

## AMERICAN COMPOSERS, XVII

### VIRGIL THOMSON

SAMUEL L. M. BARLOW

GERHENNA yawns for the official contemporary biographical portrait; so does everybody, except sometimes the sitter if he is pompous by nature. To evaluate the works with Opus numbers is a slippery business, with a range from hero-worship, through deference, to disgust. But only his contemporaries can see the artist himself as he is; and if the style is the man, so too is the personality. And there is no more sharply-drawn musical personality in America today than Virgil Thomson's. He is one of the very few American-born composers with an international reputation, he is a most lively writer, he was a *Chef d'Ecole* in his thirties, and he possesses the snappiest brain in the confraternity. With that last sentence, whatever is "official" about this sketch has come to an end.

Miss Gertrude Stein had, one might say, reached the pique of her career around 1927. Her influence, like that of Betelgeuse, was remote but manifest upon the younger stars. It must be allowed with regret that by and large she was not taken seriously or at all here. Her present popularity was created for her by Virgil Thomson. In fact, he brought the Left Bank home, put an antimacassar on it, and pointed out with proper pride that after all, our music and letters owed a lot to a fertile Parisian decade and that side of the Seine. Hemingway had turned his back with anger and due memorizing; Ezra Pound had congealed into a figment of his own imagination; Thomson alone came back with the ability to explain, the gift to be clear, and the real professional talent to be taken seriously.

As a trans-Atlantic liaison-officer, Thomson has all the requisite gifts. Chief of these, is his fundamental sense of decorum: it permeates his life and his music and his writing. When he wrote in the *Tribune* that Disney's Beethoven raised "a stink," it was this very decorum that steered him away from the flabby word "pothor." Decorum is a variety of logic, and like style it rests on a personal truth. Thomson has thought searchingly

about many important matters and has reached a personal truth about each. He may be wrong, but he has the root of decorum and style in him; and that is why he has the regard and sometimes the hostility of his fellows. With him, there might be pose, but never bunk.

Another requisite of the Ambassador is an eclectic culture. Thomson's is profuse and real. Though he frequently throws in an aside of some reconditeness – a paragraph on populism, in his critique of *Lady Macbeth*, another on the literary categories of the eighteenth century, or one on the use of the upper partials among Pygmies – he never does so unless it is pertinent. And I know that he very rarely looks up anything in a reference book. This catholicity has made him the most important writer on music in this country, because, having no specialty, and being equipped to turn his judgments also on sculpture or poetry, he is intellectually on a plane from which he can consider music as an art rather than as a livelihood, as a popular rather than a private function, and as a growth independent of the fashions of the day. All this with greater freedom and logic than most living musicologists.

Thomson brought home with him (beside over a hundred musical portraits, several big choral works, a few quartets, two symphonies, an opera, and a knack for salad dressings) a View and a School. The View was of something we lack here and need badly: the correlation of musical life to life. Europe is not more musical than America; our cowboy sings as much as the Swiss cow-herd or the lad in the Camargue; there's more music per mastoid in this country than in any other. But none of it is related to daily living as much as the minor arts of decoration even. Thomson, though celebrating the isolation of the musician in his book *The State of Music*, properly deplors the total absence of integration to be found here. Music, to most of its patrons, is an excrescence or an adornment at so much an occasional aisle-seat. The French Intellectuals had managed to keep it on a par with newspaper-reading, Chanel, and cookery, as a vital part of man's education and pleasures, and the Duchesses "had" music the way they "had" their Vichy (pre-Pétain). Here, none of that exists. How many Directors of the Philharmonic, Opera, or Metropolitan Museum, or of the Carnegie Foundation have quartets in the home? Precious few. Thomson is tactful with the Yahoos, but he labors for the good cause of what I would call fundamentally *democratic music*. He knows it is more fun to sing than to be sung at, and healthier.

