuoco .....	(8:32)
14. III – Lento e molto tranquillo .....	(5:39)

(*In memoriam* Nov. 22, 1963)

**Robert Helps, piano**

Total playing time: 61:33

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## Notes

In 1943 and 1944, the heavens smiled on me beneficently and I met and began working with the two most determining musical influences in my life—Abby Whiteside, my piano teacher, and **Roger Sessions**, my theory and composition teacher. It’s hard to imagine how my life might have gone without them.

Both people, in their own ways, believed in rhythm, movement, and the sensing out of form as being the most important, primary elements in music. The exact melody, harmony, or notes took a follow-through position to contacting the energized feeling of movement, shape, progression, and timing.

I studied with Sessions privately (not through any university or conservatory) on and off from 1944 to 1957 in New York, Berkeley, Princeton, and Florence. In his composition classes, we students closely followed Roger’s critiques of our new pieces to see how he would spot, with his highly sensitive ear and rhythm-sensing equipment, just where something didn’t work or went off the track in both gesture and detail. This process was indeed as terrific a learning experience for all of us students as was the actual critique of our own music. “Style” played virtually no role in this. Sessions seemed capable of entering the students’ stylistic sensibilities and often primitive artistic palette to criticize from within.

It was in 1946 that Sessions presented me with a manuscript copy of *Pages from a Diary* which was the original title and the one he preferred to *From My Diary*. The four short pieces, written between 1937 and 1940, were each dedicated to one

of his students. (The dedicatees are Milton Babbitt, Edward T. Cone, Carter Harman, and Vivian Fine. Three of these, of course, became well known composers while Carter Harman later became, for quite some time, executive director of CRI.) Thus began my first real contact with performing and really hearing advanced, vital twentieth-century music. And thus began my involvement with Sessions’s piano music as a whole. Within two years I was performing the Sonata No. 2, several years later I circled back to pick up the Sonata No. 1, and I started performing the Sonata No. 3 shortly after it was finished in 1965.

It has been fifty years now since I began performing the Sonata No. 2 and I have gone back to it often. After recent performances, I have been quoted (accurately) as saying “If I don’t know it by this time, I’d better give up.” It was written in Berkeley, California in one month—white hot speed for Sessions. The piece is also white hot. All of the qualities of Sessions’s music are in full evidence: the long lines, high tension, complexity but clarity of the textures, bass line awareness, seriousness of “message.” And all of this demands high concentration by performer and listener alike.

A quality that I love about all of these pieces is that they are wonderfully pianistic and exploitive of stretching the capabilities of the piano to its seeming limits. They truly need a nine-foot concert grand piano (and a large space) to do them justice. This is not so much for the intensity of the loud sections, but more for the real hearing of passages like those

in the first movement of the Sonata No. 3, where four-part polyphony is going on in primarily soft areas with most of the notes lying below middle C. Such writing tends to sound dreadful and muddy on a studio upright (what doesn't?) and not much better on a small grand—but quite wonderful on a good Steinway nine-footer.

As time has gone by, I have become more and more partial to live recordings and less and less to studio recordings. In studio recordings, you may get all the notes. But in good live recordings, you get a performance. Not only is it in one swoop (the Sessionian long line?), but projection of the piece to an audience adds an indispensable expressive factor. Three of the four pieces on this CD come from live performances.

Each of these sonatas occupy a very important position in the Sessions catalogue, and each one plays a part in ushering in the beginning, or close to the beginning, of a somewhat “new” period in his compositional development. In fact, the dates of the Sonatas correspond roughly with those of three of his most important Symphonies: Sonata No. 1 (1927-30) and Symphony No. 1 (1927); Sonata No. 2 (1946) with Symphony No. 2 (1944-46), and Sonata No. 3 (1964-65) with Symphony No. 5 (1964).

Roger voiced to me the importance of the piano in his compositional life, and that these three pieces are, to an extent, cornerstone works in his creative output. Although not a public solo pianist, Roger was fully acquainted with the difficulties and possibilities of the piano and indeed went so far as to perform on more than a few occasions his Duo for Violin and Piano with Rudolf Kolisch as well as all of the Beethoven Cello Sonatas with his friend and colleague composer George Barati.

It is interesting to note differences in Sessions's three sonatas which cover more than thirty-five years. For example, there are the “tonality” aspects of the Sonata No. 1 (1930). It even has key signatures—a practice that came to an end soon after the first *Diary* piece (1939), which, oddly enough, has always seemed to me to be the wrong signature. (But this never seemed important enough to discuss with Sessions.) The Sonata No. 2 has an increase in rhythmic complexities and dissonance, and Sonata No. 3 has the really large increase in rhythmic difficulties, the use of his version of twelve-tone technique, and the larger scope and length. Yet in the large-scale form of all three sonatas, the problems of the “sonata,” are worked out with the same sense of dedication to the materials of music. In a sense, “time” is the same, it's just that the times have changed. (These topics are the subjects of articles and books on Sessions, often by Sessions.)

On the lighter side, I was always amused (as was Sessions) by his story concerning the program listing for a performance of *From My Diary* in France. Before they got the title right, it went through two stages—“From My Dearie,” and then perhaps even more alarming, “From My Dairy.”

