

Producers: David Starobin *Duo, Adagio, Waltz for Brenda, Second Sonata*

Adam Abeshouse *Sonata for Violin*

Recording engineers: Adam Abeshouse: *Duo, Sonata for Violin, Second Sonata*

Joel Gordon: *Adagio, Waltz for Brenda*

Editor: Doron Schächter

Mastering: Silas Brown: Legacy Sound

Annotator: Matt Mendez

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For Bridge Records: Barbara Bersito, Douglas Holly
Doron Schächter, Casey Siu, Allegra Starobin and Robert Starobin

Robert Starobin, webmaster | Email: becky@bridgerecords.com

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ROGER SESSIONS

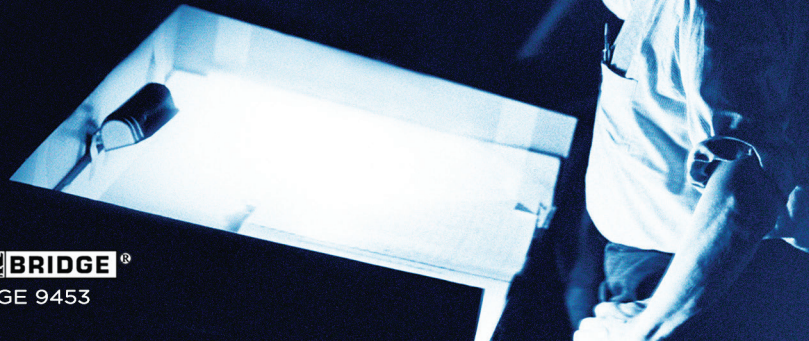
MUSIC FOR VIOLIN & PIANO

DAVID BOWLIN

VIOLIN

DAVID HOLZMAN

PIANO



BRIDGE 9453

Roger Sessions

(1896-1985)

David Bowlin, violin • David Holzman, piano

- 1) **Duo** (1942) (14:00)
(violin, piano)
- 2) **Adagio** (1947) (3:23)
(piano)
- 3) **Waltz for Brenda** (1936) (1:26)
(piano)

Sonata for Violin (1953) (29:13)

- 4) I. *Tempo moderato, con ampiezza e liberamente* (9:53)
- 5) II. *Molto vivo* (6:10)
- 6) III. *Adagio e dolcemente* (9:13)
- 7) IV. *Alla marcia vivace* (4:37)

Second Sonata (1946) (13:28)

(piano)

- 8) I. *Allegro con fuoco* (4:30)
- 9) II. *Lento* (4:29)
- 10) III. *Misurato e pesante* (4:29)

Hailed as "a master pianist" (Andrew Porter, *The New Yorker*), **David Holzman** has won acclaim both for his recitals and his recordings. Among his honors and awards have been recording grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Alice B. Ditson Fund and the Aaron Copland Foundation. Holzman has focused much of his attention upon the masterworks of the 20th Century and has been described as "the Horowitz of modern music" (*San Francisco Classical Voice*). His debut recording (CRI) was called "one of the great piano discs of the decade" (*New York Magazine*) and established his reputation as one of the most exciting interpreters of the modern repertoire. His CD, "Stefan Wolpe: Compositions for Piano" (Bridge 9116) won Holzman a Grammy nomination as well as an Indie Award and an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award for his liner notes. Among several glowing reviews, *International Record Review* praised the "revelatory insight and passionate conviction" of Holzman's interpretations while the *New York Times* lauded Holzman's "introspective virtuosity." His most recent CD featured music of Roger Sessions and Ralph Shapey (Bridge 9243).

Mr. Holzman has given lecture-recitals at the Museum of the Diaspora in Jerusalem, the Holocaust Museum in Washington and the African Museum in New Jersey, as well as distinguished Universities throughout America, and has been featured at festivals including Darmstadt, Leningrad Spring, the Wolpe Festivals in Toronto, Chicago and New York, the Schoenberg Festival in Vienna, and the Alternativa Festival in Moscow. David Holzman's writings appear in periodicals including *Sonus*, *Contemporary Music Review*, *New Music Connoisseur* and Pendragon Press. Born in New York in 1949, Holzman received his BM magna cum laude from Mannes College of Music. He completed his studies with Nadia Reisenberg at Queens College. David Holzman is currently Professor of Piano at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University.

