

## **Virgil Thomson**

*SONATA DA CHIESA* (CHURCH SONATA, 1926)

LILLIAN FUCHS VIOLA, PETER Simenauer CLARINET,  
Fred Mills TRUMPET, Paul Ingraham FRENCH HORN, Edward Edwin TROMBONE  
VIRGIL THOMSON, CONDUCTOR (Town Hall performance, New York City, December  
18, 1961)

PRAISES AND PRAYERS (1963)

BETTY ALLEN MEZZO-SOPRANO, VIRGIL THOMSON PIANO  
(Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium World Premiere, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
City, October 24, 1963)

SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO (1930)

JOSEPH FUCHS VIOLIN, ARTHUR BALSAM PIANO  
(Town Hall performance, New York City, December 18, 1961)

One of the more penetrating remarks about Virgil Thomson's music was made by a writer, the composer's friend Gertrude Stein. "It's not at all banal," Miss Stein affirmed. "He frosts his music with a thin layer of banal sounds to put people off, but what's underneath is very pure and special."

Offhand, there might seem to be more effective ways than that of putting people off: the use of an abstruse or involved style, for example. But in practice this does not always follow. Unusual complexity can become a standard rhetorical device like any other, and the purpose of rhetoric is to lower sales resistance.

The artist who defies easy popularity by assuming a mask of simplicity is another matter. His pride of craft — and of character — is such that he deliberately invites sales resistance with unrelieved clarity, a thing that oddly enough often confuses listeners. In modern music, Erik Satie is the prototype of this kind of heroically fastidious artist. And to the Virgil Thompson of the twenties, a young composer in search of a hero, Satie's music was a revelation. Satie is today, at least in America, the composer to whom Thomson is oftenest compared, and there is a special sweetness about Gertrude Stein's accolades because it recalls the Paris prelude to a distinguished career: the problematic days when an untried American faced his music paper, made his choices, and tackled his duty with honor.

I doubt that Thomson has ever written a phrase that could be called boorish. He uses the commonplaces of musical language, even vulgarisms, but he handles them as abstractly as a cubist painter does a simplified image. His music never collars you to confide, commiserate, preach, or confess. He keeps his distance in a way that a less gifted and less principled artist wouldn't dare to do. Like a supremely self-confident host, Thomson will put himself out no end to amuse, to startle, or to shock. And having put you off your guard with an ironic gesture of witticism, he will sometimes reach your sensibilities with an unexpected, unsentimental reference to sentiment that can touch you to tears. All this bespeaks a lifelong preoccupation with ethical values and with style, and in this album the listener can hear the effect of that for himself in a violin sonata dated 1930 and a song cycle written thirty-three years later.

What the fastidious artist gambles on of course is the growth of connoisseurship. The risks in this gamble are obvious, since new arts customers always have trouble evaluating work that lacks elaboration. Time is probably on the side of the Thomson kind of artists: even in the handsomest kind of three-ring elaboration, the multiplication of elephants soon ceases to surprise. But the immediate advantage is with the circus-givers. Anybody can predict the *kind* of fun you will have at a circus but nobody can tell what a piece by Thomson or Satie will be like until he tries it.

As will be noted in this program, the unity of Thomson's work is derived from his ear and his taste, not from the expressive rhetoric and formal syntax of the past century. In rejecting the successful post-Romantic musical forms, Thomson has actually carried much further than most of his contemporaries the construction of tonal works unprejudiced by market research. Consequently each piece of Thomson's is one of a kind. It demands from the listener an attitude of let's-see-how-*this-one-works*. Yet the listener need not bring too much in the way of historical preparation. Thomson's pieces are calculated to engage his interest without it.

Being atypical in any period, such music does not win all of its battles easily or soon. Thomson's music was beguiling and disconcerting thoughtful listeners a quarter of a century ago and some of it still is. From the beginning, moreover, its refractory stylistic paradoxes have perplexed the music classifiers. How do you, for example, classify an inveterate culture straddler? It happens that Thomson — who was recently profiled by Harold C. Schonberg in *HiFi/Stereo Review* as a "Parisian from Missouri"— is a virtuoso at this not very popular activity. It is the function of today's international art styles to eradicate any really important national differences. It is exactly the function of an elective *dual* nationality like Thomson's to preserve these differences and to exploit them, and this reads him nicely out of the new, Europe-dominated internationalism. It also leaves some of the home folks asking questions. Is the real Virgil Thomson American or French? Is he just a clever and sure footed talent, somewhat like *Les Six* — or is he, under all his Parisian graces, a cidery, homespun, honest-to-God genius like Charles Ives?