The School which Thomson brought back (followed back would



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A sketch by  
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be more correct) was that of the Neo-Romantics which he founded in the late twenties in Paris. Well, if you prefer, he and Sauguet hit on it about the same time, independently, and both caught it from Satie. We can picture them gazing out at a grey Paris sky from their separate windows and feeling that sedulous dissonance left them very cold. Hindemith and the Stravinsky of that moment were doing the Neo-Classic in atonality and in the best concert-halls. But Satie had not disdained the simple tune. And out of the grey sky came the new order – a melodious simplicity, accepting all the known tricks of the trade, with a friendly nod to dissonance or any other musical Nance – and started off to everybody's pleasure, right under the eye of Hindemith who never budged, of Stravinsky and Milhaud who tried their hand at it, and of all the younger ones who gave a cheer. The Duchess of Clairmont Tonnerre gave a party, too, with blue lights in the garden, and the "Sérénade" concerts were launched as the official purveyors of the movement. There was a gentle rustling in the dove-cotes of Nadia Boulanger, and Aaron Copland turned a willing ear. And this is the good Renaissance way of starting something: after supper at the Cardinal's, and with a quick look-see at what the craftsmen are up to on the Ponte Vecchio.

None of this would be important were it not for the fact that Thomson is one of the best grounded musicians in our country. Therefore, what he launched, what he brought home, what he advocates, and what he writes must be taken seriously. He has won scholarship after scholarship, he taught at Harvard, was organist at King's Chapel, has conducted widely, and written criticism for a dozen papers. And beyond all these, he is a composer. So, bearing all the aforementioned *décor* in mind, we must advance into the azygous felicities of some of his more notable works, fetching up again with his personality, this time from the inside.

I think the first piece of his I heard was the *Quartet Number One*. It was written in Paris in 1931 and remains pure Louis Philippe, that is to say, very much in the fashion today. There is the carved elegance founded on classic lines (most of the figuration is Mozartian), the black walnut and tassels, the humor, and then the abrupt endings, just to show that the Victorian can be stream-lined. The *andante*, which so often exposes the arid or flatulent, makes it quite plain that Thomson has much to say, and a capricious but real tenderness, like the flowers in the *platte-bande* at Monte Carlo. The *Second Quartet* is more diffuse and less immediately charming, but the waltz chases its tail in the best Haydn-*seek* manner;

and in both quartets there is continuous good writing for the instruments, an almost constricting use of classical form, and a pleasing and personal melodic line. Maybe, these quartets are Thomson at his best. They are well made, vastly entertaining, and often lovely – like a sea-shell door-stop – and, after all, that is as much as we ask of most quartets till, with the later Beethoven and Brahms, we get almost more than we ask for; in fact Dolmetsch would say we get more than a quartet.

One of Thomson's more peculiar addictions is that of the musical portrait. As an outlet or sketch-book or complete miniature it has uses familiar to all artists, and dangers as well. It aids the facility and the memory, but it may induce a certain chucking of the Muse under the chin and it may so captivate the fancy of the author that, as in certain lapses on the part of Picasso, the striving platitude or the experimental charade gets hung with the masterpieces. Thomson has done nearly a hundred of them, for piano, organ, violin, four clarinets, quartet, and other combinations, running in length from a minute of music to a three-movement sonatina. Couperin did very careful and professional "portraits," and some crop up in Mozart, Rameau, Haydn, and even Beethoven. For the musician, the musical portrait occupies the place that still-life does for the painter. It stimulates variety and demands an objective treatment of the subject matter. Thomson's portraits cover a period of at least fifteen years and include, as sitters, a professor at Vassar, Picasso, Henry McBride, Alexander Smallens, the Crane and Stettheimer ladies, and other notables on both sides of the Atlantic. He does them with great care, with the sitter before him. And the surprising thing is that so many of them are not only resemblances but excellent small works in their elected if arbitrary kind.

