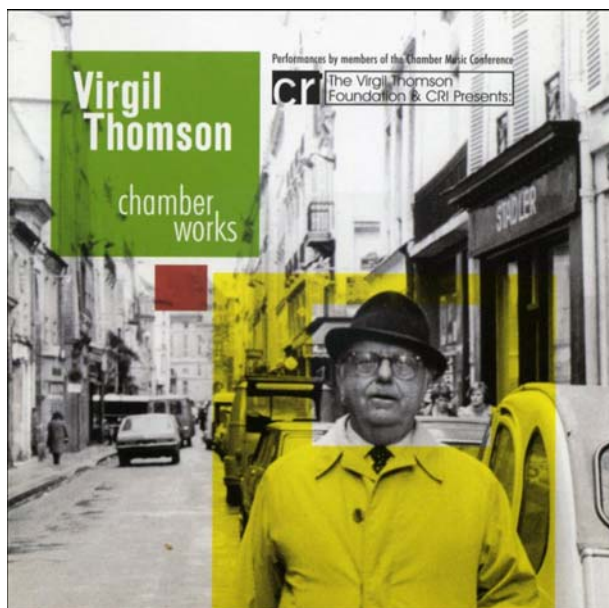


NWCR894

Virgil Thomson

Chamber Works



String Quartet No. 1 (1931—2nd Edition, revised by the composer 1957) (20:26)

1. Allegro Moderato (3:50)
2. Adagio (3:53)
3. Tempo di Walzer (3:15)
4. Lento, Presto (6:58)

Renée Jolles, violin; Shem Guibbory, violin;
Ronald D. Carbone, viola; Maxine Neuman, cello

5. *Feast of Love* (1964 – arr. Charles Fussell 1993). (9:03)
Text from the *Pervigilium Veneris*, anonymous
Latin stanzas of the 2nd or 4th century A.D.
Translated by Virgil Thomson; Mark Oswald,
baritone; Elizabeth Wright, piano
6. *Stabat Mater* for soprano and string
quartet (1931) (6:38)
Text by Max Jacob; Clare Gormley, soprano;
Shem Guibbory, violin; Renée Jolles, violin;
Ronald D. Carbone, viola; Maxine Neuman, cello

String Quartet No. 2 (1932—2nd Edition, revised by the composer 1957) (24:13)

7. Allegro Moderato (6:11)
8. Tempo di Valzer (3:42)
9. Adagio Sostenuto (5:24)
10. Allegretto (7:26)

Mayuki Fukuhara, violin; Eriko Sato, violin;
Masako Yanagita, viola; Michael Finckel, cello

Sonata da Chiesa (1926) (16:09)

11. Chorale (6:13)
12. Tango (3:47)
13. Fugue (5:09)

Veronica Salas, viola; Michael Dumouchel,
Eb clarinet; James Stubbs, trumpet; Joseph
Anderer, horn; Nathan Durham, trombone

Total playing time: 71:36

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Notes

“The way to write American music is simple. All you have to do is to be an American and then write any kind of music you wish. There is precedent and model here for all the kinds. And any Americanism worth bothering about is everybody’s property anyway.”

—*Virgil Thomson*, 1948

These lines—succinct, straightforward, plausible—are typical of **Virgil Thomson’s** music criticism, and his many compositions, written over the course of some sixty-five years, exemplify his credo. How delighted he would have been with this recording, which brings together several of the works he valued most highly—the two String Quartets; the spare, unprecedented *Stabat Mater*; the radical *Sonata da Chiesa*, which helped establish the young composer in French musical and literary circles, and *The Feast of Love*, a late setting of a classical text.

It rather exasperated Thomson that so much of his musical reputation rested on *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother Of Us All*, the two operas he wrote with Gertrude Stein. When the critic Andrew Porter published an appreciative review of a third opera in *The New Yorker* in January 1977, Thomson immediately fired off a letter: “As you may well imagine, your piece about *Lord Byron* was for

me more than merely gratifying. To be treated as a serious composer of operas, just imagine! And not as the operator of some shell game, or as an amateur who had once met Gertrude Stein in Paris...”

There was some reason for Thomson’s bitterness. As a composer engaged with the implications of consonance in an era when dissonance was deified, he was indeed sometimes dismissed as a reactionary or an amateur. Only late in life did he begin to receive his due, when a younger generation of critics, composers, and listeners recognized a spiritual and aesthetic precursor.

