

ROGER SESSIONS

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For a composer to be acclaimed as highly respected and yet be ignored as to performances and recordings of his work is a blatant contradiction. In such situations there is usually a hidden reason and, in the case of Roger Sessions, it was the fact that his music was classified as non-American and coupled with that assertion came the suggestion that it might be subversive. And when you consider the McCarthy witch-hunts into communism and other 'non-American activities' the scene was set to either discredit or ignore Roger Sessions and his music. In the USA the Second Viennese School was rejected; what was in fashion was the nationalistic regime of Aaron Copland and all forms of Americana which had a total monopoly. If you belonged to the post-Webern school you were ostracized.

Sessions had much in common with Humphrey Searle. Humphrey's music was considered non-English because it did not 'lick the boots' of Parry and Elgar. Searle's music was warmly received in Germany but ignored in Britain... and, of course, he studied with Webern. Where Sessions and Searle diverged was in that Humphrey maintained his own highly developed style whereas Sessions went through three distinct phases of musical creativity. At first, he was a disciple of Ernest Bloch; then, of Stravinsky and, finally, of Schoenberg.

He once said, "A composer should develop naturally. I am seeking a style of my own and I came to twelve-note music naturally."

Like Searle, Sessions was a modest and likeable man. Neither were interested in self-promotion. Sessions would not be dictated to; he would not work to a schedule or deadline and so comparatively few commissions came his way. But one such commission was the Concerto for Orchestra written for the centenary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and premiered by them under Seiji Ozawa in October 1981. The first British performance was given by the excellent Sir John Pritchard and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. It is a short twelve minute work which is not a showpiece as such but displays the qualities of the woodwind and brass. It is in three main sections. The first is an allegro with lyrical interludes highlighting the woodwind. An expansive solo trumpet leads into the slow section and the final allegro moderato also has a trumpet introduction which is decisive. There is an extraordinarily quiet end. The work is taut, full of tension with vivid but not heavy orchestral colour. There are some soaring string themes and a very personal passion. Hidden in this rich tapestry are some profound statements. As with all of Sessions's music, it is cerebral and intellectual and yet it has a warm emotive quality. It appeals to the heart as well as the brain. It is fine music of enviable clarity, never thick or pompous, but almost humble and all the more sincere and compelling as a consequence.

The British première received an enthusiastic ovation.

Not so, his Piano Concerto of 1956 which that gallant and distinguished pianist Margaret Kitchin performed in a BBC Studio Concert to a dismissive and unkind audience. I remember the occasion well and with shame. Music lovers seem to suffer from pre-conceived expectations and prejudice. Here was a concerto that did not intend to be ostentatious. Instead of appreciating the subtle nuances and construction of this piece, a biased audience snubbed it. This happens from time to time. Sir William Walton told me once that when he was in Japan his Symphony No 1 was received with great delight but the Elgar Cello Concerto was greeted with cold silence.

Alfredo Casella, a friend of Sessions, said that Roger was born to be difficult by which he really meant different. Perhaps this is best displayed in Sessions's Violin Concerto of 1936 which is very difficult. There are no violins in the orchestra and there are parts for five clarinets which highlights the composer's ongoing desire to be innovative. This concerto is one of the twentieth century's most beautiful concertos. This is not just my assessment but that of conductors as diverse as Dimitri Mitropoulos, Gunther Schuller and Frederick Prausnitz. The concerto took seven years to write and was declared unplayable. Arthur Judson, the manager of the New York Philharmonic, refused to allow a performance complaining that at twenty nine minutes it

was too long. The real reason was that Sessions was feared and did not fit into musical society's pre-conceived ideas. He was persona non grata.

It is true that his music is technically difficult. He often wrote violin parts in high positions which do not lie easily under the hands. And yet technique has improved over the decades and his music should not present problems for professional performers today.

Roger Sessions was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1896. He was an avid student of music. He wrote an opera when he was thirteen. He was at Harvard (1910-15) and Yale (1915-17) studying composition with Horatio Parker, who had studied in Munich with Rheinberger and taught alongside Dvorák. One of Parker's other pupils was Charles Ives. Sessions joined the faculty at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts in 1917 and studied with Ernest Bloch until becoming his assistant at the Cleveland Institute in 1921.

