AMERICAN COMPOSERS, X

Roger Huntington Sessions

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IN considering the work of Roger Sessions as a whole we shall endeavor to trace the evolution of his style in its more personal and individual aspect rather than in relation to contemporary musical problems. It must be realized however that in any intensive study of a composer who is still growing and changing, all conclusions necessarily renounce any pretence of definiteness and rigorous classification.

The works of his boyhood, written without any knowledge of musical theory, do not require detailed treatment. One sees at once in them all the raw material of natural musical talent, unspoiled and undeveloped. The magnum opus of that period, *Lancelot and Elaine,* a huge opera (scored for practically all the instruments mentioned in a musical dictionary!) completed at the age of sixteen, reveals a most robust unblushing musicality. On Humperdinck's advice Sessions devoted himself to the serious study of composition, the fruits of which are summed up in the *Symphonic Movement* written while studying with Horatio Parker. While in no respect really personal music, there are already present some of the main characteristics of Sessions' style. In spite of D'Indy and Strauss, there is a purity and breadth of line in some of the phrases that point directly to the mature *Symphony* and *Piano Sonata.*

It is, however, in the incidental music for Andreyev's *Black Maskers,* composed in 1923, that we first find a definite individual style. Here is a concentration, a biting intensity, expressed with the utmost precision and economy. The soloistic handling of the orchestra at a time when the Stravinsky of *L'Histoire d'un Soldat* was almost unknown in America is only one of the qualities that give this work its pioneer significance for American

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Pen and Ink Sketch by
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music. The terror and introspective madness of the play are far more than underlined; they are developed on another plane, analytic rather than descriptive, conveying the essence of the dramatic situation at times with more sweep and power than the drama itself.

There are limitations both of technic and style in this work, principally a choppy shortness of breath in the motives employed and a form too much oriented to the dynamic climaxes. These defects are in some measure due to the nature of the play and would probably seem appropriate when played as incidental music according to the original intention. In the concert hall, as abstract music, the very vehemence and restlessness of the climaxes give a certain feeling of monotony, especially as all of the four movements are continually rising and falling in dynamic intensity. The best criticism of the *Black Maskers* is to be found directly in Sessions' next compositions, the three *Chorale Preludes* for organ and the *Symphony*.

Here there is not the slightest reliance on the whipping-up of emotion or the suspense of accumulating crescendos. The musical line is allowed to speak for itself. There is no doubt that the example of the so-called neo-classic works of Stravinsky was of the greatest help to Sessions in achieving the clarity of purpose and style which is shown in these works. But is is highly characteristic that, in taking what he could from Stravinsky, Sessions was never in the slightest danger of losing his own musical personality. The chorales already show a conception of tonality and counterpoint that is original in the truest sense. The supple and far-reaching melodic line, the strong feeling for harmonic progression so completely at one with the independent leading of the individual parts, produce an intensity and concentration that, despite their austerity, are always alive and expressive.

In the *Symphony* these characteristics are still further developed and combined with the rhythmic vitality and orchestral virtuosity already foreshadowed in the *Black Maskers*. The first movement, with its absolutely relentless eighth-note pulsation, its unyielding setting for the non-expressive wind instruments, has a bare abstract heroism that is something quite apart

in music. It is exceedingly difficult (does that altogether account for its having been heard in only one American city?) ; a blurred eighth-note rhythm can destroy the entire cumulative effect. Not all the themes are of equal value, but one hardly perceives the separate component parts in the face of the driving power of the whole. After the rigidity of this movement, with its strict block-like form, the largo in its flowing gravity and poise becomes one of the most moving contrasts in modern music. The simplicity and effortlessness of its construction give this movement a classic quality which has become an even more integral part of Sessions' musical language. After this the bravura and brilliance of the finale seem somehow almost external and worldly. Technically it is beyond praise and the orchestration is a tour-de-force; but for us the music is not quite fully informed with the composer's real personality.

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The struggle to absorb and incorporate various external influences into a musicality that has not yet reached final maturity gives rise to a certain lack of unity in the three movements of the *Symphony* in relation to each other. With the *Piano Sonata,* and to a still greater degree in the recently completed *Violin Concerto,* Sessions has found a complete integration of style, along with greater inner variety and range. There has been no break in his growth; all the elements of his previous works are developed and welded into a flexible organic unity. The main characteristics are an unusually broad and extended melodic line, a strong and subtle feeling for harmonic progression always present despite the highly contrapuntal texture, and the most controlling principle of all, an enormously refined instinctive sense of tonality. This last is difficult to define in even technical language, but inasmuch as it is an important aspect of modern music, perhaps the only element which can be said with any justice to represent an "advance" over the past, we shall endeavor to study the piano sonata principally from that point of view.

The introduction, one long extended melody, is definitely in the key of B minor; but already in the second bar D♯ enters in

the left hand, and though at first this seems a passing harmonic change, it gradually develops a tonal pull of its own which makes itself felt not only in the introduction, but throughout the whole sonata. The modulation to C minor, the key of the allegro, is achieved by the enharmonic change of D♯ to E♭ (bar 24), which in the course of the exposition (it is in regular sonata form) becomes the classic key of the second theme. At another crucial point, just before the recapitulation (bar 178) one finds the same enharmonic struggle between D♯ and E♭. The coda of the allegro is merged, by E♭ reversing itself to D, into a return to the introduction, this time developed into an independent slow movement by means of a new middle section in D minor (another mediant, this time the minor one) and this in turn without a break ushers in the finale with D♯ at last as a full fledged tonic. This upward tendency by thirds is here given its final and most intense expression in the constant conflict between F♯ and F double sharp, unresolved even at the end when, despite the major thirds having finally succeeded in establishing the true major tonality and mode of D♯ (with D double sharp as third and C double sharp as leading tone, the F♯ is stubbornly sounded in the bass (bars 551 ff) and then in the treble (bars 559 ff), and the sonata is forced, one may say, to end on the non-committal empty fifth. The last movement is so exuberant and masterful in its transparent and highly developed form and the profusion and quality of its invention, that one cannot help being astonished at the insignificance of the principal theme, which, despite its apparent innocuousness, is able to engender a whole series of living ideas.

The *Violin Concerto* is very close in spirit and style to the *Sonata,* achieving, however, a still greater measure of integration and maturity. In the opening largo there is such complete spontaneity of expression, such a merging of all the qualities of his music, that it offers a front of inevitability which seems to render all attempts at analysis futile. This has in an absolutely perfect form what for us is Sessions' highest attribute: the building-up of a most intense and moving musical structure solely by means of beauty of line and texture. There is never a moment when the composer assaults the hearer with immediate demands

of his personality—in fact it is music in which separate moments seem not to exist, so complete is its unhindered flow and breadth. Sessions has achieved, in this movement at least, with its absolute purity and universality, the complete identification of form with content which is the mark of the truly classic in its broadest sense.

In his ability to absorb the best in the life around him and partake fully of it, while retaining the essential aloofness and self-preoccupation of the creative nature, we feel that Sessions stands apart from the general trend of his contemporaries. His development has been at times helped by his intellectuality but never controlled by it, and so, for all its originality, his music is never experimental. It is that power to coordinate and mold his unconscious musical impulse without forcing it into irrelevant and unnatural activity that gives to Sessions, among present-day American composers, his lonely position as a truly creative artist.