Violinist **David Bowlin**'s solo and chamber performances of a wide-ranging repertoire have won him critical acclaim from the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and have taken him across North America, Asia, Europe, and Russia. A passionate proponent of contemporary literature, among his dozens of premieres is *Mahagoni*, a violin concerto written for him by Austrian composer Alexandra Hermentin-Karastoyanova. His latest CD releases feature concerti and solo works by Luciano Berio and Huang Ruo, and upcoming releases include works by Dvořák, Shostakovich, Joan Tower, and Mario Davidovsky.

Bowlin is a founding member of the International Contemporary Ensemble, *Musical America's* 2014 Ensemble of the Year. He is also former member of the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players. His recording credits include works of over a dozen major composers for the Bridge, Naxos, Arsis, New Focus, and Mode labels.

Bowlin's awards include first prize in the Washington International Competition, and the Samuel Baron Prize from Stony Brook University. He has toured with Musicians from Marlboro and has also served as guest concertmaster of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the IRIS Orchestra.

Bowlin currently teaches on the violin faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and has taught and performed at numerous summer festivals across the U.S., including Marlboro, Kneisel Hall, Mostly Mozart, Ojai, and Chamber Music Quad Cities, which he serves as Artistic Director. Bowlin is a graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, the Juilliard School, and Stony Brook University.

Roger Sessions was in many respects the prototypical East Coast composer. Born into a venerable New England family—"genuine seventeenth-century American stock," his one-time pupil Milton Babbitt remarked—he proudly claimed descent from Samuel Huntington, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Harvard- and Yale-educated, Sessions enjoyed an intermittent but enduring association with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, stretching from his student concert-going days before the First World War all the way to the premiere of his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Concerto for Orchestra* in 1981. While he was the silent partner (so to speak) for the short-lived but pioneering Copland-Sessions Concerts, established in New York in 1928, Sessions's true forte was as an educator, and he acquired a reputation as one of the nation's preeminent composition teachers, holding prominent posts at Princeton and, later, Juilliard. Keenly aware that his upbringing guaranteed him "a basic sense of social security" all too rare in the musical profession, Sessions felt not unlike the gnarled old trees at Forty Acres, the Western Massachusetts property that had been home to generations of his forebears—and his output had something of this sage yet robust, weather-beaten quality, as well.

Deeply rooted as he was in this milieu, Sessions actually passed the most decisive stage of his career west of the Rockies. It was while teaching at the University of California at Berkeley during the 1935 summer term that he met his second wife, Lisl (they were to remain married until her death nearly half a century later), and after further stints in the Bay Area in 1936 and 1941, he took up a full professorship in 1945. Though Sessions's tenure at Berkeley proved relatively brief—he returned to Princeton in the fall of 1953—it was nevertheless a

watershed, coinciding as it did with the tail end of southern California's wartime émigré boom. Finding himself just up the coast from some of the leading German-speaking musicians and intellectuals of the day, he was soon on friendly terms with the likes of Arnold Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, Artur Schnabel, and Thomas Mann. Where most of his composer countrymen had treated the recent arrivals with indifference (at best), Krenek's biographer Claudia Zenck credits Sessions for being "practically the only one who related closely to his colleagues exiled from Europe."

Sessions had already shown himself to be a staunch internationalist, spending a formative spell in Berlin at a time when America's compositional advance guard was taking its exclusive marching orders from the Paris of arch-Stravinskian Nadia Boulanger. "As far as musical life goes," Sessions later averred, that sojourn in the German capital, just prior to Hitler's rise, "was the high point of my whole life." So it is scarcely a surprise that he greeted the displaced Schoenberg circle with enthusiasm, and they in their turn regarded Sessions with genuine respect and encouragement. The exchanges Sessions enjoyed with these figures—among others, he had the opportunity to cross-examine the architect of the twelve-tone method on his theories—were to have a lasting impact on his own composing. Previously a hyper-meticulous worker, Sessions's productivity positively soared in California, and by the time he was back at Princeton the stage was set for the extraordinarily fecund yield of his last three decades.