By this time, Sessions's was already an amazing intellectual. His studies at Harvard had enabled him to speak Greek, Latin and German and later Italian and Russian. This enabled him to live in Florence, Rome and Berlin between 1927-33 and unintentionally gave rise to a problem that was to beset him for the rest of his life. He was seen not as an American but as a European. To add to this he saw the rise of fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany and feared the possibility of nationalistic fervour in the USA. He had no evidence to support his fears but he consequently was never a nationalistic composer. He did not like the false style of rangy Americana and, because of his European sojourn and his views, he was not liked in America. All his friends were European with the exception of the American composer Mark Brunswick who studied both with Bloch and Sessions.

Another pupil of Sessions was Milton Babbitt who refers to him as a complex person, a singular person who had the nickname 'The Lone Roger'. With Sessions, Babbitt learned all the mechanics of music and they studied Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. Babbitt was surprised to discover Sessions' love of Verdi operas. Their studies in New York were in a desolate room where Sessions lived and worked. His first marriage to Barbara had broken up and he was trying to make a living.

He had a powerful musical mind but never became a public figure as a composer. He appealed to fellow musicians, the professionals, and not the general public of music lovers. He and Aaron Copland formed the two opposite poles. Copland never settled into any individuality; he was always looking for a new bandwagon to jump on. He had some colourful athletic scores such as *El Salon Mexico* and *Rodeo* both written in a popular public-pleasing style; he used jazz in *Music for the Theatre* and his *Piano Concerto*; tried to imitate Schoenberg in his *Piano Variations* and the *Short Symphony* and tried to capture the vast American landscape in *Appalachian Spring* and *The Tender Land*. The nationalistic works are many including *A Lincoln Portrait* for speaker and orchestra and settings of *Old American Songs*. He also wrote film scores. He produced what the American public wanted and, as a result, it kept him in receipt of a steady income. His counterpart in England was Benjamin Britten whose main interest was not music but both a bank balance and prestige and, in this, he copied the toadying of Elgar. However, Copland and Sessions did co-found a series of New York concerts of new American works between 1928-31 but they were poles apart musically.

Sessions taught at Boston University (1933-35) followed by ten years at Princeton University. He was professor of music at the University of California, Berkeley 1945-51 where my friend, the British composer, John Veale studied with him for about a year.

By now, Sessions had married Lisel, a wealthy German divorcee and they kept two noisy ginger coloured spaniels which used to charge around as if on the wall of death. The second Mrs Sessions wanted a lot of waiting upon and this must have hindered composition.

The core of Sessions' work is his nine symphonies. The superb *Symphony No 1* dates from 1927 and is robust and strong. It has an incredible forward motion and a sinister excitement coupled with vigorous woodwind and solo brass passages. When the percussion is used it is to great effect and merely as punctuation. The haunting quality of the oboe is used with appealing results. There is a hint of fugato in a very brassy

section. The music develops a style of pageantry and it is never pompous but it flows with a menacing thrill. It is really exhilarating.

The slow movement often resembles a chorale and is very poignant with warm sensual string writing. It is very tender but not mawkish; rich but never sentimental or dreamy. The oboe has a melodic line of crystal clear beauty. The shifting harmonies of the horns is very telling and the woody sound of the viola adds to the music's dark passion. This develops with arabesque figures accompanying woodwind solos. There is a strange beauty and individuality. The gorgeous string music returns and how expert Sessions is at composing long melodic lines and a sound world that is exclusively his very own.

The finale is strong and virile which accidentally hints at something Scottish in a high flute part accompanied by a drone. The clarity of this vibrant music can only be admired. Any climaxes are natural and brief. This is a busy interesting movement with humour and solos for Roger's oboe and trumpet which he loved.

It is an incredible score.

The Symphony No 2 dates from 1944-6 and is dedicated to the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was first performed by the San Francisco Orchestra under Pierre Monteux in January 1947 and chosen for the Walter W Naumburg Foundation American Composition Award. The Greek conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos recorded it on a Columbia 7 inch LP (ML2120). The sleeve note was written by the British composer John Veale and his brief analysis of the symphony is reproduced here.

