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Notes & Comments December 1989

Virgil Thomson (1896-1989)

With the death in October of Virgil Thomson at the age of ninety-two, the necrology of the first generation of American modernist composers is almost complete. Of this first generation, active in the 1920s, only Aaron Copland, born in 1900, remains as a living reminder that once upon a time an exciting future for a serious American music seemed to be waiting only for its discovery. As a composer Virgil Thomson will be remembered for at least two of his operas, *Four Stunts in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947). Both works are settings of texts by Gertrude Stein, and both are full of her quirky, canny, and witty presence; the earlier opera arose out of Thomson's friendship with Stein during his early expatriate years in Paris after World War I, and the later work served as his memorial to her. *Four Saints* was immediately, and correctly, perceived as an icon of Franco-American modernism. By contrast, *The Mother of Us All* represented a kind of assimilation of Stein to the homespun middle-American world of Susan B. Anthony, temperance, and suffragism.

It was Thomson's achievement as a composer to draw his musical style equally from the Protestant hymn tunes of his childhood and from the refined simplicities of post-Romantic French music, especially that of the sophisticatedly childish Erik Satie; it was Thomson's genius to make out of this unlikely combination an unforgettable amalgam, instantly recognizable as his own. He wrote one opera of interest in the 1960s: *Lord Byron* was a treatment—by turns quaintly old-fashioned and touchingly serious—of the poet's adventures on his short road from genius to death. The two Stein operas had been well and even rapturously received by a sophisticated public, but *Lord Byron* has suffered the fate endemic to serious American operas: inadequate productions, carping press, and oblivion.

Thomson was also a formidable writer of English, or, more accurately, American prose. Blessed with a straightforward, sprightly, and piquant style, during his years on the New York Herald Tribune from 1940 to 1954 he earned an enduring reputation as the best music critic, along with James Gibbons Huneker, America has yet produced. He was energetic, interesting, accurate, and opinionated. He was a great backer of American composers and performers, and he influenced the introduction into the American concert repertory of a large amount of French music, along with a lessening of our total concentration on the Germanic masterpieces. A great deal of his criticism was collected in book form, and much of it remains available to this day. He published his

sassy but essential memoirs in 1966, and a collection of his letters appeared just last year. By all accounts Virgil Thomson was a happy man, and his talent and his success supported that happiness well. Though the fact of his death was sad, that of his life was not, and under ordinary circumstances we might thus be able to take comfort that in Thomson's case at least, talent, intelligence, and tenacity were rewarded. But today in American music we do not live under ordinary circumstances. It can be simply put: Thomson's life may well have been a happy one, and in that we rejoice; but we cannot rejoice in the present state of American music.

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The sad fact is that classical music composition in America today is an orphan, living in the history books in a way it does not live in concert halls and opera houses. We have our golden age of symphonic composition from the 1920s through the 1940s, the age of Copland, Howard Hanson, Walter Piston, Roy Harris, Samuel Barber, and the still active William Schuman and David Diamond, as well as a few others; in opera we have Thomson's two Stein works, and perhaps *Lord Byron*. But the quickest glance at concert programs across the country shows that, save for conductors Gerard Schwarz and Leonard Slatkin, this great achievement has few present-day champions. In the field of opera, it is notorious that none of Thomson's works has yet received the vastly deserved honor of a performance in a great opera house. It is good news that *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1953-56), a remarkable setting of the Pirandello play by Hugo Weisgall (b. 1912) and a major milestone in the history of American opera, will be performed (in a small house) next June by the Chicago Lyric Opera—but this will only be *Six Characters's* second production, and it will take place more than thirty years after the first.

We honor Virgil Thomson's life, as well we should; but distinguished composers are, after all, not about lives but about music. It is no honor to them, and no service to the present, that we continue, as we have for so many years now, to ignore their music.

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