

**PIANO MUSIC OF**  
**ROGER SESSIONS                  RALPH SHAPEY**

**David Holzman, piano**

- 1) **Sonata #1** (1930) (in one movement) (14:27) **Roger Sessions**  
(1896-1985)  
Andante/Allegro/Andante/Poco meno mosso/Tempo 1/Molto vivace
- Sonata #3** (1964-65) (19:28) **Roger Sessions**
- 2) I. Adagio e misterioso (6:50)
- 3) II. Molto allegro e con fuoco (8:36)
- 4) III. Lento e molto tranquillo (In memoriam: Nov. 22, 1963) (4:02)
- 5) **Mutations (1956)** (7:45) **Ralph Shapey**  
(1921-2002)

- Mutations II (1966)** (11:32) **Ralph Shapey**
- 6) I. majestic passion/of designs, movements and forces/  
of peace and quiet/of singing tenderness/of passion and fury (8:21)
- 7) II. with furious wildness, intensity, brilliance and sound/  
of majestic passion (3:11)
- 21 Variations (1978)** (26:14) **Ralph Shapey**
- 8) Maestoso (Theme-Variation 5) (5:29)
- 9) Variations VI-X (3:56)
- 10) Variations XI-XVI (9:43)
- 11) Variations XVII-XXI (7:06)



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While their last names might put them just a page apart in an encyclopedia of 20th Century music, Roger Sessions and Ralph Shapey are seldom found in such close proximity in music history classes, concerts and, certainly, recordings. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. Although the musical inspiration of both composers makes this pairing especially satisfying, in background, musical style and sphere of influence Sessions and Shapey were indeed pages apart.

Roger Huntington Sessions was born in 1896 into a proud family heritage reaching back more than two centuries of New England Protestantism. He himself partook of this venerable tradition in his education, which included degrees from both Harvard and Yale and a decade of study in Europe. His influential career as teacher was largely centered upon Princeton and Juilliard. Ralph Shapey, on

the other hand, was a first-generation American whose Jewish parents fled Czarist Russia in the early years of the 20th Century. Shapey was born in 1921 and grew up in a working class Jewish section of Philadelphia and while he studied violin with Emanuel Zetlin, formal education ceased with his graduation from high school. He used to boast that he was the only member of the University of Chicago faculty without a college degree.

Stylistically, they were worlds apart. After gentlemanly studies at Harvard (starting at age 13), Sessions worked with Horatio Parker, whose interests stopped with Impressionism, at Yale. His first meaningful studies were with Ernest Bloch, whom he followed to Cleveland as his assistant. In the '20's, Sessions became aware of Stravinsky and Schoenberg (*Black Maskers* was evidence of these new interests and was the first work which he would acknowledge) and neo-Classicism became his stylistic

center with its clarity of line, propulsive rhythms, and roots in traditional forms. *Sonata #1* and *Symphony #1* were the earliest fruits of this period.

What followed for Sessions (much like his close friend Luigi Dallapiccola) was a two-decade journey towards his fully individual and mature musical personality. Each of the works from the '30's and '40's seemed to mark an arduous step in this journey towards a personal harmonic language, complex counterpoint and fluidity of form. The strident harmonies of *Sonata #2* were a midway point on his path to atonality. By 1950, Sessions reached his rich final period which lasted two decades and allowed for a remarkable increase in productivity. This style made full use of Schoenberg's 12-tone techniques while maintaining a subtle use of classical forms. Polyphonic textures became even more complex, with long fluid lines interacting freely. Subordinate lines

maintained a degree of clear metric patterns as in neo-Classicism, but this was a declining factor in the largely melodic sweep of his works.

By his late teens, Ralph Shapey already knew that the avant-garde of Abstract Expressionism was to be his road. This was certified by his studies with Stefan Wolpe in the late '30's. Serial pursuits went beyond purely 12-tone techniques and, as with Wolpe, involved smaller serial units, concentrated rhythmic motives, and polyphonic complexities. Shapey's ties to the Abstract Expressionist school of painters in New York led to his fascination with interacting rhythmic patterns and the "pointillistic" melodic fragments with disjunct lines, spasms of pulses and recognition of silence as a "fourth dimension", as meaningful as the sounds around it.