Of the three major pieces recorded here, only the *Duo* for violin and piano, from 1942, was written outside the Bay Area. A sonata in all but name, it sees

Beginning *in medias res*, the *Allegro con fuoco* is steely and motor-charged, with a near-omnipresent sixteenth-note pulse. Sessions blurs structural subdivisions, but a few basic signposts can be made out: for instance, the music thins to a lone repeated pitch (as in the *Duo*) to cue a section of developmental character, and the transition back to the opening material begins with stacked perfect fifths chords, followed by a passage of plangent chiming. Soon, the rhythmic assault gives way to the gently singing *Lento*, whose shadowy first theme had provoked Babbitt's twelve-tone comment. The ensuing part has a more florid melodic sensibility that Andor Foldes, the commissioning pianist, reckoned "almost Chopinesque," while the music preceding the (extremely truncated) reprise of the shadowy theme is memorably hushed, as if absorbed in thought. As for the finale, a sardonic toccata, Sessions called it "a goose step," indicating that the graceless, clodhopping main idea was a caricature of the Nazi stormtroopers he had seen firsthand in Berlin. Though some of the contrasting music put Sessions in mind of the doleful-sounding foghorns in San Francisco Bay, the vehemence unleashed ultimately sweeps all else before it, topping off one of the most trenchant, dynamic piano works in the American literature.

Matthew Mendez is a music critic with a focus on twentieth and twenty-first century repertoire. He has written extensively on such contemporary figures as Peter Ablinger, Joseph Beuys, John Cage, and Julius Eastman.

reserved middle one being twelve-tone. Almost uniquely in Sessions's output, the last part is a note-for-note reprise of the first (he reasoned that the music moves too quickly for complicated variation procedures). The slow movement subsequently alternates between double-stopped textures and more flexible phrases marked *quasi recitativo*, while the closing *Alla marcia vivace* exudes a tightly-sprung energy only fleetingly broken up with a mock-waltz interlude and an expressive reminiscence, in inversion, of the row form that began the *Sonata*.

Belonging to the other end of Sessions's tenure at Berkeley, the *Second Sonata* for piano was composed in a mere month and a half in the fall of 1946. On seeing the score for the first time, Babbitt opined, "Do you realize you're on the brink of the twelve-tone system?" and in later years, Sessions rated it one of his most forward-looking offerings. It was originally envisioned as a modest sonatina; as Sessions confided, fashioning a serious piece that was "not only short but easy to play" was "a constant ambition of mine which I have never yet succeeded in fulfilling!" Though compact, with three uninterrupted movements, the music turned out anything but simple, and its high-impact, (mostly) rapid-fire style has few counterparts in Sessions's catalog. In this regard, it was a characteristic product of the 1940s American scene, which saw a boomlet of stormy, challenging keyboard compositions echoing the turbulent mood of the war years (prominent examples include Samuel Barber's *Sonata* and Stefan Wolpe's *Battle Piece*). The work made a considerable impression on the notoriously hard-to-please Schoenberg, who went so far as to exclaim, "Now I know how Schumann must have felt when he first heard the music of Brahms."

Sessions casting off the Stravinsky residues that had typified his earliest efforts, and was "quite important," he maintained, "in developing my harmonic style." Rhythmically sturdy, with an emphasis on sober argumentation over frivolous surface effects, the music provides something of a justification for the "American Brahms" moniker critics routinely applied to Sessions. He often performed the piano part himself, including at the 1943 premiere, as well as subsequently with Schoenberg's brother-in-law, the violinist Rudolf Kolisch, who lauded Sessions for engaging with the legacy of the Second Viennese School more substantively than any of his compatriots.

