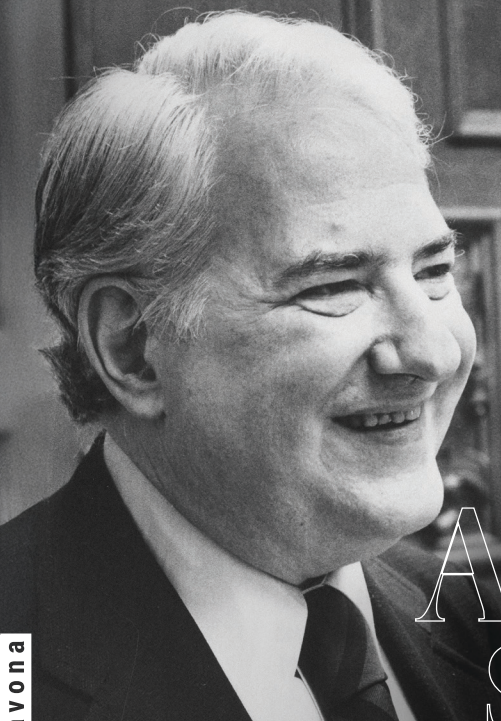


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# ALLEN SAPP

**Live Piano Works**

Norma Bertolami Sapp piano

**ALLEN SAPP: LIVE PIANO WORKS** presents a selection of live concert recordings from the Allen Sapp Collection at the Ohio State University Music & Dance Library. As part of the library's celebration of Allen Sapp's centennial year in 2022, recording engineer Seth B. Winner was engaged to digitally preserve a large portion of these recordings from the Allen Sapp Collection. From these, we selected the best recordings of performances of the solo piano works performed by the composer's wife, Norma Bertolami Sapp, and further audio restoration and mastering were performed to produce this album. The final selection on this album features the digital restoration of Allen Sapp's 1961 performance of his Piano Sonata III.

**ALLEN SAPP** (1922-1999) was a prolific American composer of more than 140 compositions, including more than 40 works for solo piano. He was a student of Walter Piston at Harvard University, and subsequently studied privately with Aaron Copland and Nadia Boulanger. Following his service in the U.S. Army during World War II, Sapp returned to Harvard for graduate studies and then served on the music faculty there from 1950 to 1958. During the next two decades, Sapp held academic leadership positions at three different universities: State University of New York at Buffalo, Florida State University, and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. In 1980 he returned to teaching and composing in earnest, and in his final two decades completed more than sixty new works.



**NORMA BERTOLAMI SAPP** (1921-1995) studied at Radcliffe College and Harvard University, and served as a teaching fellow there through 1950. She then served as the principal assistant to Leonard Bernstein at Brandeis University in the early 1950s. A student of pianist and composer Heinrich Gebhard, Norma Bertolami Sapp performed numerous chamber music concerts with members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Budapest String Quartet, and as a soloist with the Boston Pops and other orchestras. Norma met Allen Sapp while they were students at Harvard, and they were married in 1943. She premiered at least nineteen of Allen Sapp's compositions for solo piano, or chamber and orchestral works featuring the piano.

THIS RECORDING WAS INITIATED IN 2022 in celebration of Allen Sapp's centennial year, to honor this gifted American composer, and in memory of his many contributions as an influential teacher and leader in American artistic culture. Thanks to the generosity of many donors to the Ohio State University Music & Dance Library, we are honored to preserve and make available these recordings from our Allen Sapp Collection of many of his piano compositions, brilliantly performed by the composer's wife, Norma Bertolami Sapp. As a student of Allen Sapp, I was privileged to personally attend and enjoy all of these performances in the 1980s and 1990s. It is my delight and honor to produce this album and share these fine recordings with you. As a bonus, the final work on this album features a recording of the composer himself performing his Piano Sonata III in 1961.

In the early 1990s, I had the privilege to interview Sapp during multiple extended sessions at his home while preparing to write his biography and works catalog, *Allen Sapp, A: Bio-Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1996). Most of the quotations in these program notes come from these interviews. Sapp dedicated his *Suite for Piano* (1949) to Aaron Copland, who helped to promote Sapp's early compositions by arranging for performances at concerts of the League of Composers and the Composers' Forum in New York. This five-movement suite is written primarily in a neoclassical vein, but the second movement is notable among Sapp's works as his first effort at writing music using serial composition techniques. Nearly all his compositions following the *Suite for Piano* were created using serial methods, but usually within a discernable tonal context.

