

Virgil Thomson: Portraits and other works
New World 80429-2

When Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) was a music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, his stated goal was “to support with all the power of my praise every artist, composer, group, or impresario whose relation to music was straightforward, by which I mean based only on music and the sound it makes.” This is a good description of Thomson and of his relationship to his own music. He makes no effort to impress the listener with his skill, or with his learning, or with the depth of his emotions. It's bracing music that refreshes the ear and lifts the spirit.

The clarity of Thomson's thought is especially evident in his piano music. Trained as a pianist and organist, Thomson first performed in silent film theaters; later he accompanied the soprano Mary Garden. Surprisingly, Thomson didn't compose at the piano. He knew what pianist could do, but he never stopped to worry just how they should do it. In fact, he was happy to have his music edited and fingered by trusted colleagues.

Thomson was equally happy to have other musicians arrange his works. Pianist Jacquelyn Helin created the delightful piano arrangement of Thomson's 1975 ballet suite *Parson Weems* and the *Cherry Tree* recorded here. The ballet was commissioned by the Erick Hawkins Dance Company; it was one of the few Hawkins scores not written by his resident composer/conductor Lucia Dlugoszewki (like Thomson an American independent, though in the tradition of Varèse rather than of Satie).

The plot of *Parson Weems* is derived from the life of George Washington, or rather the version of Washington's life made famous by his early biographer Parson Weems, who invented the cherry tree myth. In Hawkins's description of the ballet, George was “really too good a boy” to chop down the tree. “His alter ego, his angel, must have done it, so that George could go to heaven.” Hawkins himself danced the part of the angel, dressed as an eighteenth-century clown with an orange wig. The biographer Weems turns up in the dance too, along with Molly Pitcher and Martha Washington. Thomson's music for *Parson Weems* draws on melodies and harmonizations found in manuscripts from the Federalist period of American history.

Thomson's *Five 2-Part Inventions* date from 1926, during his Paris years. In the words of John Cage, Thomson deals with double counterpoint “to take it for a spin, so that he would never afterward have to concern himself with it as a problem.” Cage praises the third Invention in particular, “a piece that simply flows, as a stream flows through a landscape. Unhampered by the presence of canon, this centrally placed Invention shows Thomson unconcerned with façades of broken rules that he had been so busy erecting.” This two-part texture became a favorite in Thomson's piano music throughout his life. Its clarity was especially useful in Thomson's portraits, which often have the feeling of line drawings by a visual artist.

Thomson's musical portraits were like those of a visual artist in another way, too—he did them “from life”, in the presence of the sitter. This method distinguishes Thomson's musical portraits from those of earlier composers such as Couperin, Schumann and Elgar. Thomson claimed that the idea for this method came from observing the painter friends and colleagues of his Paris years, as well as from the abstract literary portraits of his friend and librettist Gertrude Stein. As Anthony

Tommasini says in his book on Thomson's portraits, "Thomson was clearly impressed by the idea of depicting character through the use of language purged of its associative values so as to focus on sound and syntax." In Thomson's words, "in all my portraits only the sitter's presence is portrayed, not his appearance or his profession." A portrait sitting for Thomson was carefully planned to allow him to achieve what he called "the discipline of spontaneity." As he described his method, each portrait was "sketched in silence, usually at one sitting...I do not stop to try out on the piano, to hear, correct, or criticize what I have done. Such adjustments are left for later."

The two sets of portraits on this disc appear in chronological order of composition. The first eight of the *Nine Portraits* were written between 1930 and 1942; the last was written in 1958. They range from the famous (art historian Russell Hitchcock and conductor Eugene Ormandy) to the obscure (Louis Lange, a child staying in the same hotel as Thomson in 1938). Madame Dubost and Helen Austin were musical hostesses. Ettie Stettheimer was a novelist and the sister of the painter Florine Stettheimer, who designed the sets for Thomson's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Tristan Tzara was one of the founders of the Dada movement, famous for describing art as "a private bell for inexplicable needs." Pierre Mabille was a doctor with, according to Thomson, "surrealist connections." Schuyler Watts edited and arranged *Hamlet* for a 1936 production starring Leslie Howard and directed by John Houseman, with incidental music by Thomson.

