

ROGER SESSIONS' STRING QUARTET*

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ONE of the certainties in the world of musical journalism is that every performance of a work by Roger Sessions will be greeted by a critical chorus chanting "uncompromising atonality," "persistent polytonality," and similar phrases. It is doubtful, of course, that either of these phenomena exists, and demonstrable that Sessions' music embodies neither of them. On the other hand, so much critical smoke must betray some fire, although the nature of the conflagration is not to be explained in such easy omnibus terms.

What is really apposite is a new and wider conception of tonality. If we define the word in terms of a strict dominant-tonic relation, then most of Sessions' music is indeed "atonal"—along with much of Wagner and Debussy and pages of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. It would be more profitable and more nearly correct to consider the tonal concept as a sense of the directions and relationships in all functional harmonic and melodic progressions. Each of these ideas—direction and relationship—implies the existence of some point of reference, whether a single tone or a set of chords. The ear tends to supply such points even when, as in "atonal" music, the composer has tried to avoid doing so; and if two so-called keys are heard simultaneously, the hearer will relate the one to the other or both to a third, thus reducing our second bugbear, polytonality, to a mere name.

The *String Quartet in E-minor*, composed as it was in 1936, represents Sessions' most advanced style; and here we can best observe his greatly broadened tonal system, which is an attempt to bring into organic relationship a more widely extended range of harmonies than would otherwise be possible. Such a system naturally offers problems to the listener—problems which he must face before he can understand the essential expression of which the technic is only the means.

He may be confused by the prevailing chromaticism until he realizes that it is related neither to the aimless meandering of much late nineteenth-

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ROGER SESSIONS
drawing by
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century music nor to the complete lack of differentiation of twelve-tone methods. Sessions' directions are always clear and always significant.

The listener will find passages – such as the *Trio* of the second movement – which cannot be placed definitively in one key and must be considered as lying within a tonal area or region characterized by a relationship between several harmonies. He will discover that tonality need not be stationary but can move constantly – as in the first theme of the *Finale*. He will hear harmonic functions implied without being expressly stated – as in the interesting passage preceding the recapitulation of that movement.

These processes are by no means peculiar to Sessions (indeed, they are clearly observable in Wagner) but are present in all important contemporary music. It is frequently asked whether they are not devices of *Augenmusik* – music which works out beautifully on paper but which cannot be heard. The answer must necessarily be empirical and personal, and I can only say that each hearing of the *Quartet* confirms my feeling of solid harmonic-tonal foundations beneath the complex structure.

I have thought it worthwhile to analyze the opening of the initial movement (*Tempo moderato*) in some detail, as it illustrates some of the methods employed by this music and the problems they present. Example Ia shows the two outer parts; Ib is a linear reduction of the same. The

The image contains two musical examples, Ex. 1a and Ex. 1b. Ex. 1a is a linear reduction of the opening of the initial movement, showing the two outer parts (Violin I and Violin II) and the Cello. Ex. 1b is a linear reduction of the same passage, showing the harmonic structure in a more abstract, linear fashion.

bass denotes the key unmistakably as E-minor by its tonic pedal followed by a scalewise movement centering on the dominant. The melody has a superficial appearance of being partly in E \flat ; but the linear analysis shows

that this is due to the presence of foreign passing-notes, and that the real motion consists of three descending lines firmly established in E. The first of these we may consider as beginning on the initial higher B, progressing as indicated to E in measure eleven. For the second line I find it convenient to assume an E as the antecedent of the E \flat in measure two, the character of which seems to me that of a passing-note in the general downward movement. This line is soon interrupted; but it is continued in a lower octave in measure four, where the motion initiated by the G in measure one picks up the E \flat -D \flat on the way toward its final B. The third line can be thought of as starting with the lower B in measure one and ending with G in measure eight. While this one is of slight importance, it is interesting to see that even the least significant tones are given direction; and the G serves to complete the triad formed by the finals of each descent: E-G-B.

Although the passage can thus be neatly explained in the key of E-minor, it would be useless to pretend that the pull of E \flat is not present. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the first important modulation is to E \flat -minor (D \sharp), leading to the appearance of a second theme in C-minor. At other points as well, this relation of a half-step influences the principal harmonic changes.

The general design – three successive expositions of the same material – corresponds in a rough way to exposition, development, and recapitulation; but I think a more accurate picture is obtained from the composer's own term, "three-stanza form." The skillful handling of the connections is noteworthy, especially outstanding being the three entrances of the closing theme.

The *Adagio-Allegretto-Adagio* which follows may be described as a slow movement with a scherzo as trio. The second *Adagio*, while containing the same material as the first, is not an exact repetition: whereas the first moves in the general direction of the dominant, the pull of the second is toward the subdominant, a nice balance being gained thereby. An interesting feature of the movement is its use of the germ-motive furnished



by its opening. Example II indicates the variety of treatment which this

three-note figure receives. Making its appearance in the first violin (a), it is treated sequentially and then inverted by the 'cello (b); it is heard in diminution as part of a transitional theme (c, d), soon to be worked imitatively; it is even given in retrograde motion (e). It is this fragment, too, that connects the trio with the returning *Adagio*. More important than the ingenuity of such devices, however, is the fact that never does the detail obtrude; never does it disturb the flow so characteristic of Sessions' music, in which detail is always subordinated to line.

The movement is one of great intensity and variety of expression, emphasized by effective contrasts of instrumental color. The pizzicato-accompanied second theme and the evanescent *Trio* hardly confirm the often-mentioned aridity of the composer's style.

For those who consider Sessions' melodic lines too extended for ready comprehension, the *Finale*, (*Vivace molto*), should afford welcome relief. It is full of memorable ideas of rhythmic vitality and characteristic contour. The form, too, a fairly regular sonata-pattern, is easily grasped. Again one wonders why this music is condemned as cerebral or intellectualistic. This common accusation is ridiculous, as any sensitive listener must realize. Besides, serious composers have better things to do than invent musical cross-word puzzles for the fun of solving them. When difficulties arise, they do so as the result of an inner necessity — a necessity of expression.