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Roger Sessions: A Biography (review)

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(i.e., the composer's eventual emigration to Switzerland), but also due to the decisive influence of two major ideological currents of the era: nationalism and communism. Veress studies may therefore provide a welcome widening of horizon to music historical investigations in these three fields, which have until now been almost exclusively dominated by case studies focusing on Germany and the Jewish Diaspora. Andreas Traub's essay finely illustrates this thesis by identifying *Verlust und Utopie* (loss and utopia) as the keynotes of Veress's life and work, while Willson's second contribution provides another illuminating study about the composer's relationship to communism before his settling in Switzerland in 1949. As she suggests, Veress's solid position in the Hungarian musical establishment before the end of World War II may easily have been something he felt pressed to compensate for by joining the Communist Party in May 1945. The composer's final years in his homeland are also discussed in the article by his son Claudio Veress, which thoughtfully argues that each of his father's works in the period 1945–48 could be read as intentionally ambiguous, and their seeming "political correctness" in fact hides resolutely subversive ideas.

The collection also features a few analytical essays. Both of Bodo Bischoff's studies explore particular aspects of Veress's *Das Glasklängespiel*, a five-movement work for chorus and orchestra to texts by Hermann Hesse. In a less theoretical manner, Doris Lanz examines Veress's changing relationship with dodecaphony, a technique he categorically rejected in a note dated July 1951, but nevertheless adopted in a work completed as early as August 1952. According to Lanz's intriguing interpretation, through this apparent turning against one of his earlier aesthetic principles the composer might in fact have sought to perpetuate another, more important artistic preference: the quest for synthesis he so admired in the works of his former mentor Bartók. (Intriguingly, by 1954 Veress went as far as to draw a parallel between composing with a *Reihe*, and arranging folksongs.) The final essay by Péter Laki deals with Veress's most important ethnomusicological contribution, his collection of *csángó* folksongs (the Csango people are a Hungarian-speaking minority in Moldavia),

and is thus the only article in *Sándor Veress: Komponist—Lehrer—Forscher* to deal with the third major topic indicated in the title.

Taken as a whole, this collection fulfills its prime goal admirably by calling wider attention to a generally neglected figure of twentieth-century music, whose life and work can nevertheless help us understand several of his better-known contemporaries as well. Since the volume grew out of a single-day conference on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the composer's birth, the editors were of course not in the position to ensure all-round coverage of Veress's career—the virtually complete silence on the pre-1945 years is therefore understandable, though quite unfortunate. (And all the more so, for we do learn [p. 220] that the composer's letters to his brother, now preserved as part of the Veress estate in the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, document this period in considerable detail.) At the same time, all readers will no doubt wish the editors had added a brief chronological overview of Veress's life, as well as a work list, in the absence of which some of the received information about such a little-known figure seems difficult to put into context. This minor flaw and the inevitably uneven quality of the contributions aside, the bilingual volume represents a welcome widening of our rather narrow traditional canon of twentieth-century composers worthy of study. If perhaps not a *Granifundament* that Veress's statue could be erected on, it does achieve a small but much-needed step toward a fuller understanding of a fascinating chapter in European music history.

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Roger Sessions: A Biography. By Andrea Olmstead. New York: Routledge, 2008. [xvii, 441 p. ISBN 9780415977135 (hardcover), \$120; ISBN 9780415977142 (paperback), \$47.95.] Illustrations, bibliography, index.

Roger Sessions receives surprisingly little attention despite his status as one of the most significant American composers of the twentieth century. His music is performed, but not regularly; there are record-

ing reviews and scholarly articles, but not many. Until the publication of Frederik Prausnitz's *Roger Sessions: How a "Difficult" Composer Got That Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), there existed no full-scale biography on the composer. Yet this is a composer whom Richard Dyer of the *Boston Globe* calls "perhaps the most influential of all American composers" (liner notes, *Roger Sessions and Donald Martino: Piano Sonatas*, New World Records, 80546-2 [1998], CD), and whom Leighton Kerner of the *Village Voice* called the greatest symphonist since Mahler. I witnessed personally the long standing ovation accorded to the composer and his Piano Concerto at the Boston Symphony Orchestra several years ago. The bulk of the work on Sessions has been done by Andrea Olmstead, his erstwhile colleague at Juilliard, whose previous books on the composer include *Roger Sessions and His Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), *Conversations with Roger Sessions* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), and *The Correspondence of Roger Sessions* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992) (all available for free download at the author's website (<http://www.AndreaOlmstead.com>, accessed 25 September 2009)). It is to be hoped that the present work, *Roger Sessions: A Biography*, will jumpstart a well-deserved, renewed interest in the composer and his music.

This book goes far beyond all previous attempts, including the author's own publications, to delineate the composer's life. Drawing on newly discovered letters, unpublished interviews and articles, and Sessions' own prose accounts of events in his life and in the world, Olmstead paints an honest but sympathetic portrait of a composer frequently thought of as brainy. The inclusion of many lengthy excerpts from Sessions' correspondence gives the reader a very different view from that of the "mathematical" composer, resulting in a strong sense of his personality—his nervousness, his excitability, his passion, his self-doubts, his tendency toward self-analysis (e.g. "My problem seems to me to be above all one of coordination and regulation, and above all perhaps one of controlling the tempo of my nervous rhythm" [p. 193]).

