

ROGER SESSIONS
Symphonies 6, 7 & 9

American Composers Orchestra
Dennis Russell Davies

Phoenix USA
PHCD 172
(D)(D)(D)

Symphony No. 6

1. I Allegro	7:02
2. II Adagio e tranquillo	5:54
3. III Allegro moderato	7:14

Symphony No. 7

4. I Allegro con fuoco	8:49
5. II Lento e dolce	6:31
6. III Allegro misurato	7:18

Symphony No. 9

7. I Allegro: Impetuoso - Tranquillo	11:16
8. II Con movimento adagio - Doppio movimento quasi allegretto	5:54
9. III Allegro vivace	11:27

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This disc includes the first recording of the Sixth and Ninth Symphonies by Roger Sessions, whom critic Leighton Kerner called “the greatest symphonist since Mahler”. Superstitious about writing more symphonies than Beethoven's nine, Mahler died during the composition of his Tenth. Sessions, like many other composers, also wrote nine symphonies. When commissioned to write another, the composer disclaimed superstition, but called it Concerto for Orchestra. His nine symphonies plus the Concerto, a Violin Concerto, a Piano Concerto, Double Concerto, Rhapsody, Concertino, Divertimento and Suite from *The Black Maskers* contribute mightily to the American orchestral canon. Sessions’ long creative life - the nine symphonies were written over fifty years can be divided into six periods. Symphonies 6 and 7 appeared in the fifth period, bordered by two masterpieces, the opera *Montezuma* (1963) and the cantata *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (1971). The Ninth came in his last period.

In his orchestral music Sessions developed a unique and recognizable orchestral profile: a strident sonority of violins in their highest register refusing octave doubling; the blurred warmth of the brass interweaving in a dense counterpoint that cannot be untangled; black laughter in the woodwinds, which breaks off into florid *bel canto*-like solos of intense expression played by piccolo, alto flute, bass clarinet, even contrabassoon; a brittle foreground of xylophone and marimba; and ominous drums and percussion. Sessions described the orchestra as 'his instrument'.

Symphonies Nos. 6, 7 and 8 composed in 1966, 1967 and 1968 respectively - were associated with the Vietnam war. The composer said, “[They] form in my mind a kind of series connected with the events of that time. The Sixth Symphony becomes grim at the

end, and the Seventh is grim all the way through.” The Sixth was commissioned, however, for the celebratory occasion of the State of New Jersey's 300th anniversary. Sessions began writing it in the summer of 1965 while in South America (Buenos Aires, Chile, Peru and Mexico) and completed it at Tanglewood.

The first movement's initial idea, a repeated major ninth, unifies the work as a memorable shape. The opening idea of the Adagio, a high violin melody with winds, recurs twice; the notes, however, vary. The similarity of its rhythm, register and contour reveal Sessions' characteristic formal trait: continuous variation, that is, reminiscences without verbatim repeats. “In this style recapitulation in the old sense of the word would not work at all. There's always movement heard. The movement you might say is planned in dynamic terms.” The third movement's material is treated so freely it “almost has no theme at all, except the trumpet call at the beginning, which comes back”.

The Seventh Symphony, dedicated to Jean Martinon, was Sessions' favorite. The usually modest composer said of it, “The last movement has a kind of scherzo with dark rumblings underneath. It's the most brutal [movement] except at the very end. The main part of the third movement ends in a sort of impasse with an ostinato in the horns, which gets slower and slower.

And then the Epilogue was very slow. And if I may say so, that's about the best ending I ever wrote. Or one of them. It's quite unusual.”

The first movement divides approximately into an ABA form. The two initial ideas of the slow movement return in reverse order. The 'Sessions ending' appears in the Epilogue he liked so much - several instruments drop out and never return: contrabassoon, trumpets, trombones, tuba, percussion, xylophone, and vibraphone. According to Michael Steinberg, the last phrase (like the ending of Lilacs) “does not cease so much as recede out of earshot”.

Sessions was commissioned to write the Ninth Symphony in 1974 when Frederik Prausnitz, the dedicatee, conducted the Syracuse Symphony. The work was finished in 1978 and Christopher Keene, by then conductor of the Syracuse Symphony, gave its premiere. In the Ninth the first movement concludes with a pause. The second begins and ends with a trombone solo whose conclusion overlaps with the beginning of the Allegro vivace. The rate of musical information is higher in Sessions' works in the fifth period (the 1960s). But here, ten years after the completion of the short and concise Eighth Symphony, Sessions gives the musical gestures (and us) more time to breathe. The expansive solo passages do not have to compete with such densely contrapuntal accompaniment. The sprawling adagio movement relaxes more than is usual in Sessions' slow music. In the Allegro vivace Sessions uses meter as a method to articulate form. Here the slippery and sliding tempi produce a musical vertigo typical of Sessions' late style. This last movement is the most difficult to grasp formally, where the rhythmic and metric dizziness both produce and blur formal distinctions.

