

# THE SPRING SEASON IN REVIEW

## A SYMPHONY INTRODUCES ROGER SESSIONS

TO most persons in the Boston audience that heard the first performance of Roger Huntington Sessions' *Symphony* on April 22, the composer was an unknown man. Some few may have remembered Paul Rosenfeld's *Dial* essay of three or four years ago, wherein Sessions' music for Andreiev's *Black Maskers* was written about with an enthusiasm rare even in Rosenfeld. A few hearers of the new work knew the earlier one, and a very few knew something of Sessions' other music. This small company was, however, hardly more prepared than the larger part of the audience for the event which Mr. Koussevitzky and his men brought to pass. No one could have anticipated that a young man who had let so little of his music be known, even to his intimates, would step suddenly into an incontestable place among the most compelling figures in modern music.

This is not to say that everyone liked Sessions' symphony. I set down, solely for historical purposes, that some hisses were heard. That has happened before. Nor do I mean to affirm that Sessions has written an enduring, monumental, perfect work. I do not know. But of this I am sure: no one who had ears to hear could for a moment doubt the astounding capacity of the man, a capacity equally secure in its technic and in its imaginative grasp. Sessions can do consummately what he wants to do; he wrote this E minor *Symphony* exactly, I believe, as he meant to write it.

The symphony is pure music. It has no commerce with the externals or inconsequentials that so frequently intrude upon modern music. "I am not trying," Sessions says in the Boston

Symphony Program Book, "to write 'modern,' 'American,' or 'neo-classic' music." Nor, he might have added, am I trying to write music of machines, of post-war disillusion, of audacious experimentation, or of the "dynamic propulsion of naked desire." These things, so persistently invoked in our present musical thinking, do not concern Mr. Sessions. His symphony is to be judged with the same single-minded, focused attention as one of Mozart's. It is music of the imagination in which the only relevant matter is the musical thoughts and the living shape their composer has given them.

But in detaching music from all concern with externals, Sessions has not ignored the musical resources newly upturned in this modern decade. He is not a reactionary either in technic or expression. His symphony is the work of a man to whom modern orchestration, harmonic potentialities, melodic style, and, above all, modern rhythmic vitality are so native that they cease to be self-conscious incidents.

In the three short movements of this symphony the wind instruments, especially the brasses, carry the chief interest. Stravinsky of the *Symphonies pour Instruments à Vent* is recalled in the use Sessions makes of trumpet and horn. The score is never sensuous; the composer is never diverted from his purpose either by the enticements of sonority or by facile effectiveness. The instrumentation is as pertinent, as cut-to-the-quick, as are the ideas it conveys.

The first movement, from the opening challenge of a trumpet melody, rising by quick successions of perfect and augmented fifths, exposes contrapuntally conceived textures, bare, almost stark in their sincerity. The pace is rapid but not so fast that the hearer cannot determine the purpose and the logic of the several melodic strands. They move against one another with the titanic compulsion often to be found in Bach. Here as in the other movements one feels the clean nakedness of the thought. Is it because chromaticism is ignored? Sessions' atonality is sinewy, diatonic atonality. It all ends, without rhetoric, upon an unexpected E major triad, the most eloquent triad I have heard in modern music. Brief quotations from the score, desiccated as they may sound at the piano, give a more

vivid sense of the stuff of which this movement is made than can words.

*Giusto* ( $\text{♩} = 116$ )

The image displays three systems of handwritten musical notation. The first system is marked 'Giusto' with a tempo of 116 beats per minute. It features a melody in the upper voice and a bass line. The second system continues the melodic line with various ornaments and dynamics. The third system includes a section marked '7-p' and 'Fog', with more complex rhythmic patterns and dynamics.

The slow movement is deeply meditative. Its melodies are largely diatonic; its counterpoint untroubled. An ascetic restraint is here. These melodies do not seduce the composer into luxurious richness of color, nor do their many turns of thought prompt him to any of the familiar clichés of sequence and extension and of rhetorical emphasis. Who can hear the little duet between flute and oboe, which precedes the return of the first theme, without a startled sense of the integrity of a man who could forego developing this passage into a sweeping episode? Deeply meditative, I have called this movement, yet I found in it no melancholy, no defeated ecstasy. This is not

the mood of Bloch, nor is it the biting depression of Stravinsky's slow movements. The opening measures are here quoted:

*Largo*  
(♩ = 44)

*Vcllo (L. & R.)*  
*Brass*  
*Cym.*

*p*  
*con sord. sempre.*

Vivacity and exuberance pervade the last movement. Its vigor is stupendous. These are dances of a man to whom a dance is a demoniac ritual. The demons here are, however, those of birth and death, not of the play-time and love-time between.

What is the result? Disturbing, certainly, as are all works of art so long as they remain vital. It is stark, almost grim in its restraint. I venture to assert that its mood is that of a modern, thoughtful man who feels without desperation and without illusion the beauty as well as the despair of his world. This, it should be remembered, is a *first* symphony. Its composer, though he has traveled far, is still a young man. He will have much more to say. He now plans an opera and other extended works. Whether this music, yet to come, will be more rounded-out, more expansive, more tender than the first symphony will depend largely upon what life does to Mr. Sessions. But whatever he says will command attention.

*Roy D. Welch*

## BALLYHOO

**A**BOUT the time the red flannels are hung away in the back closet and before the proverbial harbingers of spring "bob" their way into a sweltering summer, there comes a lull when