Perhaps the *New York Times’s* John Rockwell summed up his accomplishment most adroitly: “As a Missourian who attended Harvard, an American in Paris, a musician among critics and a critic among musicians, Thomson has really always been a little bit of an outsider. His music and his prose may have been artfully simple, but he avoided the primitivism of some American outsiders, and he used his outsider perspective to see more truly than most of us can. Above all, he never turned his back on any of his homelands. Indeed, in his music and in his prose, he has given us as profound a vision of American culture as anyone has yet achieved.”

Let us address these compositions in roughly the order in which they were composed. The *Sonata da Chiesa* (1926), scored for the unusual combination of viola, E-flat clarinet, D trumpet, horn, and trombone, was the last piece Thomson finished under the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger. It was first performed in Paris (along with works by Copland, Piston, and several other members of the “Boulangerie”) before an audience that included James Joyce, Albert Roussel, Ludwig Lewisohn, Walter Damrosch, and Roger Sessions.

Thomson himself reviewed this Sonata in a letter home to his Harvard friend Briggs Buchanan. The first movement, he wrote, “sounds like nothing else on earth”; the second movement “is the popular success.” “The fugue,” he concluded, “though most admired by the general listener, is in the author’s opinion, the least satisfactory. A more melodic and less symmetrical development of the first subject would have made a more living organization. Also the clarification of the harmony at more frequent intervals would give it a repose which it lacks.”

Overall, though, critic Thomson was well-satisfied with composer Thomson: “Leaving aside two ill-advised experiments, the instrumentation is unquestionably a knockout. The chorale is a genuine new idea, the other movements decently satisfactory...The public awaits (or ought to) with eagerness Mr. Thomson’s next work.”

Four years later, with both the *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* and *Four Saints In Three Acts* already behind him, Thomson delved more deeply into chamber music. Richard Jackson, in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, suggests that this was a deliberate effort to expand his instrumental facility—and there can be no doubt that Thomson was always fascinated by technical challenges, which he approached with the same keen interest he showed in detective novels. Between 1930 and 1932, Thomson composed a sonata for violin and piano (as well as three of his celebrated “portraits” for the same duo); a Serenade for flute and violin; his only two string quartets, and a *Stabat Mater* for soprano and string quartet. He would never again concentrate so intently on writing for strings.

The String Quartet No. 1 was finished in early 1931. It is in four movements—an opening “Allegro moderato,” an “Adagio,” a waltz movement and a final “Presto” preceded by a “Lento” introduction. At the time, Thomson described this work as “neo-romantic,” but it has little in common with the so-called “neoromanticism” that became fashionable in the last decades of the twentieth century. Rather, this was the composer’s effort to transcend the hymns and popular melodies that had inspired and informed so much of his earlier music and move in a more self-consciously “serious” direction.

Ned Rorem, who served as Thomson’s assistant in the late 1940s, has called the beautiful little *Stabat Mater* (1931) “a piece without guile or style [that] says as much in its five dear minutes as in all Thomson’s dozens of other songs.”

“By style I mean historic location,” Rorem continued. “The *Stabat*, with its lean and ambiguously modal counterpoint, nods simultaneously at ancient Greece, at pre-Bach Germany, and at late nineteenth-century France. By guile I mean tongue-in-cheek, the need to satirize. Surely the text dictates the sober tone. Max Jacob, born in 1876, was a cultivated

Jewish poet who turned to Christianity at thirty-three and, like many converts, became more Catholic than the Pope...His *Stabat Mater* is a fifteen-line exchange between an Angel, Saint John, Mary at the foot of the cross, and Jesus himself. At the close, when John asks, ‘And who, my lord, shall console me?’ Jesus answers, ‘I shall console thee with the Sacraments.’ Then, without words, the strings speak their two-measure heartbreaking coda.”

Thomson was especially proud of the String Quartet No. 2, which dates from 1932. John Cage, another one-time acolyte, has called this Thomson’s “total, if temporary, divorce from official modernism.” “Nothing in the entire work occurs out of context or in collage,” he continued. “All is well-knit. Thus, the greatest difficulty this work presents to the understanding is that it presents none.” (This sounds suspiciously like Cage describing his own aesthetic.) The String Quartet No. 2 is a limpid, generally peaceful work in four movements that prefigures minimalism in its stasis and deserves a much wider audience than it has so far received.

Rounding out the recording is *The Feast of Love*, Thomson’s setting of an anonymous second-century Latin poem in praise of Venus, the *Pervigilium Veneris*. This celebration of the all-night dancing and singing that accompanied such ancient praise was originally written for baritone and orchestra and received its premiere in 1964 in a performance by David Clatworthy and the National Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Walter Hendl. It is heard here in an arrangement by the composer Charles Fussell, yet another of the younger musicians to whom Thomson drew close in the last decades of his life.