The set of *Seventeen Portraits*, written between 1982 and 1984, provides glimpses not only of the lively musical mind of Thomson in his eighties, but of his impressive circle of friends and acquaintances. During this period, portrait sittings generally took place at Virgil's apartment at the Chelsea Hotel. Although the sittings themselves were consecrated and uninterrupted work sessions, they were often followed by convivial meals in the apartment or at nearby restaurants. For Virgil, the pleasures of the mind never excluded more sensual pleasures, and elegant sophistication was never confused with display of money.

The subjects of this set of portraits include three composers, Rodney Lister, Charles Fussell and Philip Ramey—Ramey is well known as program annotator for the New York Philharmonic. There are also three painters, Power Boothe, Mark Beard and Glyn Boyd Hartke, and Malitte Matta, wife of the surrealist painter Roberto Matta. Pianists included Bennett Lerner and David Dubal. Writers include Peter McWilliams, a poet and author of books on computers, Brendan Lemon, and Louis Rispoli, who was Thomson's personal secretary. Two married couples appear in the set; the Venezuelan scientist Marcel Roche and his wife Doña Flor, as well as filmmaker Molly Davies and her then-husband, conductor Dennis Russell Davies.

Does the identity of the sitters matter? As Thomson said, "music in the long run tends for musicians to be just music. But very little has ever been written down that the author did not think was about something. Some thing or some body. So every musical portrait is tied to an individual, and the composer of it tends to believe it a true likeness. He hopes it will also be good music." —*Scott Wheeler*

Composer Scott Wheeler was a private student of Virgil Thomson in 1981, during which time he sat for his portrait. Wheeler has subsequently arranged a number of Thomson portraits for publication and recording.

Virgil Thomson was the living embodiment of the declarative sentence, enlivened always with the zing of the one-liner. I never met a man who was more of a piece—the man, his music (and how he wanted it performed), his letters, his conversational style, even the functional design of his apartment—all were utterly forthright. However, declaration was always offset by the whimsy of the bon mot, the unpredictability of Virgil's sly, humorous, outrageous, and witty take on reality.

The surface of his music is pure, direct American plainsong, but underneath subversion lurks gleefully. Hymn tunes get transposed, rhythms overturn or collide, often with comical results; cowboy songs turn into fugues. Virgil made use of all materials, from Sunday school ditties he learned as a child in Kansas City, to the tangos he heard in Paris in the twenties, to the counterpoint of his formal musical education. What is distinctive and utterly unique is the mix.

For six years, I had the good fortune to work closely with Virgil on how he wanted his music performed—and how he wanted it performed was directly, without any musical veneer of “prettiness.” Small “musical” ritards and crescendi and diminuendi—the kind of thing a trained musician puts in as a matter of course—were ruthlessly expunged. To play simply was the extremely difficult goal. For Virgil a piece was very often a song or a dance—the one having legato implications, the other a rhythmic underpinning. Tempi were chosen to allow the texture of the music, often contrapuntal, to emerge.

On first hearing, Thomson's music, like his prose, sometimes sounds dry and matter-of-course. However, repeated hearings reveal the sophistication of the language and musical thought underneath the deceptively simple surface. To encounter the breadth of his musical thought is to recognize with astonishment the unique synthesis of style he created—to recognize the years and styles traveled, the cultures happily juxtaposed. —
Jacquelyn Helin

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Portraits for Orchestra and other orchestral music. Virgil Thomson and Eugene Ormandy conducting the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. Bay Cities BCD-1006.

Portraits and Self-Portraits. Anthony Tommasini, piano. Sharan Leventhal, violin. Northeastern NR240-CD.

Acadian Songs and Dances. Suite from The Plow that Broke the Plains. Fugues and Cantilenas. R. Corp conducting the New London Orchestra. Hyperion CDA 66576.