Olmstead traces five areas of Sessions' life throughout the book: musical, reli-

gious, political, sexual, and financial. She weaves these elements into her narrative, at times using them to challenge received wisdom about the composer, such as his sexual ambiguity as a young man, which not even his family knew about. Most chapters include a detailed discussion of one or more musical works. Olmstead divides his life into six chronological chapters: "Family History," "Yale through the Cleveland Institute," "The European Period, 1925–1933," "The Decade 1936–1946," "*The Trial of Lucullus* through *Montezuma*," and "The Last Two Decades." She pays special consideration to his early life, including a far too detailed account of his family pedigree. The extreme attention to detail is at times overwhelming, hampering the narrative flow. Minutiae such as each semester's grades for classes while at Harvard, and lists of all his reading material (whether or not they proved relevant to his life and music) at times obscure the story of his life and work. Yet the painstaking research is quite often tremendously fruitful. A thorough account of the composer's relationships with his parents and close friends sheds light on the composer's thoughts, feelings, and at times artistic frustrations. His significant (and intimate) friendship with George Bartlett, who died when Sessions was twenty-four, reveals layers of his personality previously hidden. Earlier books and biographies, including Prausnitz's *Roger Sessions*, make no mention at all of this important and emotional episode in his life.

Given the great attention to detail in much of the book, the cursory treatment of another important event in his life is surprising. After having been unfaithful to his first wife, Barbara Foster Sessions, a few years into their marriage, his wife began an affair while alone in Paris in the spring of 1926 while he was in Florence. Her infidelity resulted in a pregnancy and subsequent abortion and hospitalization from complications. She would never be able to have children after that. Olmstead covers this in one scant paragraph, with little elaboration on either party's comments, thoughts, feelings, or reactions.

In general, however, what Olmstead does best is reveal the nuances of Sessions' character. Very much appreciated are the frequent excerpts from comments on particular composers, works, or trends in

music. They uncover his nature, his thoughts, and his passions beautifully, resulting in an intriguing, somewhat contradictory image of the composer: from his actions and behavior he seems frequently irresponsible, defensive, and selfish; yet he is clearly also thoughtful, principled, and honest. Olmstead takes great pains to assert "his lifelong ability to make and keep friends" (p. 202). He was well liked, charming, and personable: "warm, lovable, wise, and friendly, Sessions struck almost everyone he met as someone worth speaking with" (p. 202). In the end, the reader is drawn in as much as any acquaintance of Sessions during his lifetime must have been: we find him likable, charming, and sympathetic, despite his infidelity, irresponsibility, and selfish moments.

The benefit of this insight is almost negated by the author's frequent forays into psychoanalytic commentary. In small doses this may be acceptable, but the pervasiveness begins to grate. It was with misgivings that I encountered the following statement, halfway through the mini-chapter on the Symphony no. 2: "Perhaps this is the moment to try to explain Sessions' personality in terms of psychological motivations" (p. 276). Olmstead draws on vocabulary from Karen Horney's *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (New York: Norton, 1950) and acknowledges the speculative nature of her discussion. Surprisingly, the section was logical, insightful, and appropriate to the larger narrative of Sessions as a composer. Perhaps it is the frequent off-hand psychological comments that seem out of place, while this separate, more deliberate section was both welcome and necessary. Had it occurred earlier in the book, Olmstead may have felt less need for the many off-hand remarks.

More detrimental to the narrative flow of the book are the many idiosyncrasies of Olmstead's writing style. Information is presented out of order, paragraphs jump from topic to topic, and there are numerous gaps in logic, inconsistencies, and missing information. She presents information in the wrong paragraph or several paragraphs too late: material that should come at the beginning of a topic thread comes in the middle or the end. At times she introduces an important topic in the middle of a chapter, in one sentence, then drops it

completely. She fails to mention it again for several pages or even chapters. For example, upon the death of his close friend George Bartlett, she includes a paragraph in which she describes the various emotions Sessions must have felt. It's poignant and well written. The last sentence of the paragraph comes out of nowhere: "Sessions began to set Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*" (p. 134). One might suppose that this could be her idiosyncratic way of transitioning to the topic of his *Leaves of Grass* setting, but she drops the subject completely, finishing the chapter with no further mention of the work. The only other mention of Walt Whitman's work comes two hundred pages later. We find an example of missing information in a paragraph about Eleanor Foster, Sessions' sister-in-law. The paragraph ends with the sentence: "Eleanor, too, went to Europe" (p. 148), yet the author has not yet mentioned anyone else's going to Europe. As an example of inconsistency, at the beginning of a paragraph about Ernest Bloch and his family, the author refers to Bloch's wife as Marguerite Schneider and at the end of the paragraph as Marguerite Bloch. Taken alone, these examples seem minor and unimportant, but the pervasive occurrence of these idiosyncrasies makes the entire first half of the book laborious reading. Fortunately such problems seem to vanish around the middle of the book, and the importance of the content certainly makes the effort worthwhile.

This book is crucial for any scholar, librarian, student, or musician interested in American music of the twentieth century. Despite some issues of writing style, the importance of this book cannot be overemphasized. Olmstead opens up Sessions' life to the public for the first time, allowing the reader an understanding entirely impossible until now. The detail, thorough and painstaking scholarship, and sympathetic treatment of this complex figure in American musical life are well deserved and most welcome. Let us hope that with this in-depth reference to Sessions' life, scholars and performers will find new impetus for focusing on the wealth of music he has left us.

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