

NEW BOOKS

THOMSON'S MUSICAL STATE

VIRGIL THOMSON has written the most original book on music that America has produced. *The State Of Music* is the wittiest, the most provocative, the best written, the least conventional book on matters musical that I have ever seen (always excepting Berlioz). If you want to have fun, watch how people react to this book. It will undoubtedly be taken too solemnly by some, not solemnly enough by others. It will make many readers hopping mad. It will simply delight others. It will be quoted and discussed everywhere. In other words, it is the book that every reader of MODERN MUSIC would expect Virgil Thomson to write – a book that only he could have written.

Composers especially can profit by reading it. *The State of Music* is primarily a discussion of their own profession. There is very little about good and bad composers, good and bad music. Thomson is positively squeamish about judging other men's music. Instead he describes the composer's general situation in the Musical State and in the world at large. For once the composer is treated as a human being, with not merely a craftsman's interest, but also economic, political, and social interests. One can violently disagree with any number of Thomson's conclusions on these matters, but the composer *quo* composer emerges from these pages as a personage, *un homme*.

Thomson has an almost medieval sense of the composer's professional community

of interests – both financial and artistic. He is strongly for a composer's united front vis-a-vis the home government (whatever form it may take – democratic or authoritarian), the music employers (whether they be publishers, patronesses, or radio stations), and the music consumers. (What are music lovers to you are just plain customers to him.) Professional solidarity is about the only thing preached in this book.

The composer, according to Thomson, is a miniature capitalist, with "vested interests" in his compositions. This makes him different from the musical executant, who, being paid a wage on an hourly basis, is properly organized in trade-unions, affiliated with other trade unions. The composer, like the doctor, the lawyer, or the literary man, is more properly organized in guilds or alliances. The present set-up, in which composers and publishers band together for the collection of performing rights, is less desirable than a possible future alliance between the composers and their executants. As far as I know Thomson is the first composer among us who has ever considered these things. Everyone else has been so busy upholding artistic ideals that they have completely lost sight of the composer's professional status as such.

Money is a word that doesn't frighten Thomson. *Au contraire*, he likes it. It explains a great many otherwise inexplicable things. Musical style, for instance. Tell Thomson how you make

your money and he will tell you what your musical style is likely to be. In the highly diverting chapter on *Why Composers Write How*, (the economic determinism of musical style), composers' possible income sources are tabulated with devastating completeness. Heaven help you if you live off the "Appreciation racket." A composer, says V.T., can sink no lower. On the other hand, he exudes a warm glow when writing about that *rara avis* — the composer who can support himself exclusively from collections of royalties on the sale or performance of his music. "Royalties and performing-rights fees are to any composer a sweetly solemn thought" is the way he puts it. It's a chapter with a great deal of real observation in it, despite an overdose of continuous generalizations.

The composer as a political animal is another of Thomson's preoccupations. It keeps cropping up on every other page. If I understand him correctly, Thomson has no quarrel with the individual composer who dabbles in politics. He thinks said composer might be better employed working at his music at home, but still, there is no great harm in it. What he will not have, however, is that the composers' organization be involved in the affairs of any particular political party, rightist, leftist or liberal. He firmly maintains that the proper province of the composers' organization is the setting of *musical* policies. "We must demand . . . from any governing agency of whatever kind in any possible state, both economic security for our members and the musical direction of all enterprises of whatever nature where music is employed." I strongly suspect an oversimplification here. But whatever its value as a program for the future, it makes sense here

and now in America, where composers have no control over musical affairs, let alone political ones.

Composers are not Thomson's sole concern in the State of Music. There are very amusing sketches of the artists in neighboring states — the painters, the poets, the architects, the actors, the photographers. The dancers, poor dears, only rate one sentence. They are "auto-erotic and lack conversation."

Under the pretext of telling *How To Write A Piece*, there are excellent analyses of the considerable problems involved in writing music for the screen, the stage, the ballet, and the opera. Thomson knows whereof he speaks, having written successfully in all these forms himself. He has sound advice to give, worth the attention of any composer. His handling of Concert Music is touched by a certain amount of personal acrimony. "It is a very intense little affair," he says. The shortcomings of the concert field are gone over once again, without adding very much to an already sore subject.

But Thomson's really big guns are reserved for that special field of the concert world known as "modern music." He sees an International Modern Music Ring, (something like Father Coughlin's International Bankers) a kind of self-perpetuating Oligarchy, intent on performing or allowing to be performed only one kind of music — the dissonant-contrapuntal style. This is just our old friend Virgil having a good time. For fifteen years now he has been repeating the same thing, as if we didn't know that this same style of Modern Music which he supposedly abhors, has served as the perfect foil for the simplicities of Thomson, Sauguet and Co. Now, as Thomson himself, points out, the International

Style in Modern Music is rapidly drying up. Everyone is beginning to see the advantages of melodious and harmonious-sounding music. That old gag about the Modern Music Style is in for some serious revision.

One thing is sure. It will be a long time before there is another book on music as fascinating as this one. Unless Thomson himself can be persuaded to write it.

Aaron Copland

SAMINSKY REVISES MUSIC OF OUR DAY

IN a new and enlarged edition of *Music of Our Day* (Thomas Y. Crowell 1939), Lazare Saminsky maintains the advanced position that he held seven years ago and strengthens it with five more batteries of argument. The additions are an introductory essay, *A Prelude to Resurrection*; a survey of *America (Celtic and Latin)*; an appraisal of *Sibelius*, an *aperçu* of contemporary qualities in English and French music, *Saxon Versus Gaul*; and a postlude on *The Composer and the Critic*. Far from retracting anything that he has said, he reaffirms every heterodoxy and utters many more. His book will afford pleasure to readers who appreciate straight and cogent thinking, sensitiveness, catholic culture, and a polemical spirit.

Being a critic myself, let me consider first Mr. Saminsky's discussion of the relation between his craft and mine. The gist of it is this: "The composer and the critic have nothing in common as to either mental position or stage of action. The composer is a creative and dionysian power. Instinct, invisible promptings of his peculiar esthetics, contradicting emotional truths living in the same soul, are his law. The critic is mainly a reasoning force. As such he is bound to seek yardsticks in judgment, consistency, a clear and centered source of the creator's vision." No pointless jibes at criticism

as the refuge of artistic failure, but a fair statement, and the one omission (the critic's occasional flash of intuition which enables him to see the essential meaning of a work) is rectified in another passage: "Criticism is, indeed, science when it means dissection, but it is art, and one of deep human nature, where intuition and enthusiasm come in. The critic is, or should be, an ecstatic doctor as well as a warrior."

His estimate of Sibelius, "the revered artist with his deep emotional nobility," offers a penetrating explanation for the gray color which has been so often eulogized as Nordic atmosphere and bardic brooding. His verdict on the composer is: "an inspirational genius with a two-dimensional mind." "The case of Sibelius is precisely that of Grieg and Rachmaninov, even if the nature of his material, and particularly the tone of it, is different; even if the size of his spiritual self is larger. He is a natural flame, of the same kind in some respects as Schubert and Mussorgsky but with this variance: nothing emanates that may infuse itself in the new art. His song has something of the same immediate potency, but surely not the same germinal power."

Of the French and English he has this to say. "The French tonal mind is restrained, concise, centripetal, and the English expansive, catholic and centri-