Four Saints in Three Acts. Orchestra of Our Time, Joel Thome conducting. Elektra Nonesuch 79035-2.

The Mother of Us All. Santa Fe Opera, Raymond Leppard conducting. New World 80288-2.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hoover, Kathleen and John Cage. *Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music*. New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959.

Thomson, Virgil. *American Music Since 1910*. With an introduction by Nicholas Nabokov. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

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———. *Music With Words: A Composer's View*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Tommasini, Anthony. *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Jacquelyn Helin is particularly identified with the music of Virgil Thomson, with whom she worked closely. She was a featured artist in the nationally televised PBS special honoring Thomson on his ninetieth birthday, and has premiered and recorded many of Thomson's works to high critical praise. Selected by *Musical America* as one of the Young Artists of the Year, Jacquelyn Helin made her European debut at London's Wigmore Hall. She played her New York debut as winner of the Artists International Competition, to a sold-out audience in Carnegie Recital Hall. Ms. Helin has performed both in recital and with orchestras in the major musical centers of Europe and the United States, and presents master classes and appears as artist-in-residence at numerous colleges and festivals. Radio broadcasts of her performances have been heard on National Public Radio and major stations throughout the United States and Europe.

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Jacquelyn Helin, piano

Nine Portraits for piano (1930-1969)

(publ. Southern Music)

1 Madame Dubost chez elle (0:59)

2 Russell Hitchcock, Reading (1:00)

3 Ettie Stettheimer (1:01)

4 Helen Austin at Home and Abroad (1:11)

5 A French Boy of Ten: Louis Lange (1:17)

6 Pastoral: A Portrait of Tristan Tzara (2:24)

7 Awake or Asleep: Pierre Mabile (1:10)

8 Prisoner of the Mind: Schuyler Watts (2:02)

9 For Eugene Ormandy's Birthday, 18 November 1969 A Study in Stacked-Up Thirds (1:14)

Parson Weems and the Cherry Tree (1975)

(publ. Boosey & Hawkes)

10 The Parson Writes His Book (1:36)

11 The Parson Instructs George & Martha in the Gentle Art of the Dance (1:28)

12 The Hatchet (0:51)

13 The Pitcher and the Bucket (1:05)

- 14 Rum is a Demon (2:22)
- 15 Martha's Secret Love (1:01)
- 16 Molly Whips the Army into Shape (0:55)
- 17 Crossing the Delaware (1:54)
- 18 Hard Times at Valley Forge (3:07)
- 19 On to Glory (1:30)
- 20 Cavalry Manoeuvres (1:29)
- 21 Chopping the Tree and Winging to Heaven (2:41)

Five 2-Part Inventions (1926)

(publ. Elkan-Vogel)

- 22 With marked rhythm (1:05)
- 23 Freely (1:09)
- 24 Flowing (0:55)
- 25 Rhythmically (1:01)
- 26 Firmly (0:50)

Seventeen Portraits for piano (1982-1984)

(publ. G. Schirmer)

- 27 Molly Davies: Terminations (0:57)
- 28 Dennis Russell Davies: In a Hammock (1:07)
- 29 Rodney Lister: Music for a Merry-go-round (0:55)
- 30 Doña Flor: Receiving (1:01)
- 31 Dr. Marcel Roche: Making a Decision (1:26)
- 32 David Dubal: In Flight (1:04)
- 33 Peter McWilliams: Firmly Spontaneous (1:02)
- 34 Vassilis Voglis: On the March (1:16)
- 35 Power Boothe: With Pencil (1:08)
- 36 Mark Beard: Never Alone (0:51)
- 37 Louis Rispoli: In a Boat (0:58)
- 38 Malitte Matta: In the Executive Style (1:04)
- 39 Glynn Boyd Harte: Reaching (1:20)
- 40 Bennett Lerner: Senza Espressione (1:20)
- 41 Phillip Ramey: Thinking Hard (0:45)
- 42 Charles Fussell: In Meditation (1:18)
- 43 Brendan Lemon: A Study Piece for Piano (1:28)

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