Interestingly, Shapey's close ties to Edgar Varese led to a subtle "classicalizing" of his music, as longer

"time chunks" created more easily recognizable rhythmic patterns, longer melodic lines and greater use of symmetrical shapes. When slow-moving and repeating harmonic progressions are included, one can sense a "timelessness" which, at its most intense, attains a mystical quality, at times close to his colleague Morton Feldman. Shapey's "mellowing", much like Sessions' radicalization went largely unrecognized by the musical community and there was no point at which the styles of the two reached a nexus. However there was an ever-growing bond of friendship between them, which lasted until Sessions' death. Both the music and the person behind the music found a sympathetic partner in the other.

What they had in common, perhaps more than anything else, was a deeply ambivalent view of the world and its social, political and cultural standards. They had a deep sensitivity to the am-

biguities, frustrations and violence which were central ingredients in the modern experience. Both were skeptical of mass movements and pious platitudes—Sessions witnessed the advent of Fascism while in Europe and upon his return to America shunned the populist "American" style-- and both resisted simplistic outpourings of emotion. Neither was hesitant to speak bluntly about the state of the world, including the musical world. One could say, with utter justice, that any sensitive person would have ambivalent, if not hostile, views towards the mechanization, mass culture and bewildering scientific revolutions of the 20th Century. Some creative figures would express their reactions in mystical pursuits; others with political art (whether through choice or necessity) or nostalgia for earlier times. However, most of the greatest figures embraced these dichotomies and revolutionary new experiences in their art. Sessions and Shapey maintained the

abstract basis of their art, but both composers would incorporate their personal experience of the modern world into their music in rich and yet still vastly distinct ways.

This sense of ambiguity and flat-out contradiction, is reflected most noticeably in the music's textures and harmonies. Textures in their keyboard works are largely two-part polyphony with each part (often each hand) betraying its own individuality and its own metric independence. The results cover the full gamut of expression.

The parts can be blithely going their merry ways in the sparkling (and pianistically frightening) finale of Sessions' *Sonata #1*. The humor can be darker as with the intermezzo in the central movement of his *Sonata #3*, where the left hand is like a doppelganger haunting the folk-like melody of the right hand one sixteenth note later. It can be horrifying in its grotesque violence, as in the open-

ing of the second movement of the Sessions *Sonata #3* or Variation 6 of Shapey's *21 Variations*. In these cases, the listener experiences complex rhythms and brutal chords flailing about in each line, either at war with the other, as in Sessions, or utterly oblivious to the other, as in Shapey. This is made more frightening by the existential abyss which surrounds this action. There is no accompaniment, no harmonic backdrop and no metric stability to give the listener any sense of gravity, just a vast black hole, whose presence is uncannily felt by the listener. Shapey especially conjures up the nightmare world of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* in Variation 6 where one senses runaway machines in an impersonal factory. Variation 7 is slightly gentler-- a more comic war-- rather like Jacques Tati stuck in a glass skyscraper in "Playtime" where he could not distinguish doors from walls. These dialectics are effective in lyrical music as well. When Sessions uses accompanying fig-

ures as in *Sonata #1* the rolling arpeggios are filled with Brahmsian hemiolas which not only create two speeds but which allow nostalgic glances backward at the three-note motif of the very opening. Shapey's accompaniments, found in *Mutations II* and *21 Variations* always have an ostinato life of their own. In all cases however, the two-level dialogue leaves one hungry for resolution of the remarkable tension which is created. Both composers will eventually allow for this release. The brilliance of the run-away two part invention of the Sessions *Sonata #1* makes use of sonata form to allow a resolution to the "2nd theme"—in this case a jazzy two-step befitting New York in the '20's. Shapey will use a signature technique where the geometric complexities of the two competing rhythms eventually allow for a (temporary) unity and he will triumphantly celebrate with fanfares of the treble in augmentation (playing material twice as slowly). More profound are the

quiet resolutions of tension and violence. In Sessions's 1st Sonata they are subtle simplifications which allow for a more straightforward cadence (going from a modal A natural in the beginning to a leading tone A sharp in the return of the lyric line ten minutes later... a subtle and heart-felt confession of tenderness). Another example is the simple use of an accompanying figure with a stable meter for a mere two measures. This allows a melody to assuage the violent church bells at the climax of the first movement of *Sonata #3*. For Shapey, peace occurs in whole sections of works rather than by internal musical development. The vast timeless stretch in the middle of *21 Variations* is the most spell-binding example.