Thomson's long career as organist and choir-master has influenced both his choice of form and his material. Beside the *Missa Brevis* and the *Mass*, there is the *Funeral Oration* (Bossuet's on Henrietta Maria) for tenor and orchestra. Monsieur de Trévi, of the Opéra, performed it first in Paris. There is a companion piece for soprano, the *tirade* from Racine's *Phèdre*, also given in Paris. The Biblical material crops out in the *Five Phrases* from the *Song of Solomon*, which has been widely performed, and in the old Scotch pentatonic hymn tune, *How Firm a Foundation*, which he first heard down South, used in the finale of *The River*. It is unexpected and good that Thomson's material has always been tenaciously American. He reposes comfortably on the bosom of the eighteenth century, and that means Europe, for Voltaire is much closer to us than Jonathan Edwards;

he molds the rococo forms and configurations which spell Vienna; and he would say gladly that he regards and uses certain methods as nearly like Lulli as possible. But that is the manner; the matter is curiously home-grown. Cowboy and other Western tunes abound in *The Plow that broke the Plains*, and beside the old Southern Hymn tunes, the *St. Louis Tickle*, and *The Eagles they fly high* weave in and out of the score for *The River*. But perhaps his most American work is the *Four Saints*; in fact, with it we are back in Kansas City, in a completely personal and original idiom.

The marriage of true minds was performed by Antheil in Paris. The first-fruits were *Capital, Capitals*, text by Miss Stein (for male voices and piano), and three long songs, text also by Miss Stein. The fascination exerted by her writings was, I suspect, again linked with the choir-master in Thomson. The declamation split off from the meaning, and the freedom from everything except an exact prosody. We are reminded of the dance tunes used in the Liturgy in the sixteenth century, and of the processes of Gregorian and earlier Greek. The success of the Stein-Thomson collaboration was immediate, and it was not long before an opera was under discussion. An opera seria, of mythological character, with dialogue and antiphonal choruses much as Lulli employed, with a longer lyric line for the emotional heights, and a tragic ending. Aspasia and Pocahontas were quickly eliminated. And again came the return to the Church. Saints. *Churriguesque* saints. Spanish Saints, love, martyrdom, and a general flight to heaven on an engraved visiting card. The work was completed in 1928. News of it got round; Darmstadt wanted the premiere. There was such a rumpus that the Darmstadt opera company nearly broke up. Then in 1934 Hartford opened a New Wing, and Thomson sailed for America.

He sailed right into the brilliant idea of having the opera sung by Negroes. They had the conviction necessary, the lack of intellectual resistance to Miss Stein's words, the beautiful diction and love of sound, with or without meaning, and of expression for its own sake. And upon the brilliance of that casting, the opera rode to unprecedented success. Gilman found the music "wily and deft . . . often wittily and subtly illusive," and Downes wrote, "he knows the voice in a most exceptional degree; . . . an American composer who can write recitative magnificently . . . who can laugh and write a melodic line and set a very difficult text with absolute virtuosity." Later, they boggled at their first enthusiasm; but the opera was more than a success. It was a lesson. And the critics always allowed



as much; and the people flocked; and all the composers took a good swig at the lesson. *Four Saints in Three Acts* is a work of remarkable freshness in many ways – rhythmically, and theatrically, and in the matter of prosody. The musical material, harmonies, scales, counterpoints, are so simple that some thought them banal. As a matter of fact, the manipulation of the very simple root-material is most complex, but it is a complexity made necessary by the fine adjustment of word to note, a complexity no greater nor less than the stresses of our rich and varied language. There was freshness in the scoring – with harmonium and accordion and much wood-wind – and in the production which Thomson directed. And above all there was freshness in the point of view, in the creative ability to devise a new form and to set a new standard.

Voracious, experimental, eclectic, prolific; ballets, sonatas, movie-music, oratorios, concertos; new movements in art, old technics revived – and yet Virgil Thomson always seems the most unhurried of men. This comes, I fancy, from his having what Dr. Johnson called “a sound bottom of sense.” His values are always admirably adjusted to his needs. He likes and frequently gets one-man concerts of his works, but he will have none of the miscegenations of the usual Carnegie Hall program. As he says, moderns show at the Museum of Modern Art, not at the Metropolitan Museum. “You can’t look at your sister the way you look at the bust of your grandfather.” He is right. And he gets away with his intransigence because his attitude of no compromise with the plush public is founded on his ability to reach a greater and freer public, because he believes in the integrity of his own approach, and because he has never sold out.

Thomson moves, unexpectedly but decorously, across the musical skyline like a baroque covered-wagon. More unexpectedly, there’s a pioneer inside.