Thomson maintained his wit, common sense and fierce independence until the end. During one of his last illnesses, fed up with the gentle solicitude of the hospital staff, he fixed his sharp gaze on the doctor and, in his distinctive, high voice, asked him bluntly whether or not he was going to die. “If I am, I have a lot of things to get done,” he insisted. The doctor reassured him, consolingly, but Thomson had no time for sentiment. “Well, if I’m not going to die,” he snapped, “then pass me my appointment book.”

In Thomson’s ninety-third summer, he went into a rapid and irreversible decline. There was one last item on his calendar, however. He had just completed a new book, *Music With Words*, and, as he put it, wanted to “stay around to read the notices.” And so some calls were made to find out when the book would be reviewed. As it happened, *Music With Words* was not even scheduled to be published for three or four more weeks and no newspaper would jump the publication date with a review. When told that he might have another month to wait, Thomson snorted in disgust. “Oh, forget it,” he said, and stopped eating. A few days later, around five in the morning, he flickered out.

His words and music survive him—and will endure.

—Tim Page

Tim Page won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1997 for his writing about music in the *Washington Post*. He is the author or editor of more than a dozen books, including *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, *The Glenn Gould Reader*, *William Kapell*, *Dawn Powell: a Biography* and *The Unknown Sigrid Undset*. A new collection of this criticism, *Tim Page On Music: Views and Reviews* will be published in 2002 by Amadeus Press.

The Feast of Love

Tomorrow all know love;
Love knows all tomorrow.

O, spring, singing spring!
Singing in spring, lovers love and all birds mate;
Under spring's warm rain Diana's woods unbind their hair.

Tomorrow shall all know love;
The unknowing shall know as well as the knowing.

She who loves coupling lovers has made them myrtle tents
And under bird-filled trees leads dance with song;
Tomorrow all shall love; Venus commands.

All shall love tomorrow,
All who have never loved.

In west wind's warmth, clusters blush and swelling buds burst
open;

Star-lit globes of heavenly moisture tremble, hesitate, explode;
By dawn the virgin vests are all undone.

As Venus tears their robes away
And purple flowers burst into flame,
The shameless rose, glowing like gems and fire,
From out its moistened sheath reveals her hidden splendor.

Holy Diana, Venus brings to thy wood
Maidens of no less modesty than thine;
Absent thyself tonight: shed no beast's blood.
She would invite thee, wert thou less chaste;
For three nights wouldst thou hear their festive sound,
As joyful companies traverse thy glades.
All night they dance to celebrate the spring
With braided garlands and with myrtle boughs,
With Ceres and with Bacchus, god of song,
Venus triumphs in Diana's wood.
Love is for all tomorrow;
Tomorrow the unknowing and the knowing know love.
Tomorrow remember the union primeval,
When fluid from Zeus shot through the foam
To beget among rearing sea horses

Stabat Mater

Ne pleurez pas, Madame.
Si votre fils est condamné.
Il ressuscitera par miracle après l'enterrement.

Comment ne pas pleurer un tel fils?

Ne pleurez pas si vous pouvez vous empêcher.

Laissez moi passer. Je veux aller près de lui.
Je veux mourir avec mon fils.

Vous mourrez à votre heure, Madame,
et vous ressuscitez pour l'Assumption.

Ne pleurez pas, ma mère, disait le fils unique.
Je sais ce que j'ai à faire.

Gardez mon sang. C'est un trésor.
On ne l'aura que par ma mort.

Quelle mère s'arrêterait de pleurer en perdant un fils
de trente ans?

Croyez en moi! ma mère.
Vous êtes Dieu sur terre.
Obéissez à votre père.
Je resterai sous le poteau à pleurer.

Consolez ma mère, Saint Jean.

Et qui me consolera, Seigneur?

Je vous consolerais avec les sacrements.

Dione* out of the sea.

Love shall find all tomorrow;

Tomorrow the unknowing as well as the knowing shall love.

And now from out of the clouds of spring,

Rains fill the lap of our mother-earth,

Then moves through sea and sky back to the land for feeding all.

Venus, who governs all on land or sea,

Has given each living thing a fecund seed,

Commanding all to love and to give birth.

Venus's voluptuous ways people the countryside,

When Love was born, a country boy.

There love doth multiply the herds;

Bulls rest with cows on yellow broom,

Ewes lie in the shade with rams,

And singing is neglected by no bird.

Where swans call raucously from pool to pool,

Ticus's daughter, by the polar sings,

As if her passionate sweet song

Were all of love, not of her sister's death.

She sings, not I; my voice is lost.

When shall the soaring swallow mount again?