"I. Molto agitato - Tranquillo e misterioso. In five sections, the opening of the symphony presents two sharply contrasted moods and types of material in A-B-A-B-A alternation. The Molto agitato portion, with which the symphony commences, announces in succession four musical ideas that are important throughout the movement - (1) 'a held chord from the woodwind and horns, against which the strings play a passage of rapid figuration,' used later on as an important unifying device; (2) 'a declamatory theme in two sections, presented by horns and trumpet respectively'; (3) 'a brief, chorded fragment, played by trumpets and horns,' repeated twice with slight changes; (4) an oboe theme that begins with two large skips of the major sixth. These materials are all presented within the first twenty-one measures, and are then developed to a climax. The subsidence permits the appearance of the quieter materials of the second section, Tranquillo e misterioso, introduced by a violin solo, accompanied by arpeggiations of the solo 'cello, and producing, for Mr Veale, an effect 'like clouds racing across the moon at night'. The rest of the movement is an outgrowth of the two initial sections.

"II. Allegretto capriccioso. 'Nimble, ironical and dance-like,' this sixty-five measure movement stems entirely from the theme given at the beginning by the oboe and English horn.

"III. Adagio tranquillo ed espressivo. Three contemplative themes appear in sequence. The first, beginning at the third measure, is allotted to the muted violas, accompanied contrapuntally by muted lower strings; the second is presented by the oboe, accompanied by clarinet and bassoon, and again by the trumpet; the third is played by the solo clarinet, accompanied by the piano, and later taken over by the violins in a higher register.

"IV. Allegramente. The exposition presents two principal themes, which are worked over, and then interrupted by 'an unrelated, twenty-two bar pesante section, based on a muted trombone and English horn theme which, at its inception, remains entirely within the compass of a minor third.' Later, the music reaches 'a passage of exceptional dramatic intensity,' in which 'the tenor drum plays a long roll, of which the effect is variously accentuated by other percussive interjections and low string tremolos', with crucial rhythmic and melodic ideas set against this background by the rest of the orchestra. After a quiet portion, the music regains its force for the final climax, with cymbals and gong, in the unambiguous tonality of D major."

The Symphony No 3 dates from 1957. It has an easy-paced allegro with typical splendid woodwind solos. There is an ever-present menace and a few mini-outbursts but, as usual, everything is in control; it is colourful, slightly subdivided but never dull. When the music does become robust it is very impressive and has

scintillating colours. It is wonderful and vigorous with passages of lyrical beauty but it is never predictable as to its melodic line, tonality or harmony. This is one of Roger's many strengths.

The second is a real scherzo. It has a neo-classical Stravinskian feel about it and a humour that varies between sarcasm and laughing at the American self-importance. There are some uproarious 'rude' brass glissando but it is a scherzo. Its content is quite at odds with the modern public's absurd claim that all modern music is humourless.

The slow movement is brooding and thoughtful and of a profundity and austere beauty that we shall never fathom. It is very deep and beyond either words or praise... but, sadly, such genius will not appeal to everybody.

It is this profound intellectualism that will defeat most listeners as will the finale of the Symphony No 4 of 1958. This movement is called Pastorale. It is not feeble but resolute with fragmentary melodic lines always in evidence. Perhaps this movement is a little loose at times but it is always full of interest and it contains a brief but stunning climax. The opening movement is a vital energetic allegro of much athleticism. It contains strong thematic statements and Sessions' personal serialism which has great tension and a Bergian warmth in the strings. After a pause, the music sets out with startling effects and a relentless drive and, as usual, one can only admire the stunning orchestral clarity. The music has drama and tremendous excitement which recalls Humphrey Searle's Symphony No 1, particularly the trombone and tuba solos amid whirling string writing. No wonder Sessions called this movement a burlesque.

The second movement is an elegy but it is not weak or indulgent wallowing that you often hear in music by Tchaikovsky or Elgar. It is strong music. Its central section is agitated with strident strings and braying horns. This tension gives way to a beautiful violin theme taken up by the woodwind. The violence returns - a tremendous moment. The movement has a wonderful continuity despite its change of pace and content and has passages of a real chilling quality.

Eight years later the Symphony No 5 appeared. It has a mysterious opening which soon knits together to become energetic, angry and often very exciting. In this movement there are some simply astonishing moments and others of a lyrical intensity not found elsewhere.

The slow movement begins with a trombone solo and muted brass and proceeds to one of those beautiful high string themes. It is an impeccably written essay with much soul searching.