Harmonically, the duality makes itself felt in the contest of an issue which is perhaps no longer an issue among musicians—namely, tonality vs. atonality. Virtually all music has a center of gravity; har-

monic motion and direction do not require the textbook tonal system. Sessions's *Sonata #1* is "tonal" in the sense that the chords usually have a familiar triadic sound. The opening has a B minor feel which, with the A naturals gives it a church mode "purity" at the outset. The Allegro has a thicker C minor feeling with greater chromaticism and with 9th and 11th chords making it almost polytonal. In the development section of the sonata-form movement, chromaticism intensifies to the point where—along with complex meters and warring contrapuntal lines—one can no longer even hear the music as tonal. The recapitulation, almost invisible amidst the turmoil, continues the chromaticism until interrupted by a rich chord, struck three times, and—with the overtones created by held notes—painting a picture of bells ringing from within New England steeples. This chord, which probably shocked the first listeners as much as a Shapey cluster shocked his listeners, is a complex

combination of C minor and F#-E natural. This chord came to him while in Pisa and was the inspiration for the entire sonata. While the C-F# dichotomy conjures up Stravinsky's *Petroushka*, it is closer in function to Wagner's *Tristan* chord in that it is a chord of implication, as Sessions himself noted. The pitches lead both backwards, to the B minor and C minor, and forwards to the luscious cabaret music and, finally, the pentatonic D# minor of the close. Thus, in essence, Sessions is taking us on a musical journey—the first among many to come. Using all tonal means at his disposal, he travels from the quiet of New England to the Berlin of Hindemith, the Paris of Stravinsky (conjuring up a quiet cabaret with a lyric jazz combo) and the raucous sounds of New York City.

This journey will eventually take Sessions to the atonality of *Sonata #3*. He knew in the 1920's, upon first encountering Schoenberg's

music that this would be an arduous path. He wrote: "The borderline between tonality and atonality is a very, very wide one. You don't step over the threshold from one to another. You have to go down a long, long, long corridor".

In his *Sonata #3*, written as a memorial to the assassinated President Kennedy, Sessions is dealing with "atonal" music, but the barren opening chord—A—flat on top, A natural on bottom with F in the middle—is as meaningful emotionally and structurally as the rich chromatic chord of the earlier work. This mysterious opening sonority presents the duality which is heard throughout the entire work. This polarity consists of the despair of the minor third and the comfort of the major third. It is given added weight by the 12-tone techniques which allow for inversions of material and reversals of time and line. The pitch centers have nothing to do with structural tonality, but the musical results

give direction and coherence to the work, much as his polytonal chord did for *Sonata #1*. Sessions will "transpose" this material as in the E-E flat of the second theme or the B-D# --B flat—D of the Finale. What is never lost is the forlorn duality of major third vs. minor third and the closing F-A flat seems as touching a confession of despair as one can find in his music.

Shapey's fierce dissonances and stern serial procedures would make many listeners despair at finding any coherence, especially tonal coherence, in the music. In some ways, however, his use of harmony is simpler than Sessions and even somewhat traditional. In Shapey's *21 Variations*, one finds clear-cut cadences, with leading tones of a sort, all in the service of the omnipotent B flat which rules the entire work. The opening chord—glaring in its thick dissonance—will slowly be recognized as a strong center of gravity with the D natural giving the B flat bass

sonority an almost triadic quality. In all Shapey's works on this recording, there are vast slabs of time, as in Varese, but this static quality is also found in composers from Satie to Messiaen to Cage to jazz greats. *Mutations* uses pitches much the way Cage used sounds in his prepared piano works such as *Perilous Night*. In Cage, the ostinato made non-pitched sounds act as tonal centers with no sense of motion. Shapey does the same with the thick dissonances of *Mutations* and expands this sense of timeless pitch oscillation in *Mutations II*. The fiery climax—with its left hand C sonority oscillating grotesquely with a G sonority—is a violently surreal version of Dave Brubeck's *Take 5*.

Shapey is, as with late Sessions, using serial techniques and he can sift his rows in ways learned from Wolpe to create a great variety of "tonal" effects. The entire slow section of *21 Variations* makes use of a pervasive D-A perfect fifth.

This, plus the virtually motionless rhythms and long melodies, creates a mysticism which conjures up all D minor Requiems (especially Faure's). Perhaps more, however, the use of a chromatic minor scale, with endless augmented seconds, especially in Variations 11 and 12, convey the image of a synagogue with the cantor intoning the Kaddish. Shapey wrote many liturgical Jewish works and even in the abstractions of his piano works, such unforced personal gestures of heritage can be found. Indeed the brassy fanfares which open and close all of these works have the ritual quality of the calling to order of the congregation as the Jews enter the synagogue.