O, glance at me, Apollo, lest I remain

Forever mine, a ruin on the plain!

Tomorrow all know love:

Love knows all tomorrow.

Spring, singing spring!

Singing in spring, lovers love and all birds mate;

Under spring's warm rain Diana's woods unbind their hair.

Tomorrow shall all know love;

The unknowing shall know as well as the knowing.

She who loves coupling lovers has made them myrtle tents

And under bird-filled trees leads dance with song;

Tomorrow all shall love; Venus commands.

All shall love tomorrow.

All who have never loved.

*Venus the earth-mother

—from the *Pervigilium Veneris*, anonymous Latin stanzas of the
second or fourth A.D. Translated by Virgil Thomson.

Weep not, Lady,

If your Son is condemned

He will miraculously come back to life after the burial!

How not to grieve for such a Son?

Do not weep if you can hold yourself back.

Clear the way! I want to be near Him

I want to die with my Son!

You will die in your own time, Lady.

And you will return to life for the Assumption

"Weep not, mother," the Only Son said.

"I know what I must do.

Save my blood. It is a treasure.

Only through my death can it be obtained."

What mother could stop weeping over the death
of a thirty year old Son?

"Have faith in me, Mother."

You are God on earth.

Obey your Father.

I will stay by the post, weeping.

"Console my mother, Saint John!

And who will console me, my Lord?

I will console you through the Sacraments.

—translation by *Edmée Schless*

When Charles Fussell of the Virgil Thomson Foundation approached me about producing an album of Virgil Thomson's chamber music, I thought "what a great opportunity to get to know his interesting music, and do something in return for the Thomson Foundation's long-term support of the Chamber Music Conference and Composers' Forum of the East." Charles suggested working with CRI, another longtime beneficiary of the Thomson Foundation's support—and so began a first step in a new relationship between the Conference, which has a fifty-seven year history of teaming up composers with performers professional and amateur, and CRI, which has a forty-eight year history of teaming up composers and performers with listeners!

The compositions that you hear on this CD not only represent what I believe to be some of the best chamber works Thomson composed, but together comprise, to the best of our knowledge, the most comprehensive presentation of his chamber music. We hope you enjoy many hours of listening pleasure.

—*Shem Guibbory*

Music director, the Chamber Music Conference and Composers' Forum of the East, Inc.

Joseph Anderer, horn, is a founding member of the Orchestra of St. Luke's and St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble and a member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. He is a former member of the Boehm Quintette. Anderer has recorded for Arabesque, MusicMasters, and St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble Records.

Ronald D. Carbone, viola, performs with the Composers String Quartet and the Orchestra of St. Luke's. He is an associate member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and associate principal of the American Ballet Theater Orchestra. Carbone has recorded for CRI, DGG, and Reference Records.

Michael Dumouchel, clarinet, performs with the Montreal Symphony, Musica Camerata Montreal, and the McGill Chamber Orchestra. He has recorded for Centredisc CBC, DGG, and London.

Nathan Durham, trombone, has performed with the Opera Orchestra of New York, American Ballet Theater Orchestra, Stamford Symphony, Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, and the Maria Schneider Big Band, as well as the *Showboat*, *Secret Garden*, and *Les Misérables* National Company Orchestras.

Michael Finckel, cello, performs with the Finckel Cello Quartet, Cabrini Quartet, Ensemble 21, and The Sextet Project. He is music director and principal conductor of the Sage City Symphony and a member of the faculties of Hoff-Barthelson Music School and Concordia College. He has recorded for CRI, DGG, Dorian, ECM-Warner Brothers, Opus One, and Vox-Candide.

Mayuki Fukuhara, violin, performs with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, Brandenburg Ensemble, and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. He has recorded for MusicMasters.

Clare Gormley, soprano, was the first Australian to become a member of the prestigious Metropolitan Opera Young Artist Development Program in 1992. Gormley has performed with the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, the Spoleto Festival, Connecticut Grand Opera, Opera Antica, San Diego Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, Royal Opera Covent Garden, Santa Fe Opera, Tulsa Opera, and Canadian Opera. Her debut

solo album *Where Morning Lies—Spiritual Songs* has just been released on the ABC Classics label.

Shem Guibbory, violin, has appeared as soloist with the New York Philharmonic, the Beethoven Halle Orchestra (Bonn), the Kansas City Symphony, and the Symphony of the New World. He is a member of the first violin section of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and music director of the Chamber Music Festival of the East. Guibbory has served as concertmaster with the San Francisco Ballet and many New York City freelance orchestras. He is a founding member of the Cordier Ensemble and original violinist for Steve Reich & Musicians and Episteme. In 2001 Guibbory was recipient of the ASCAP/CMA Award. He has recorded for ECM, Gramavision, Opus 1, and DG labels. Guibbory is a D'addario Artist.

