

ROGER SESSIONS:

Symphony No. 1

I. Giusto

II. Largo

III. Allegro vivace

Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra
Akeo Watanabe, conducting

IF one were electing an all-out, qualified candidate among Americans for that mythical musical status—"The Composer's Composer"—I should be terribly surprised if Roger Sessions weren't the hands-down winner. Sessions' career goes back to the 'twenties—when the American composers, as the term is understood today, was "invented." Like his famous colleague of the Copland-Sessions Concerts, he was born in Brooklyn, New York—four years earlier than Copland, in 1896.

His entrance into Harvard College—at age fourteen— was the beginning of a higher education that saw him later at Yale, studying with Horatio Parker; in Cleveland, with Ernest Bloch. In 1924, he went to Europe where he lived for eight years in Italy and Germany. The Guggenheim Fellowship (1926-27) and the Rome Prize (1928) were awarded to Sessions during his stay abroad.

His return to the United States in 1933 saw him all but immediately settled into the University atmosphere that he has served with virtually unswerving loyalty ever since: an Assistant Professorship in music at Princeton preceded his appointment to a Full Professorship at the University of California. The years following World War II found Sessions back in Princeton at the head of a music department that, in recent years, has been the academic cradle for the recently-emerged, twelve-tone avant-garde.

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 "neo-classic" style, in full influence during the mid 'forties, is an already abiding attitude of the Symphony No. 1, composed in 1928. (His Symphony No. 3, which appeared years later, shows a strong drift to the dodecaphonic chromaticism of the 'fifties which has become increasingly influential in the Sessions manner.)

Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Sessions has responded to these musical ideologies in limited reference to his *own* manner. Neo-Classicism, in the First Symphony, for example, is by no means a matter of "sounding" like Igor Stravinsky; the esthetic is absorbed in attitude, the style is Sessions. Nor has his more recent preoccupation with advanced chromatic techniques given us music related in any palpable way to the personalities of Schoenberg or Webern or Berg; again, the technique is absorbed into the style of a man who, one imagines, could not be *other* than himself were he so to choose.

The First Symphony is a three movement work of complex formal investiture, of considerable linear-contrapuntal density and of a rhythmic elaborateness that its overall “sound” belies. Like all of the Sessions catalogue, this first symphony is likely to seem “difficult” to the listener who seeks easy gratification in facile tunefulness or musical “color.” Sessions—perhaps more than any American composer of his long-range prestige and solidity of reputation—has consistently eschewed the beguiling, the delightful, the “pretty” of music. But the intent ear, the serious musical perception will find much that is profound and absorbing in long-breathed, meticulously wrought, seemingly endless horizontal lyricism that characterizes the second movement of the symphony—a movement that, from a point of view, is Sessions in distillation.

WILLIAM BERGSMA AND RUSSELL SMITH—although nothing about the “sound” of either’s music would of necessity remind a listener of the other’s— have, in point of fact, a good deal of common ground. Some of it is coincidental, and (although nothing save a similarly coincidental coupling of the two names on this recording would have suggested it to the present writer) some of it is temperamental.

For example: Both composers are at the present writing in their thirties—Bergsma in his later, Smith in his earlier. Both, moreover, are alumni of the Eastman School of Music, in Rochester, New York where both studied (along with other teachers and elsewhere) with Bernard Rogers. These are the coincidental areas of common ground.

While the temperamental areas could conceivably relate to these similarities of educational background, the case could not easily be made. Both, for one thing, are thoroughly Eastern-Seaboard-American in their attitudes and compositional biases; the more characteristic “Eastman School composer” rarely is. But even apart from this, both are slowish producers, immaculate workmen; neither—viewed from this point in career—is likely to go down as a Darius-Milhaud-or-Benjamin-Britten—prolific composer. Both make their music without haste—carefully and very, very choosily—and both are quite likely to mull a piece for a good while before showing it to the public.