The *Duo* proceeds in a single continuous span, a format favored by Sessions for chamber works. It opens with a slow, prelude-like section, the violin offering increasingly long-breathed melodic utterances over low, trudging thirds in the piano. After a more animated episode and a brief return of the introductory dynamic, punctuated by what Sessions likened to a half-cadence, an *Allegro impetuoso* follows to fulfill a quasi-exposition function. Striding and angular, it has some of the flavor of Hindemith (who was also resident in the United States when the *Duo* was composed), though here too the fiddle finds room for lyrical reflection. A repeated-note texture segues into a developmental passage with high, virtuosic violin figuration, and then a clangorous, climactic reprise of the Hindemithian idea. At this juncture the prelude music reasserts its rights, before making way for the concluding *Allegro vivace e con fuoco*. Unusually for this composer, it sports "American" inflections—hints of jazzy cross-rhythms—though the quizzical trailing-off of the final measures is thoroughly representative of Sessions's style.

Sessions always found composing to order disagreeable, and his catalog is hardly overflowing with small, occasional pieces. One of the rare exceptions is a piano *Adagio*, finished by August 1947 but subsequently overlooked until 2006, when Sessions expert Andrea Olmstead drew fresh attention to the manuscript. It was written to commemorate the retirement of Monroe Deutsch, a Classics professor and provost at Berkeley who helped facilitate Sessions's hiring. (Once described as "American education's best-kept secret," Deutsch was a prime mover behind Berkeley's ascension to the top rank of U.S. schools during the 1930s.) They would have had much to discuss: Deutsch's scholarly specialty was the life of Julius Caesar, and Sessions, an inveterate Italophile, had just completed his opera *The Trial of Lucullus*, on a libretto by Bertolt Brecht treating the biography of the eponymous Roman general. Again featuring pronounced bass thirds, the *Adagio* has a brooding, decidedly uncelebratory complexion, prompting Sessions to appeal to Deutsch for clemency: "Apologies that this is a somewhat gloomy piece!" In this it is poles apart from the *Waltz for Brenda*, a whimsical, mordant trifle dating from late 1936. The "Brenda" in question is the noted author Brenda Webster, who was born that year to Sessions's Princeton neighbor, the abstract expressionist painter Ethel Schwabacher. Playable by children, the *Waltz* is notably lacking in the knotty counterpoint that was Sessions's stock-in-trade.

Fascinated as he was by the music of the Schoenberg school, Sessions did not take the plunge into the twelve-tone method until the spring of 1953, when he wrote his *Sonata for Violin* in response to a request from the Los Angeles violinist Robert Gross. Initially, Sessions was not excited about the idea, which "seemed to me quite at variance with my own musical impulses at the time." While he

admired Bach's unaccompanied string music, Sessions was troubled by a lack of successful contemporary models: alongside the *Solo Cello Sonata* of Zoltán Kodály, which he deemed accomplished but too alien in idiom for his purposes, he may have been aware of Krenek's recent work in this area, as well as Bartók's 1944 *Solo Violin Sonata* (this he could have known through Kolisch). Then again, he was close with a number of skilled violinists whose guidance he valued—not only Gross and Kolisch, but also Louis Krasner, the commissioner of Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto*, and a strong advocate for Sessions's "unplayable" effort in the same genre. The result all but requires interpreters of their caliber, and is, as Sessions bluntly put it, "difficult as hell." In fact, John Harbison recalls him claiming that the *Sonata* began life as a symphony, and that he ultimately "compressed" it into violin music—which, if true, certainly helps account for the fiendish technical demands.

Not unlike the *Duo*, the *Sonata* is in four interlinked movements. Though fundamentally "rhapsodic" (Sessions's word), with a discursive cast, the first movement is the most rigorously twelve-tone. It begins with a row statement distributed over almost four octaves; surprisingly, Sessions did not set out to write a twelve-tone piece, and he only came to the recognition that the music was tending in that direction once he had composed the opening bars. The movement has three loose sections, each signaled with an alternative form of the initial row shape. The middle part becomes jauntier, while the third ends with the basic row in retrograde, now unhurried and sustained. It leads straightaway into the scherzo-like *Molto vivo*, which is replete with all manner of quicksilver rhythmical legerdemain. Here too there are three subsections, with only the slightly more