Sessions' music has been difficult for performers as well as listeners. While composing the second movement he wrote to this author, “I'm afraid it will not be easy to play, but it has to be what it has to be!” And “I set myself a rather special task in this work and it

involves both agony and joy in the making of it.... I find it comforting to read the score of my [recently published] 7th symphony and to discover that it did, from my point of view, come out right that time!”

The 'special task' refers to the portrayal of evil. The images of the lion and lamb in William Blake's poem *The Tyger* inspired this symphony. The poem opposes the violent 'tyger' to the lamb, representative of a cooperative and peaceful spirit. A conflict arises between brutality and gentleness in the first movement especially. Sessions said its initial measures represent the tiger lying in wait. The opening fast section contrasts with the quieter, slower and more lyrical B section; the music returns to the (much varied) beginning material and ends with the question “Could he who made the lamb make thee?” Unlike the quiet 'petering out' of the Seventh Symphony and *Lilacs*, this work concludes with a definite cadence, a 'sudden bang'.

Unusually, Sessions incorporates two tone-rows here, although “Nothing is conditioned by the row; the row is conditioned by the piece”. He would object even to the mention that these three symphonies are twelve-tone. The term always engendered a gentle diatribe about the unimportance of such techniques: what was important was the music. Sessions's ties to Beethoven and Mahler go beyond mere numerology - the number nine. In a profound musical sense all of their symphonies form links in the Western chain of orchestral tradition.

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Andrea Olmstead is the author of *Roger Sessions and His Music* (UMI Research Press), *Conversations with Roger Sessions*, and *The Correspondence of Roger Sessions* (both Northeastern University Press).



Roger Huntington Sessions (28 December 1896 – 16 March 1985) was an American composer, critic and teacher of music. Born in Brooklyn, New York to a family that could trace its roots back to the American revolution, Sessions studied music at Harvard University from the age of 14. There, he wrote for and subsequently edited the Harvard Musical Review. Graduating at age 18, he went on to study at Yale University under Horatio Parker and Ernest Bloch before teaching at Smith College. His first major compositions were made while traveling Europe in his mid twenties and early thirties with his wife. Returning to the United States in 1933, he taught first at Princeton University, moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where he taught from 1946 to 1954, and then returned to Princeton until retiring in 1965, although he continued to teach on a part-time basis at the Juilliard School until 1983. He died at the age of 88 in Princeton, New Jersey.

DENNIS RUSSELL DAVIES

A masterful and innovative force in classical music, Dennis Russell Davies is considered among today's most inventive conductors at the forefront of the orchestral, chamber and operatic worlds. A modern, articulate and versatile artist revered for his command of both traditional and contemporary music, Mr. Davies is also recognized as an accomplished pianist and as an acclaimed collaborator, sought out by orchestras, composers and artists alike for his interpretive skills.

American-born Mr. Davies has lived abroad since 1980, but maintains an active presence on the North American music scene as a regular guest conductor with the major orchestras and opera houses of New York and Chicago. In addition to his ongoing duties as Chief Conductor of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra and Professor of Orchestral Conducting at the Salzburg Mozarteum, Mr. Davies is Chief Conductor and Music Director of the Bruckner Orchestra Linz and Chief Conductor of the Linz Opera. In January 2002, he was appointed to a 5-year term to the Board of Directors of the esteemed Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard University.

A champion of contemporary music, his support of modern works, particularly American, is legendary. His close personal friendships with some of the 21st century's greatest composers, including Luciano Berio, William Bolcom, John Cage, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Hans Werner Henze, and Francis Thorne (with whom he formed American Composers Orchestra); have been an important catalyst for enriching concert and operatic repertory around the globe.

Recently, Mr. Davies concluded his tenures as Chief Conductor of the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra (1996-2002), and as Music Director of the pre-eminent American Composers Orchestra (1975-2002). He continues his affiliation with American Composers Orchestra, which he co-founded 26 years ago, as Conductor Laureate. Mr. Davies has had successful tenures as the General Music Director of the City of Bonn (Germany), Principal Conductor/Classical Music Program Director of the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center, Principal Conductor of the Brooklyn Philharmonic, Music Director of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Music Director of the Cabrillo Music Festival in Santa Cruz, California. In addition to his North American orchestral guest conducting appearances, Davies has guest conducted some of the most prestigious orchestras in Europe including the Berlin Philharmonic, Munich Philharmonic, Gewandhaus Orchestra and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Dennis Russell Davies was born in Toledo, Ohio, and graduated from The Juilliard School

where he studied piano with Lonny Epstein and Sasha Gorodnitski and conducting with Jean Morel and Jorge Mester.