



RANDALL THOMPSON

A drawing by

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RANDALL THOMPSON

QUINCY PORTER

RANDALL Thompson has consistently gone a way of his own, little influenced by many of the more radical tendencies of contemporary music, evolving a style based on the safer, more tried practices of older masters. It is unusual in this day to find a composer using musical words for the most part familiar to everyone, yet writing music that is contemporary in feeling and sincerely admired by his colleagues. His splendid craftsmanship, sharp sensibility and good taste may be important factors in accounting for his success not only with fellow musicians but with his audiences. He always keeps the point of view of the listener carefully in mind, avoiding anything which might be over-perplexing harmonically, rhythmically or contrapuntally. His ideas have sufficient span to make them easily assimilated before contrasting elements are introduced. His melodies are simple, often of a surprisingly popular appeal which perplexes those who think of Thompson as a musical aristocrat.

In his choral music to English words, the setting of the words is admirable. In the past the treatment of our language has been lamentably influenced by the characteristic rhythmic formulae suitable to other languages. The words have been so miserably distorted that their accents have been uncharacteristic, the result being that the words are often incomprehensible. Thompson is one of those who have done the most to correct this situation, and the example which follows demonstrates his great skill. Throughout *Americana*, from which this excerpt is taken, singers have no difficulty in making the audience understand every word. His grouping of three or five even notes within one beat is a device which he uses frequently, sometimes bracketing together as many as twenty syllables and thereby giving the impression of the spoken word where uneven stresses do not exist.

1-80 *Meno mosso (d. 64)*

ff *co. ira* *p* *ff*

May ev-ry tongue be par-a-lyz'd and ev-ry hand

pul-sid that ut-ters a word or rais-es a fing-er from this

pul-pit in ad-vo-ca-cy of Mod-ern-is-m.

Thompson has filled a need for effective, singable choral music, a field in which too few of our present-day composers seem interested. His meticulous care is shown in the above example, and his skill in constructing out of a simple ascending scale a well unified yet artistically varied melodic line which so admirably portrays the growing wrath of the preacher. This work exhibits, to my mind, the inventive ability of the composer more strongly than much of his other choral music, because of its great dramatic qualities and its admirable wit, a truly significant element in his musical make-up. The music throughout sets off the words with devastating emphasis, and the contrasts are startling in their effect.

His new opera, *Solomon and Balkis*, at the time of this writing has had its first radio performance. It has great charm and arrives at its climax most effectively. Possibly a feeling of let-down after this point of greatest musical interest may be overcome in the stage version. There is no lack of melody, and it is melody which is extremely singable. Here again the prosody is unusual, exhibiting his skill in throwing just the right emphasis on each syllable of the script. The instrumentation is most effective, including a striking use of arpeggios executed on the wrong side of the violins' bridges to give an inkling of a female butterfly's anger.

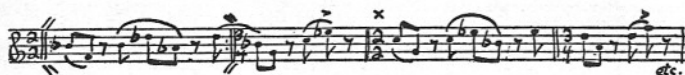
In his instrumental music we find the same skill that he shows in his choral writing. The instruments are always kept well within their most effective limits, and the music is again written with such clarity that individual colors come out with striking eloquence. Painstaking workmanship with care in every detail is a characteristic of all of his music.

The musical ideas themselves often seem curiously simple and unsophisticated, but they are fashioned with the same scrupulous care. In the fast movements there are fascinating rhythmic ideas, with ingenious displacements of accent. Here again Thompson presents his rhythmic ideas in such a way that the meters and changes in meter are quite evident. In the scherzo of his *Second Symphony*, the basses make the meter of seven

clear by their descending scales before the cleverly syncopated idea of the third measure is exposed:



Delightful use is made of variations in the rhythmic treatment of this idea, utilizing both the 3/4 and 2/2 group in new combinations, such as:



The surprise displacement of the rhythm at "x" is very typical, and it is again brought about in such a way that one is fully aware of what is going on. We find the same clarity that is shown in his instrumentation, in his use of rhythmic formulae. He is not interested in the more cerebral types of rhythm which confuse the listener, and of which many examples may be found in the *Sacre*. Another example taken from the beginning of the scherzo of his recent *String Quartet* shows a similar treatment of a rhythmic idea made up of small cells. The second quotation shows how he explains the meter when it becomes syncopated.



Reference has already been made to the lyric sense which he possesses. The slow movement of his *Second Symphony* contains a melody which is just barely around the corner from the typical popular song, and the harmonies that accompany it, exquisitely worked out, are just outside the window of the barber shop. There is a curious conflict between the schmalz-like manner in which the typical first violinist wishes to play this music and the delicate, unpassionate manner pleaded for by the composer. At the end of the movement a horn, unabashed, sounds a B \flat after the

final C major chord has been reached. I must quote the opening measures of this movement, as it represents the very essence of Thompson's art. The division of the 'celli pizzicati, allowing each note to continue its vibration beyond the next chord and giving at the same time a very subtle cross pattern of three beats, is something he should be proud of.

The image shows a page of musical notation for a string quartet. The tempo is marked 'Largo'. The instruments are Violini (Violins I and II), Viola, Voce (Soprano), and Cb. (Cello/Bass). The score is in 4/4 time. The Cello/Bass part is marked 'pizz.' (pizzicato) and shows a complex rhythmic pattern of three beats. Dynamics include p, pp, and ff. The Viola part has a 'pizz.' marking. The Soprano part has a 'div.' marking. The score is written in a standard musical notation style with various ornaments and slurs.