Thus, the music of Ralph Shapey was a slow and subtle path from the understated humanity of *Mutations*—Shapey's scrawled motto "like an IBM machine caressing a tape recorder" in Irma Rabemacher's copy of the manuscript describes perfectly the magic of

*Mutations* and the stained glass polish of *Mutations II*. The island of harmonic richness and emotional tenderness which forms the center of *21 Variations* becomes a continent in the works of his final decades as the caresses are clearly felt as coming from a giving member of the human race.

A few words about Shapey's title *Mutations*. Unlike such time-honored titles as Sonata and Variations, the word "mutation" gives one an uneasy feeling due to its connection with both science and science-fiction. For the listener, grasping the musical essence of a "mutation" is important, but perhaps more valuable is the surreal emotional response which one can feel when confronted with the grotesque creatures which make up these individual movements.

A biological mutation occurs when a gene or other building block of life shows sudden and abnormal change and distortion. Shapey

is using musical building blocks such as repeated chords, rhythmic shapes (he loves rolling triplets followed by dotted rhythms) and pitch series. These "cells" become expanded and transformed to create utterly different musical entities. The first mutation in *Mutations* is nothing but the repeated cluster which accompanies the opening theme. Now the pattern stands alone, hovering timelessly in empty space over varying silences. The timid melody from the middle of the theme is mutated into a dizzyingly fast three-part fugato with the shapes transformed from up to down and from forward to backward. *21 Variations* can easily be described as 21 mutations as Shapey is using largely the same techniques. It is perhaps the massive scope of the work as well as the classical four-part structure which led him to use the more traditional title.

Despite the current implications of *Mutations*, I would like to use

the word in its most time-honored meaning. This goes back to the alchemists of the Middle Ages who were trying by "transmutation" to turn base metals into fine metals such as gold. As noted above, Shapey is using "base" musical materials such as clusters, a six-note cadence, a twelve-tone row or a rhythmic pattern. These coarse, cellular elements become transmuted and refined to form vast sections of sound in which the musical character is utterly different despite the clear tie to the original musical cells. In the slow sections of all three works, the simplicity, timeless beauty, and evocative colors show the successful and indeed magical alchemy as base blocks of sound are transmuted into rich and polished jewels of musical expression.

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I will add one final point of comparison, one which has come to me gradually as I have immersed my-

self in these works. It is a somewhat intangible recognition of the essence of each of these composers and is hopefully borne out by the experience of actually hearing the sounds: For me, Roger Sessions's works spring from the ground up, while Ralph Shapey's are born whole, with the composer looking down serenely upon a finished product.

The very openings of Sessions' works seem like bursts of emotions and sounds, whether lyric or violent, which could no longer remain within. The seeds will spread and evolve throughout the full course of the life of the musical creation, with much the same degree of vindication, irony, despair and love which our own lives afford. This infinite variation is seldom as wonderfully achieved as in *Sonata #3*. Within the essentially classical structures, there is a constant flux in color, texture, shape and emotional nuance...there is not a single literal repetition in the music. This

personal quest is most touchingly evident in *Finale*, an *in memoriam* to John F. Kennedy. Within the Brahmsian intermezzo form, one hears essentially a three-note line comprising a major third (heard in a gestating stage in the first movement but wonderfully clear in the B Major of the *Finale's* opening). As noted earlier, the serial treatment of this simple structure allows the emotions found throughout the three movements (anger, sorrow, frustration and comfort are ever-present) to be combined with symbols such as church bells, rifle shots and mystical death images found in much religious music. This complex fabric is realized in an almost stream-of-conscious manner. However, Sessions can never shed either his musical heritage or his human sense of choice, despite the complexities of the music. He himself described this responsibility in his essay *On the American Future* (1940) where he exhorted American composers to rise above the nationalist strain

in life and music. With the tragic passion of one who knows he will have few allies, he writes:

"For nationalistic criteria are in the last analysis quite unreal. I do not really believe that our advocates of 'American' music would be seriously content with a picturesque folklore or with the musical reproduction, either specific or general, of American scenes or landscapes—we are quite adequately supplied with these in our popular music and various other manifestations. A nation is something far greater than that—it is rather the sum of a great many efforts towards goals which are essentially human and not parochial. It gains much of its character, no doubt, from the conditions of time and space under which those efforts are made. But it is the efforts and the goals which are really essential. So how on earth can we demand in advance qualities which can reveal themselves only gradually, in works, the products of clear artistic vision? It

is such works which, if and when they come into existence, will reveal America to us, not as the mirror of things already discovered, but as a constantly renewed and fresh experience of the realities which music alone can reveal."