Sapp's *Piano Sonatas II, III, and IV* are collectively known as his *Roman Sonatas*, as all three were completed in 1957 while he was on a sabbatical leave from Harvard University and living in Rome. Sapp modeled his second sonata loosely after a baroque suite, in which each movement centered around the tonality of E-flat. While this tonality is frequently obscured by the highly chromatic harmonies in the first three movements, it becomes clearly in focus in the fourth movement. The main theme begins with the unifying three-note main motive E-D-E flat, also employed in the other three movements, in a lively dance rhythm that stresses E-flat through repetition and strong rhythmic placement. The theme eventually outlines an E-flat minor seventh-chord, stated emphatically in octaves, before departing into chromatic variation and segmentation of the thematic elements. Near the end, the emphatic E-flat theme reappears, and the movement closes with a strong four-chord cadence ending on a resplendent E-flat minor eleventh chord. *Piano Sonata III* was started in December 1956 and completed three months later. Sapp stated that this sonata was "a piece I wrote very much for myself to play. I was worried because people

would ask 'What are you writing,' and I could only show them orchestra pieces or choral pieces or string quartets, but I decided, well, by George, I'm going to write some piano music and be able to play it. So this *Third Sonata* I wrote really for myself to go back to Cambridge and play... to be able to say, 'here's what I'm doing, and here's what it sounds like.' There are a lot of my own personal piano idioms, and what works best for me in this piece." For this work, Sapp took inspiration from the character, textures, and structure of several of Beethoven's piano sonatas, particularly the *Waldstein Sonata*, op. 53, and the *Appassionata Sonata*, op. 57. "I decided not to write in that style or use any of those motives, but to kind of borrow what I thought was going on," Sapp said. "You know, here's a man about my age writing this kind of music for himself to play in Vienna, and I thought, 'well, I'll do the same thing.'" The third sonata was composed using serial composition techniques, but it was also purposely designed to be strongly tonal. The outer movements are clearly centered on A minor: The first movement begins with a brilliant A minor arpeggio motif, while the finale opens with a boogie-woogie bass line outlining an A minor seventh chord. The middle movement opens and closes with a serene four-part chorale in D-flat major. This album features two performances of this work, one by the composer himself in 1961, and the other by his wife Norma Bertolami Sapp in 1984. Just as Sapp composed *Sonata III* as work for himself to play, he wrote *Sonata IV* as a companion work intended for Norma to perform. He completed *Sonata IV* in Rome in August 1957, and Norma gave the premiere performance at Harvard the following year. In his program notes for a 1986 performance of *Sonata IV*, Sapp wrote that he considered this work to be in "a decidedly Romantic, strongly personal idiom. It is in three movements, first an energetic Allegro with two strongly contrasting textures in an arch form, the second a lyrical and episodic soliloquy, for the most part, with disruptive interjections, and the third a light and witty set of variations moving back to the moods of the previous two movements at intervals and recapitulating some materials." Like the other two Roman piano sonatas, it is composed using serial composition techniques, but still focused around specific tonal areas: The two outer movements are centered on D, and the second movement on B-flat.

*Piano Sonata V* was one of the first compositions written by Sapp when he returned to composing in 1980 after a long hiatus. Sapp did very little composing while he was involved in university administration during the previous two decades. He sketched the first few pages of *Sonata V* in 1968, in an effort to write for the piano in a more dramatically expressive, virtuosic style. "I realized that my pianistic style needed to be rethought; I needed to get away from just writing music that was comfortable for me to perform. The second, third, and fourth sonatas were all

within my pianistic ability." In the summer of 1980, he found that sketch from 1968 and "took right up and immediately connected with it, and I made the rest of the piece... The fifth sonata is a one-movement work in sections, alternating between moods of violence and anger and rage, and moods of great tranquility and reflection, and with a prevailing strong affirmative quality. The contrasts are very sharp, and they're accentuated by very little break between the sections. It's a dramatic and very romantic piece. It's a piece that has a particular meaning for me. It was the piece in which I resumed active and professional writing after a hiatus of about 20 years. I was absorbed and co-opted into the administration and academic affairs, and all of a sudden I needed and wanted to write again. The fifth sonata was my return to the drafting table. It's a piece I wrote rather specifically for my wife Norma to perform. I had her technique in mind, the kinds of sounds she likes to make. It's a piece that is violently alternating in moods and textures, but the lyrical sections are almost Chopinesque. There are recitatives, there are ariosos, and there are arias, all connected by essentially a single melodic entity, a kind of strand. It's music that has lots of familiar chords in it, and lots of familiar effects, but it is rather aggressively organized around certain cells."