He is in no way easy to pin down. You can't even rightly say, in the ordinary sense, that Thomson is out of fashion. For almost forty years he has worked at being out of it. He has operated outside of the going movements and the prevailing power groups — sociologist David Reisman would certainly identify him as a "inner-directed" of "loner" type — and though he has moved through four decades as a respected contemporary, it has always been on his own intellectual terms. After properly scandalizing audiences with the dissonant *Sonata da chiesa*" (1926), Thomson turned his back on that idiom. By 1928 he was scandalizing not audiences but composers with the outrageous simplicity of his diatonic do-mi-sol style in America's most-discussed opera, *Four Saints in Three Acts*. In 1930 he threw the stylistic switch again in a group of chamber works — among them the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* — in which he investigated the expressive possibilities of an almost equally economical but chromatic do-mi-sol style. Subsequently, after successful invading ballet, Broadway, and the documentary film, this most worldly of American composers turned to a series of Masses and related works on devotional and mystical texts, all of the most moving gravity and austerity. Today, quizzically unimpressed by those electronic Tom Swifts who are ingeniously fragmenting the human voice for outer-spaciousness, Thomson obstinately goes on setting magnificent devotional poetry as something to be *sung as language*. I refer to his *Praises and Prayers* (1963), a song cycle that displays a mastery of prosody so subtle, so sure, and so illuminating textually that one feels one is hearing these famous poems, what they are and what they are *about*, for the first time.

Still another problem for many is the dismayingly cheerful eclecticism of Thomson's musical vocabulary. It is evident enough of Thomson's musical tap roots are Christian, and this almost wholly in its West European aspect, barring a North African melisma or two. The American in

Thomson is Protestant by way of Calvary Baptist Church in Kansas City and King's Chapel in Boston. The harmonic system of this composer exploits the thirds and triads and in general the moral foursquareness of Reformation choral writing.

But Thomson's musical Protestantism was early exposed to Paris and particularly to that city's Seventh Arrondissement, the lovely, immemorably Catholic, and sometimes aristocratic, sometimes sinister quarter where the composer for many years has made his home in France. This area between the Boulevard St. Germain and the Seine is today chiefly famous for such historic cafes — Thomson as a young composer made some of the history — as Lipp's and the Deux Magots. Near by, anciently, was the haunt of alchemists, astrologers, not a few defrocked priest, and black magicians. Celebration of the Black Mass was not unknown to it (see notes below). I am not suggesting any discreditable connection, but it was in this history-burdened region that Thomson pursued the use (along side his Puritan hymn-tune inheritance of thirds and triads) of the medieval fourths and fifths and all the tonally equivocal modal practices of the Gregorian intervallic system.

Much has been written about the simple surfaces of Thomson's music, next to nothing about its intricacies, its depths and darkness. Yet so lucid an analyst as John Cage (in Hoover-Cage biography of Thomson) claims to have met the Devil himself in Thomson's music, particularly in the broodingly tortuous Tango of the *Sonata de chiesa*. Cage does not make it entirely clear whether he thinks the Devil is theologically as well as musically present in this church sonata, but I am inclined to think he is. Thomson is too good a medievalist not to know that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as a matter of historical report, the Devil returned in great power to French ecclesiastical precincts and took an unsettling hand in church music. Many church pieces of this period — consult Philippe de Vitry, Guillaume de Machaut, the interpolations in the *Roman de Fauvel* — display a familiar Thomsonian stylistic anomaly: thirds and full triads sounding, often quite licentiously, among the then orthodox fourths and fifths.

On the other hand ... I possess one of those biographical sheets, written by Thomson, of the kind that celebrities are always being asked to prepare for public relations use. I would like to quote from it here for its reassuring, non-medieval tone: "I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, grew up there and went to war from there. That was the other war. Then I was educated some more in Boston and Paris. In composition I was chiefly the pupil of Nadia Boulanger. While I was still young I taught music at Harvard and played the organ at King's Chapel, Boston. Then I returned to Paris and lived there for many years, until the Germans came, in fact. From 1940 to 1954 I was music critic of the New York Herald Tribune. I still live in New York.