Shapey, the quintessential "outsider", seems like a modern Maimonides, or perhaps William Blake, looking down, eyes gleaming with pleasure, upon a "perplexing" world with a vast cellular structure of impulses and patterns seemingly at odds and ready to mutate into larger and stranger forms. His works seem to have existed forever, with a kind of metaphysical geography whose land masses are connected subterraneously and barely within human recognition. Simplicity and complexity are ever-present and the repeating patterns and tones eventually allow one to recognize that overarching simplicity which rules the musical universe as well as the love which Shapey offers us, almost

unbeknownst. Shapey himself revealed his own artistic soul in his *Three Essays on Thomas Wolfe*, an early piano work. He quotes Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* on the title page of Essay #1:

*"It was as if God had lifted his baton sharply above the endless orchestration of the seas, and the eternal movement had stopped, suspended in the timeless architecture of the absolute."*

Thus, the profound and inspiring contrasts between Roger Sessions and Ralph Shapey. I hope that, in this recording, their differing strands can interlock in a simple and yet exhilarating manner, which is what these two masters strove for in their own art.

--David Holzman, 2007



Hailed as a "master pianist" (Andrew Porter, *The New Yorker*), David Holzman has won acclaim both for his recitals and his recordings. Concentrating his virtuosic talents on the 20th Century's keyboard masterworks, Holzman has premiered more than 200 works and made the first recordings of many of them. Mr. Holzman has performed at festivals throughout the world including Darmstadt, Leningrad Spring, the Vienna Schoenberg Festival and the Toronto Wolpe Festival. Most recently he has appeared in Xalapa, Mexico and the Black Mountain Festival in North Carolina as well as concert halls throughout the United States.

David Holzman's latest CD (Bridge 9116), featuring solo music of Stefan Wolpe, received a Grammy nomination for best solo album, the Indie Award for best classical

recording, and the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for his liner notes and those of Austin Clarkson. Matthias Kreisberg, writing in *The New York Times*, described the CD as follows: "David Holzman demonstrates with introspective virtuosity the breadth of Wolpe's pianistic expression, ranging from poignant delicacy to breathtaking ferocity." An active writer and lecturer, Holzman's essay "On Performing Battle Piece" was published by Pendragon Press in a collection honoring the Wolpe Centennial. Recent essays on pianistic challenges in new music have appeared in *Sonus* and *Contemporary Music Review*. His lecture at Tufts University, "An Introduction to Shapely's *21 Variations*" can be heard on the Art of the States web site, [www.artofthestates.org](http://www.artofthestates.org)

Born in 1949, David Holzman received his BM from Mannes College of Music where he studied

with Paul Jacobs. He completed his studies with Nadia Reisenberg at Queens College. Early in his career, he was active as a chamber musician, performing with New York's leading ensembles, conductors and soloists. He is currently Professor of Piano at C.W. Post Center of Long Island University. In addition to Bridge, Holzman has recorded on the Albany, Centaur, Naxos and Capstone labels. His discography ranges across the 20th Century, including major works of Schoenberg, Bloch, Maxwell Davies, the complete solo works of Donald Martino and the works of Wolpe virtually in entirety, and the younger generation of American composers. To learn more about David Holzman, visit his web site at [www.battlemuse.com](http://www.battlemuse.com).



**Producer:** Matthew Packwood

**Recording engineer:** Joel Gordon

**Editor:** Matthew Packwood

**Mastering engineer:** Joel Gordon

**Piano technician:** Leonard C. Harris

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**Design:** Douglas H. Holly

**Executive Producers:** Becky and David Starobin

**Sessions: Sonata #1:** Published by Theodore Presser Company, dedicated to Rosamond Foster, premiere at Copland-Sessions concerts, New York City, 1928 (incomplete); first complete performance: Rome, 1930.

**Sessions: Sonata #3:** Published by Edward B. Marks Music Company, commissioned by Eugene Istomin; first performance: Jacob Lateiner, 1969.

**Shapey: Mutations:** Published by Theodore Presser Company, dedicated to Irma Wolpe-Rabemacher, first performed by her in Composers Showcase Concert Series New York City, 1958.

**Shapey: Mutations II:** Published by Theodore Presser Company, dedicated to Frances Burnett; first performance Frances Burnett at Bowling Green State University (Ohio).

**Shapey: 21 Variations:** Published by Theodore Presser Company, written for Abraham Stokman. First performance by Mr. Stokman at Alice Tully Hall, New York City, 1979.

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David Holzman's lecture on Ralph Shapey can be found at: [www.artofthestates.org](http://www.artofthestates.org)

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