Piano Sonata VI is a companion piece to the fifth sonata, composed in September 1980. Like Sonata V, the sixth also makes use of sharply contrasting moods and gestures. The sonata's two movements share many thematic and harmonic elements, usually in a varied presentation, but sometimes the second movement directly recalls elements from the first. "It is in a two-module form, the two parts of which involve altered perspectives on the same material. Each movement is a kind of Möbius strip of the other. It is prevaillingly cool, with occasional flare-ups. I think there's an expansion [of texture] rather than a compression [as in Sonata V] and I think also there's a more adroit use of what might be called the episode. In other words, I'm not afraid to put together material of a highly contrasting nature, of almost discontinuous things." Piano Sonata VIII is Sapp's most expansive piano sonata, about double the size of his other sonatas. The first of the three movements of Sonata VIII is nearly 15 minutes long. It has 16 separate episodes in contrasting tempos and character expressions: "Moderately – Decisively – Agitated – Majestic – Slower – Agitated – Majestic – Moderately – Decisively – Majestic – Rubato – Agitated – Slowly – Moderately – Decisively – Moderately." Among these episodes, there are at least five discernable, recurring motifs or textures in this extensive first movement. Sapp conceived this work in cinematic terms: "I've always been interested in film, and while I'm not an expert, I am interested in and knowledgeable about cinematic techniques, and some have been finding their

way into my writing. The first movement of the eighth sonata is full of cinematic techniques: Rapid focused points, rapid zoom-ins, rapid distance shots, perspective shots, cross-cuttings, and all those kinds of techniques. When Norma was learning this piece, she was having a great deal of trouble deciphering how the sections were connected one after another. I explained to her to think of herself as a camera, and the camera is moving from scene to scene. It helped her a great deal to understand the piece." The delicate, lyrical, and stunningly beautiful second movement, marked "Iridescently," is relatively simple in comparison. It is played softly throughout, and at nearly nine minutes, it is considerably longer than the middle movements of Sapp's other piano sonatas. The final movement, "Vehemently," opens with a brisk and vigorous *moto perpetuo* angular bass line in *marcatissimo* eighth notes, set against a wide-ranging legato melodic line, principally in 7/8 time. This main idea is contrasted by sections of forceful and rough block chords, primarily in 5/8 time. The movement's persistent tension is somewhat relieved by two softer, legato, *meno mosso* passages. The finale concludes with an inversion of the opening concept (*moto perpetuo* eighth notes in the right hand, and a legato melody in the left), ending with a brilliant and forceful *pesante* presentation of accented treble minor ninth chords and descending eighth note bass lines in octaves.

Fantasy III: Homage to Mendelssohn was composed in the summer of 1992. Norma asked her husband to write a piece for her that would be brilliant and communicative, which she could perform in concert during his last year on the faculty at CCM before his retirement. Around this same time, Norma had been practicing for an upcoming performance featuring Mendelssohn's Rondo capriccioso, Op.14. Sapp took inspiration from this work and decided to write a subtle parody of it for his Fantasy III: Homage to Mendelssohn. In his program notes for the premiere, Sapp wrote "I decided to try the task of infusing my music, as it were, with the spirit of this splendid piece. The Mendelssohn has a pretty clear design: it is a rondo with a fine introduction. It is also capricious as the title suggests... There is a slow introduction... ; there is a borrowing of the key, E, with which the rondo proper begins and ends; there is a borrowing of the design — a classic rondo structure; and to some extent there is an adaptation of the differential character of the scherzo-link and lyric materials." There are also some rather direct similarities: The introductions of both works are marked in tempo "Andante," and the rondos are both set in 6/8 meter, although Sapp's rondo is marked "Vivace," whereas Mendelssohn's is marked "Presto." — notes by Alan Green



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