"My most famous works are ..." And there follows a concise list of Thomson's music, books, and conductorial activities.

I love all of that, especially the last phrase quoted. It gives some of the laconic flavor of the American who wrote it, the unvarnished forthrightness and candor he shares with two other Missourians, Mark Twain and Harry S. Truman.

ROBERT OFFERGELD  
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### SONATA DA CHIESA (1926).

Thomson himself simply calls this sonata his “bang-up graduation piece in the dissonant neo-baroque style of the period” (it was the last work he submitted to his teacher, Nadia Boulanger). But Cage finds the piece “altogether extraordinary.” He says that the unstated program of the Chorale is a Negro church service Thomson had attended in Kansas City, and the device of the melismatic solo statement and group response suggest this. I have heard the composer tell with great amusement of those early critics who gave a different interpretation than Cage, who had suggested a Black Mass, to the lurching rhythms and generally dissolute character of the second movement: the labeled it the “drunken tango.” The amazing final movement is called by Cage “a fugue to end fugues.” That it is, being a perfect whopper of a double one (with the secondary fugue based on the profane Tango theme), and the peroration adds to everything else that is going on the majestic chorale tune stated in canon. The richly vivid coloration of the piece is due to the fact that Thomson had set himself the problem of writing for five disparate instruments: E flat clarinet, D trumpet, viola, F horn and trombone. His idea was that only a master could blend them successfully, and the work undeniably establishes his point.

### SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO (1930).

Thomson composed this piece partly at Villefranche-sur-mer and partly at Calamayor in Mallorca. He says that the texture, which is largely an interwoven three-part counterpoint, “represents an attempt to seduce the players into making instrumental balance.” But the main attraction for the listener in this work is its evocative but beautifully controlled Romanticism — or neo-Romanticism, to use a term of the period. It is exactly contemporary with the with the neo-Romantic painting of the Christian Bérard, Eugene Berman, and Pavel Tchelitcheff, with whose work Thomson felt great sympathy. There is no vestige left of nineteenth-century sonata form but there is a great deal of nineteenth-century sentiment reevaluated: after paying his respects to the *andante nobile* style in the grave and lovely second movement, Thomson swings into a grand concert waltz (which is much bigger in retrospect than its actual brevity can account for). The piece displays Thomson’s characteristic form — a forward moving continuity without thematic repetition — and it abounds in example of his ability to produce powerful effects with the slenderest means. Some of its measures are as much a love letter as any by Robert Schumann. It is also a sure-fire concert piece without a single embarrassing concession to the platform clichés, and I can’t imagine why it hasn’t been played to death.

### PRAISES AND PRAYERS (1963)

Thomson composed this song cycle on commission for mezzo-soprano Betty Allen, for whom he also composed his 1960 *Mass for Solo Voice*. Miss Allen sang the role of St. Theresa II in the 1952 New York revival of *Four Saints in the Three Acts*. Remarking that Miss Allen and he have often worked together, Thomson says, “This time I proposed love poetry by D.H. Lawrence but she said she preferred my religious vein. So I chose five very old and famous sacred texts, running from St. Augustine and St. Francis to the seventeenth-century Richard Crashaw and set them for the sound of her voice.

“This does not mean that I have used her full vocal powers, which are of operatic magnitude. On the contrary, I have mainly kept these songs in the middle of the range, where lie in every voice clear speech and flowing melody. Within the classical lieder compass of an octave and a half I have sought for variety of expression, for delicacy of detail as well as broad lines, and in the longer one for architectural proportion.”

Notable also is the spare, mid-range piano accompaniment, which often suggests the organ without imitating it. But my *My Master Hath a Garden*, which is music *about* music, the piano sketches exquisitely, with simple scale segments and one brief trill, the sounds of the harp, the dulcimer, the lute, and other instruments mentioned in the text. And the pervasive use of fourths and fifths and other medieval devices in a totally successful contemporary texture marks the cycle indelibly with Thomson’s signature.

R.O.

*(Original liner notes from CRI LP jacket)*