Renée Jolles, violin, performs with Continuum, Andreas Trio, Jolles Duo, and New York Chamber Ensemble. She has appeared at the Bard, Marlboro, Rockport, Bowdoin, and Cape May Festivals, and has been a guest artist with the Da Capo Chamber Players and Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Jolles has appeared as soloist with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Salisbury Symphony, and the Philharmonic Orchestra of New Jersey. She is a member of the faculty of the Juilliard School Pre-College division.

Maxine Neuman, cello, performs with the Claremont Duo, Walden Trio, Breve, Vermont Cello Quartet, Crescent Quartet, St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble, and New York Virtuosi. She is a member of the faculty at the School for Strings (NYC) and a former faculty member of Bennington and Williams College. Neuman has recorded for Albany, Columbia, CRI, DGG, EMI, Leonarda, Musical Heritage, Nonesuch, Opus One, and Vanguard.

Mark Oswald, baritone, performs with the Metropolitan Opera and has sung leading roles internationally with Vienna Staatsoper, Hamburg Staatsoper, Teatro Municipal (Chile), Glimmerglass Opera, San Francisco Opera, Dallas Opera, Florida Grand Opera, San Diego Opera, New Japan Philharmonic, Washington Opera, and Opera Theatre of St. Louis. He has recorded for London Records, Philips, and RCA, and has recently recorded Britten's *Billy Budd* (singing title role) with Venice's Teatro La Fenice. In 2001, he performed and recorded the world premiere of Richard Danielpour's *An American Requiem* with the Pacific Symphony Orchestra.

Véronica Salas, viola, performs with the New Music Consort String Quartet, Rosewood Ensemble, and Salas Duo. She has been a soloist with the USC Symphony, Westchester Ensemble, and Aspen Orchestra. Salas is principal violist with the Opera Orchestra of New York and Colonial Symphony. She is a member of the faculty of C.W. Post College. Salas has recorded for Columbia, CRI, Musical Heritage, Nonesuch, and Vanguard.

Eriko Sato, violin, is concertmaster of the Orchestra of St. Luke's and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. She is a founding member of the Aspen Soloists and the Festival Chamber Music Society. Sato has performed at the Mostly Mozart, Bargemusic, Chamber Music Northwest, Aspen, Angel Fire, and Caramoor Festivals. She is a member of the faculty of Mannes College of Music Preparatory Division, Hoff-Barthelson Music School, and the Special Music School of America. Sato has recorded for Arabesque, Delos, DGG, Grenadilla, MusicMasters, Sony Classical, and Vanguard.

Jim Stubbs, trumpet, has been an associate member of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra since 1980 and music adjunct

at the College of New Jersey, Trenton, since 1991. He is principal trumpet with the American Ballet Theatre Orchestra of New York, the Opera Orchestra of New York, and the America Symphony Orchestra; acting principal trumpet with the Brooklyn Philharmonic; and co-principal trumpet of the American Composers Orchestra.

Elizabeth Wright, piano, performs with the McDowell Trio and is principal keyboard of the American Symphony. She has performed as soloist with the Paul Taylor and Martha Graham Dance Companies. Wright is a member of the faculty of Princeton University. She has recorded for BMG/RCA, CRI, Gasparo, and Opus One.

Masako Yanagita, viola, is concertmaster of the Queens Symphony and Springfield (MA) Symphony. She is a member of the faculty at Mannes College of Music. Yanagita is winner of the Carl Flesch (London), Paganini (Genoa) and Munich Competitions. Yanagita has recorded for GM and Town Hall.

The Chamber Music Conference and Composers' Forum of the East, Inc. (Shem Guibbory, music director) is dedicated to the development of the amateur and semi-professional musician as player and listener. The Conference was founded in 1945 by a group of chamber music enthusiasts, including the composer Otto Luening and music impresario Max Polikoff, a summer resident of the campus of Bennington College. August 2002 marks the Conference's fifty-seventh summer of music. For more information, please contact: The Chamber Music Conference P.O. Box 6, Leonia, NJ 07625-0006 or call 201.242.1277

The **Virgil Thomson Foundation** was created to further and promote the performance, preservation, dissemination, and public appreciation of serious music and the music and writings of Virgil Thomson. For more information go to www.virgilthomson.com

Production Notes

Executive producer: Shem Guibbory

Producer and recording engineer: Da-Hong Seetoo

CRI Executive director: John G. Schultz

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Publishing:

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