WILLIAM BERGSMA:

Music on a Quiet Theme

Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra
William Strickland, conducting

WILLIAM BERGSMA, whose *Music on a Quiet Theme* was written while the composer was preparing his Master of Music degree in Rochester, was born in Oakland, California on April 1st, 1921. Prior to his study in Rochester, Bergsma attended Stanford University. Since 1946, he has been a member of the composition faculty of the Juilliard School of Music, in New York City.

Bergsma has managed—most of it before he was thirty—to run the gamut of prizes, fellowships and commissions of the more celebrated status. The Koussevitzky Foundation commissioned him in 1943; the League of Composers in 1947. He has been awarded grants from both the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Music on a Quiet Theme is an uncannily terse (it plays about seven or eight minutes) study in thematic statement and musical climax. Within its passage, a student of music, for example, might very easily examine the processes by which such an aspect might be effected in an extended symphonic work. Still, this curiously succinct—and immaculate work is an entity in itself, a total musical expression in itself. Tonal and essentially diatonic as to style; linear and partwritten as opposed to leeringly “polyphonic”—it states the premise of a musical “argument” and resolves it without fuss, rhetoric or excess verbiage.

RUSSELL SMITH:

Tetrameron

Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra Akeo Watanabe, conducting

RUSSELL SMITH was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama on April 23rd, 1927. After his training at the Eastman School of Music, he went on to Columbia University to take first a B.S. of Music and thereafter a M.A. degree. Otto Luening and Douglas Moore were among his teachers there and, during the summer of 1947, he studied with Aaron Copland at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood.

Smith has won the special award of the George Gershwin Memorial contest in 1954; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1955; and the Seidl Fellowship in Theatrical Composition, at Columbia, in 1951.

Russell Smith’s *Tetrameron*—according to the score it was completed in New York City in 1957—is a one movement work composed with reference to a 4-part formal plan. It is, what is more, a compact distillation of its composer’s preoccupations. The score is swept clean of fuss, “effect” or padding; its expressive gesture is aristocratic, its manner elegant (“Neo-Classical” is the tired term for untired music of this sort.)

Tetrameron is free of stylistic cliché and easy stylistic frame-of-reference. Its surface is ever so calm, even businesslike. But just as its instrumental is far more chancey and unusual than a well-prepared performance will tell anything but the most alert of ears, the subsurface expressive aura of this work is as tense and highly-charged as its exterior is self-assured and handsome.

Notes by William Flanagan

THE founder and permanent conductor of the Japan Philharmonic, Akeo Watanabe, has shown, since his earliest days, an exceptional musical talent. At the age of six he mastered the piano sufficiently to make his concert debut in a performance of Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto, later he switched to the violin with considerable success and still later became a graduate conducting student at the Tokyo School of Music. Since 1942 he has been active as a chamber performer and a conductor, having formed the Tokyo Chamber Music Society and leading, with distinction, such orchestras as the Tokyo City Symphony, the Tokyo Philharmonic and, more recently, his own group and the one used in this series, the Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra.

LIKE the renowned Leopold Stokowski, his predecessor at St. Bartholomew's Church in New York City, William Strickland's professional beginnings are rooted in the music of the church and especially the organ. His artistic growth has paralleled Stokowski's in the manner in which he has devoted most of his mature musical life to the commissioning and performance of contemporary music. Strickland's work with the venerable New York Oratorio Society has brought him considerable recognition as a choral conductor, in addition to which he has served as founder-conductor of the NYA Little Orchestra, conductor of the Nashville Symphony and "gusted" extensively in Germany and Austria. At present he is appearing with several outstanding orchestras in the Far East.

WITH a population slightly greater than that of New York City, Tokyo, Japan boasts five major symphony orchestras as well as a number of lesser ones: amateur and institutional. The newest of these, the Japan Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra, founded by its permanent conductor Akeo Watanabe and Shigeo Mizuno, Director of the Nihon Cultural Broadcasting System Inc., has made substantial strides during its three years of existence in becoming one of the world's outstanding orchestras. The number of first performances done already by the group is quite remarkable. In addition to its commission program for works by Japanese composers, the Japan Philharmonic has introduced to its public a steadily increasing number of works both foreign and Japanese, classical and contemporary.

(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)