The tunes in his new *Suite for Oboe, Clarinet and Viola* have also a simple, folk-like quality. A melody much like a Virginia folksong is used in the third movement, and treated in a manner typical of the early contrapuntalists. The theme in the *allegretto* of the last movement is in mortal danger of being swung, without even the necessity of changing the harmonies. This suite is brilliantly written for each of the instruments and demonstrates again the splendid workmanship acquired from his studies of the great music of the past.

There is this curious mixture in much of his music: ideas very close to the soil coupled with superb craftsmanship. His harmonic and contrapuntal uses are very much in keeping with the nature of his melodic ideas, the chords often extremely simple, the counterpoints, though worked out with great smoothness, seldom complicated. He does not hesitate to use the famous chords in their well known relationships; nor does he hesitate to write long stretches of music with no changes in accidental — witness the first forty-five measures of the last movement of his quartet. He gains thereby the chance to make effective changes of key, a pleasant possibility made less easily available to those who follow certain of the more up-to-the-minute modes of composition.

We have here a composer who dares to write with a simplicity that often startles his colleagues. He rides eloquently through the present in the fine stagecoach of our ancestors. One may see more at this speed of travel. One could still make a sensation on Broadway or even in Phila-

delphia by taking to this iron-tired means of locomotion. Thompson is following a safe and sane course, based on what has been proved in the past. He is using musical ideas, on the other hand, which seem very much in keeping with present-day, unsophisticated musical thought. The important thing is that he is writing music which, regardless of its style, has a well justified place in our musical life and will without question continue to please and satisfy its listeners after much of the experimental music of the present has ceased to startle or amuse us.

In conclusion I want to quote a paragraph written by Thompson himself, in which he states his position as an artist in as simple and unaffected a way as does his music: "About twenty-five years ago I came across a line of Thomas Carlyle that I promptly committed to memory. It ran something like this: 'Create, Create! Be it the pitifullest, most infinitesimal product, it is the best that is in you. Out with it, then!' That's roughly it, I think, and - come to think of it - that exhortation worked itself into a philosophy of creation that is now second nature to me. My hand has never been restrained from writing what I wanted to - so long as what it wrote was the best I could write, written in the best way I could write it."

THE MUSIC OF RANDALL THOMPSON

DATE	ORCHESTRAL WORKS	PUBLISHER
1922	Pierrot and Cothurnus, prelude to "Aria da Capo," play in one act by Edna St. Vincent Millay - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	The Piper at the Gates of Dawn - - - - -	Manuscript
1928	Jazz Poem, for piano and orchestra - - - - -	Manuscript
1929	Symphony No. 1 - - - - -	C. C. Birchard
1931	Symphony No. 2 - - - - -	C. C. Birchard
CHORAL WORKS		
1919	The Light of Stars (Longfellow), mixed voices, a cappella - - -	Manuscript
1922	The Last Invocation (Whitman), mixed voices, a cappella - - -	Manuscript
1924	Odes of Horace:	
	O Venus, regina Cnidi Paphique (mixed voices, with piano or orchestra) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
	Vitas hinnuleo me similis, Chloë (mixed voices a cappella) - - -	E. C. Schirmer
	Montium custos nemorumque, Virgo (mixed voices, a cappella) - - -	E. C. Schirmer
	O fons Bandusiae (mixed voices, a cappella) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
	Quis multa gracilis (men's voices, a cappella) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1928	Pueri Hebraeorum (women's voices, a cappella) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1929	Rosemary (Stephen Vincent Benét): "Chemical Analysis", "A Sad Song", "A Nonsense Song", "To Rosemary on the Methods by which she might become an Angel" (women's voices, a cappella) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1932	Americana (from American Mercury): "May Every Tongue", "The Staff Necromancer", "God's Bottles", "The Sublime Process of Law Enforcement", "Loveli-lines" (mixed voices, with piano or orchestra) - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1936	The Peaceable Kingdom (Isaiah): "Say ye to the righteous", "Woe unto them", "The noise of a multitude", "Howl ye", "The paper reads by the brooks", "But these are they that forsake the Lord", "Have ye not known?", "Ye shall have a song" (mixed voices, a cappella) - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1937	Tarantella (Hilaire Belloc), men's voices with piano or orchestral accompaniment (scored by William Denny) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1938	The Lark in the Morn (Somersetshire folksong arranged for mixed voices, a cappella) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1940	Alleluia (mixed voices, a cappella) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
STAGE WORKS		
1920	Torches (Raesbeck), incidental music - - - - -	Brentano
1926	The Straw Hat (Labiche), incidental music - - - - -	Manuscript
1926	Grand Street Follies, incidental music - - - - -	Manuscript
1942	Solomon and Balkis, opera in one act (text from the Just So Story "The Butterfly that Stamped" by Rudyard Kipling) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
CHAMBER MUSIC		
1924	The Wind in the Willows (string quartet) - - - - -	Manuscript
1940	Suite for Oboe, Clarinet and Viola - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
1941	String Quartet No. 1 in D minor - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
SONGS		
1925	Tapestry (William Douglas) - - - - -	Manuscript
1925	Five Songs (Merle St. Croix Wright) - - - - -	Manuscript
1926	Doubts (Eleanor Dougherty); A Ballad (Moses) - - - - -	Manuscript
1927	Some One (de la Mare); The Wild Home Pussy (Emma Rounds); The Echo Child (Mary Ely Baker); My Master hath a garden (Anon.); Velvet Shoes (Elinor Wylie) - - - - -	Harcourt, Brace
	My Master hath a garden; Velvet Shoes (Republished) - - - - -	E. C. Schirmer
PIANO		
1923	Sonata - - - - -	Manuscript
1924	Suite - - - - -	Manuscript
1926	The Boats were talking - - - - -	Manuscript
1935	Little Prelude; Song after Sundown - - - - -	C. Fischer