Listeners to music not only have to try to receive, or be open to the composer's emotional message (or whatever one wishes to call it) but this “message” also has to get through via another mechanism which is the performer (in this case, me). And it is the performer whose abilities or limitations for such communication, and whose technical adroitness for handling such a task, are always a condition that the listener is forced to contend with. How many times have I heard a performance, especially of music new to me, where my reactions and assessment have been blocked by a less than adequate performance? How many times has it been hard to know whether these inadequacies have been those of the composer, the performer or indeed me?

Often I have been amazed at reading a newspaper criticism or talking with someone who has been at the same musical event that I have and wondered whether we could possibly have been at the same event, or even on the same planet. It is equally as amazing and wonderful that seemingly whole audiences can be thrilled in what appears much the same way and that they can be moved by almost identical messages and moods—sad, happy, angry, exciting, sensuous, etc.—from an arrangement of twelve notes being thrown at them by a composer through a performer. For us performers, perhaps especially for us who try to present new as well as older creations, it's all a great and wonderful challenge.

A word about Sessions and his metronome markings: take them with a grain of salt. For example, a long time after I learned the Sonata No. 2 he changed the markings on the opening of the third movement from [quarter note] = 88-92 to [quarter note] = 66-72. It has taken me fifty years to try to slow it down! Generally speaking, I take all metronome markings, especially in my own music, as within variable limits, though usually less varied than the above example. And I take all verbal directions very seriously and, generally speaking, quite literally. However, when I learned the Sonata No. 1, I couldn't handle the directions on the first page, *senza qualsiasi rubato* (with no rubato), and would up with plenty of rubato. Sessions said he was grateful that I hadn't taken that direction literally. At the time he wrote the piece, he was irritated by the taking of liberties with tempos, especially the somewhat queasy rubato that results from not playing left hand notes together with right hand notes. This was the vogue at the time, especially among concert pianists playing Chopin, and he felt later that his directions were in too whole-hearted response to that.

I'll close this topic and these notes with a comment made by Igor Stravinsky's composer/pianist son, Soulima, who visited us here at the University of South Florida a few years ago. At a question-and-answer session, he was asked what his father felt about his own metronome markings—were they to be taken as inexorably exact? He answered quite simply, “My father always told me he wished people would play his music more like Chopin.”

—Robert Helps

Composer and pianist **Robert Helps** (1928-2001) has been a recipient of awards in composition from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim, Ford, and many other foundations. His most recent works are Trio No. 2 for Piano, Violin and Cello (1996), commissioned by the University of South Florida, with help from the Copland Fund, for the Lions Gate Trio and Quartet for Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello (1996), commissioned by the Koussevitzky Music Foundation for the San Francisco-based Dunsmuir Quartet. Among his major works are the Symphony No. 1 (1955) and *Gossamer Noons* for soprano and orchestra (1974) both of which are available on a CRI American Masters retrospective CD of his works.

Helps has been professor of music at the University of South Florida, Tampa, and a professor of piano at the New England Conservatory, the San Francisco Conservatory, Princeton University, Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Manhattan School of Music. He has toured extensively performing with sopranos Bethany Beardslee and Phyllis Curtin; violinists Jorja Fleezanis, Isidore Cohen, and Rudolf Kolisch; and composer/pianist Aaron Copland. In addition to his own works, his CRI CD recordings include music of Aaron Jay Kernis, David Del Tredici, Vivian Fine, Leo Kraft, and Arthur Berger.

“His name is Robert Helps and he seems to be about twenty-years old, and he is one of the most amazing young pianists to come forward in this community. He has a fantastic technique, incredible rhythmic power, a superb tone, and that general stamp of vitality and positiveness that makes for a walloping, authoritative performance. In the first part of the program he did his best to conceal his capacities beneath a dull fantasia by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, but he came out from under with Roger Sessions’s colossal, craggy, intensely exciting second sonata and with the richly contrasted group of sketches by the same musician entitled *Pages from My Diary* (sic). At the end, the audience gave Helps a tremendous hand, but they should have been standing on

their chairs and cheering, perhaps as much for the composer as for his exponent.”

— *Alfred Frankenstein*,  
San Francisco Chronicle, September 7, 1950

“Its execution by Robert Helps was a dream of loving care.”

— *Virgil Thomson*,  
*New York Herald Tribune*,  
February 24, 1948  
(review of Helps’s performance  
of Sessions’s Piano Sonata No. 2  
on an ISCM concert at the  
Museum of Modern Art.)

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## Production Notes

Compact disc mastered by Robert Helps, Joseph R. Dalton, and Stephen Saper, engineer at Sony Music Studios, NYC, May 1998.

Piano Sonata No. 2 recorded in concert at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Hellman Hall, July 11, 1997, John Stephan, recording engineer.

Piano Sonata No. 1 from CRI SD 198. Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded in New York, David Hancock, engineer.

*From My Diary* recorded in concert at the University of South Florida, Music Recital Hall, Tampa, Florida, February 6, 1997, John Stephan, recording engineer.

Piano Sonata No. 3 recorded in concert at Merkin Hall, New York City, March 8, 1996.

Publishing: Piano Sonata No. 1: Edition Schott; Piano Sonata no. 2, Piano Sonata No. 3, and *From My Diary*: E.D. Marks/Belwin Mills (BMI)

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