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SESSIONS: *Piano Sonata 2; Duo
Solo Violin Sonata*

David Holzman, p; David Bowlin, v
Bridge 9453—62 minutes

Three works from Roger Sessions's "mid-period" (during and shortly after World War II)—one for solo piano, one for solo violin, and one a duo for both instruments—reveal his personal journey toward greater chromaticism in his compositional idiom. These three, along with his 1951 Second Quartet and 1958 String Quintet, represent Sessions's most significant contribution to 20th Century American chamber music and if there's any justice in this world, will long outlast the reams of showier, trendier, shallower contemporary entries.

I've lived with all these pieces for four decades—they've all been recorded many times before going back into the LP era (see our index for reviews)—and can attest that despite any claims to the contrary, they are not "difficult" to grasp or enjoy, indeed to love. Nothing this well made, and so deeply animated by expressive urgency, thoughtful sensitivity, and humane feeling, is difficult or forbidding, once absorbed. It may take several attentive hearings, but that's just as true of much of the greatest music by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms. Indeed in personality Sessions is much closer to these earlier (and, in the deep sense, humanist) masters than to the febrile intensity of Berg and Schoenberg or the cubist ironies of Stravinsky.

Holzman and Bowlin play Sessions with conviction, intelligence, and technical assurance on this well-recorded Bridge release. Bowlin is particularly good on the demanding Solo Violin Sonata. Other recordings that might interest listeners who want to explore this repertoire more fully include the Second Piano Sonata played by Alan Marks (CRI 258) and by Peter Lawson (Virgin 59316); both are less vehement but cleaner and clearer, especially in the *allegro con fuoco* first movement. And no one captures the exquisite ebb and flow of agitation and repose in the ornate—indeed Chopinesque—lyricism of the sonata's haunting slow movement as well as Beveridge Webster on the old Dover LP. Another great vinyl-era recording is violinist Patricia Travers and pianist Otto Herz playing the Duo on a vintage (but still findable) sweet-sounding monaural 10-inch Columbia LP. They are more relaxed and poised, making the high-spirited finale feel less driven but more jaunty.

None of this is to disparage Bowlin and Holzman. Masterpieces aren't exhausted by any single rendering—which of course is the *raison d'être* for the new recordings here.

LEHMAN