# THE MUSIC OF VIRGIL THOMSON

DATE	ORCHESTRAL WORKS	PUBLISHER
1923	Two Sentimental Tangos - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Symphony on a Hymn Tune - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Oraison Funèbre (Bossuet) with tenor - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	Symphony No. 2 - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	Suite from "The Plough that Broke the Plains" - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	Suite from "The River" - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	"Filling Station," ballet suite - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>CHORAL WORKS</b>		
1924	Three Antiphonal Psalms, a capella, women's voices - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	Missa Brevis, a capella, men's voices - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Missa Brevis No. 2, women's voices, percussion - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	Medea Choruses (Countee Cullen), women's voices, percussion - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	Scenes from the Holy Infancy: "Joseph and the Angeles" "The Wise Men" "The Flight into Egypt", a capella, mixed voices - - - - -	The Wise Manuscript
<b>STAGE WORKS</b>		
1928	Four Saints in Three Acts (Gertrude Stein), opera - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	Filling Station (large orchestra), ballet - - - - -	Manuscript
1934	A Bride for the Unicorn (Dennis Johnson), incidental music - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	Injunction Granted (Living Newspaper), incidental music - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	Hamlet, incidental music - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	Antony and Cleopatra, incidental music - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	The Trojan Women (Euripides, in English) for radio - - - - -	Manuscript
1941	Oedipus Tyrannus (Sophocles, in Greek), men's voices, wind, percussion - - - - -	Manuscript
1936	The Plough that Broke the Plains (Pare Lorenz), film score - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	The River (Pare Lorenz), film score - - - - -	Manuscript
1937	The Spanish Earth (Hemingway and Ivans), film score in collaboration with Marc Blitzstein - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>CHAMBER MUSIC</b>		
1926	Sonata da Chiesa (Chorale, Tango and Fugue), for 5 instruments - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Five Portraits, for quartet of clarinets - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Violin Sonata, for violin and piano - - - - -	Arrow Music Pr
1931-32	String Quartets, No. 1 and No. 2 - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	Serenade in Five Movements, for flute and violin - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Le Bains-Bar (Waltzes) for violin and piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Seven Portraits, for violin alone - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Four Portraits, for violin and piano - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>VOCAL WORKS</b>		
1926	Five Phrases from the Song of Solomon, soprano and percussion - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Capital, Capitals (Gertrude Stein), 4 men's voices and piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1930	Air from "Phèdre" (Racine), soprano and piano - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	Stabat Mater (Max Jacob), soprano and string quartet - - - - -	Cos Cob
Stein Songs:		
1926	Susie Asado - - - - -	Cos Cob
1927-	Preciosilla (recitatif and aria), Portrait of F. B., Film: "Deux soeurs qui sont pas soeurs" - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	George Hugnet Songs (4 Series): - - - - -	Manuscript
1927-	La Valse Grégorienne (4 Poems) - - - - -	Private
1928	Les Soirées Bagnolaises, Le Berceau de Gertrude Stein (8 Poems) - - - - -	Manuscript
1931	La Belle en dormant (4 Poems) - - - - -	Manuscript
Old English Poems:		
1920-39	"The Sunflower" (Blake) "The Tiger" (Blake) "Dirge" (Webster) - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Le Singe et le Léopard (La Fontaine) - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>FOR ORGAN</b>		
1922	Two Preludes and a Christmas Pastorate - - - - -	Manuscript
1922	Passacaglia - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Variations and Fugues on Gospel Hymns (4 sets) - - - - -	Manuscript
	"Come, Ye Disconsolate," "There's Not a Friend like the Lowly Jesus" "Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown?" "Shall We Gather at the River?" - - - - -	
1940	Wedding Music - - - - -	Manuscript
<b>PIANO WORKS</b>		
1926	Ten Easy Pieces and a Coda - - - - -	Manuscript
1926	Five Inventions - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	Synthetic Waltzes (for 2 pianos) - - - - -	Manuscript
1929-30	Sonatas No. 1 and No. 2, No. 3 (on white keys) - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Sonatina - - - - -	Manuscript
1928-40	Seventy-Five Portraits - - - - -	Manuscript