The finale is another athletic and exuberant piece in which high strings are prominent. The music is busy and may confuse uninformed listeners. The bustle, however, is infectious but there is a quiet end. Symphonies number six to eight are a trilogy and portray the composer's hatred of the Viet Nam War. My first girl friend was a fellow student of mine at RCM and was Vietnamese. She never knew what became of her parents and in fact she herself died young... she was only 20... through a virus she contracted in a swimming pool... and in this country. I, therefore, share Sessions' hatred of this war.

The Symphony no 6, of 1966, was commissioned by the state of New Jersey and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra to celebrate the tercentenary of the founding of the colony. It had what was called the 'worst premiere'. Sessions had not completed the finale and so the first movement was repeated at the end. It was not performed in its complete version until November 1966. Sessions said way back in the 1940s (and repeated it about this symphony), "Because I am an American I am not duty bound to write American music. Music is a universal language."

The opening movement is again energetic and full of rhythmic drive typical of his style of alternating tension and relaxation in a complex polyphony. The slow movement is another mysterious piece contrasting tranquillity with heightened agitation. Often the music is sensual. The finale is another robust, rugged movement with athletic leaps... music for the Olympics. It is often nervously exciting.

A new symphony followed the next year. Indeed, the Symphony No 7 is a stunning work. It is everything a modern symphony should be. The opening movement has a robust sound which leads in to Sessions' profound intellectualism with a generous helping of energy and excitement. It is this vitality that is missing from modern music and gives it a bad name... but then Victorian and Edwardian composers set this scene with their slow allegros and tedious music. Here, Sessions uses low brass with a relish of menace and the reserved use of percussion is very effective. Strident horns and snarling trumpets heighten the tension which is relieved by passages of some beauty. Late Stravinsky, which Irving Fine also found to be a great inspiration, may be detected here... but the music is Roger's own, rugged and bustling. The slow movement tends to meander slightly at times but it is by turn peaceful and lovely. There are some simply gorgeous woodwind solos. And here we go again into a finale of sheer joy and exuberance on a wonderful canvass of colour, dramatic, energetic and totally absorbing. There is more use of percussion than usual... the xylophone has a great time as, indeed he does in the Symphony No 3... and how well integrated this music is. After about five minutes the music becomes peacefully uneasy and of a slower tempo and, three minutes later, a long held chord heralds in woodwind solos that draw this masterly work to a quiet end.

The Viet Nam War was still troubling Sessions. His next symphony, the Symphony No 8 dates from 1968. The trilogy had taken three years. This symphony is continuous and a twelve note theme is soloed before the sinister orchestra enters. The music is dramatic, almost funereal. It is angry music; music protesting at the loss of Americans in a senseless war which Roger felt deeply about... and to think that he was called an American. A slow section is surprisingly legato; it is of tremendous depth. There are some very powerful moments in what is a tragic, personal and deeply felt movement. Cerebral music only? No. It is heartfelt music despite the stupid notion that some have that music of the heart must be pretty music.

The music increases in tempo. A menacing drum signals the drama to come. But a beautiful string theme with snarling bass takes centre stage. Further agitation follows and there is a brief climax but the music continues its quest for resolution as Roger pleaded for an end to the Viet Nam War. This is tough, gritty music. It is not for the amateur. The twelve-note theme is repeated at the close of this special work.

The Symphony No 9 of 1978 is more relaxed. The conflict is over and Sessions, now in his eighties, began to think of his mortality. It is a work of soul-searching with both vigour and lyricism. And it has a strange realistic finality about it.

As a teacher, Sessions was friendly but did not become close to his students. When discussing matters of importance, music or otherwise, he measured every word. He lectured on many topics including Mozart. He always spoke slowly... indeed he walked slowly. His music is always uneasy with a classical clarity not the richness of the romanticism of say, Richard Strauss. There is drama in his music but never of the sudden thunder-clap variety and his music has a matchless virility that is both rare and welcome.

Frederick Prausnitz has said that Roger Sessions is as good a composer as Edgar Varese and Elliott Carter. He is greater than Copland and Roy Harris but his music is not so immediate as theirs. There are no platitudes or clichés in Sessions' music. It is far too good for that.

Roger Sessions died at Princeton, New Jersey in May 1985. When he was told that he had a month to live he replied philosophically, "What a nuisance!"