

# *Virgil Thomson - Vignettes of His Life and Times*

by Paul Wittke

## I. The Beginnings

### Kansas City

Everything may have been up-to-date in Kansas City, Kansas, as Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote, but everything *happened* in Kansas City, Missouri, where Virgil Thomson, its most inimitable citizen, was born on 25 November 1896. He set the record straight in the first sentences of his spic and span autobiography (1966): "To anyone brought up there, as I was, 'Kansas City' always meant the Missouri one.... You did not speak of Kansas City, Kansas, often...or go there unless you had business." The truculence of these sentences was his benchmark to his dying day.

Thomson's great romance with Missouri needs no apology. The state has never been a cultural desert; its historical and sociological history is of great importance in our political life. The journalist Horace Greeley, the editor William Allen White, the painter Thomas Hart Benton, and Harry Truman are among its glories. In fact, the entire Midwest is a bedrock of our cultural history whose native sons and daughters include T. S. Eliot, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, Cole Porter, and Marianne Moore.

Thomson was a prodigy: intellectually, verbally, musically, and literarily, and he voraciously apprehended the world around him. He must have been a difficult child to handle and was surely an oddball to his many friends. They admired him but were aware of the need to protect themselves from his boundless energy and perceptive ability to ferret out fuzzy conclusions and illogical thinking.

The Thomsons were genteel folk, solid, sturdy stuff; not rigid, a wisely tolerant middle-class family. Virgil Thomson's sympathetic Scottish father was tone deaf; his English-Welsh mother musical, forthright, and practical; his beloved sister artistic, gifted in painting. This warm, close-knit family gave their spoiled child pretty much a free hand to explore all the allurements, the prim and the rowdy, of a thriving river town.

By the 1890s, Kansas City, Missouri, was a commercial and artistic rival of Chicago. Virgil Thomson observed and absorbed the exciting frontier sportsmanship, often not so polite derring-do, of a mobile, burgeoning self-confident city. This image of Kansas City never left him and was a dominant factor in his personality. The music he heard was part and parcel of the wide-open world around him -- Civil War songs, cowboy songs, the blues, barn-dance music, Baptist hymns, folk songs, sentimental popular songs, as well as the canons of Western art music that he studied. They were indelibly embedded in him, and he undertook to reconstruct this atmosphere.

At five he played the piano, at 12 he was a paid organist at the Calvary Baptist Church and astounded the congregation with his outlandish improvisations.

Two facts that foreshadow the Thomson-to-be should be mentioned. His mother encouraged him to host Sunday evening gatherings at home where he and his bright friends, young and old, dissected intellectual and artistic subjects for hours on end. Had Virgil Thomson heard of the immense power of the intellectual salons of Europe and America, and what they contributed to world culture? Did he have

a sixth sense that someday he would be a contributing member and jovial host to endless high-powered gatherings of contemporary artists?

By his teens he was addicted to reading on all subjects that interested him, a vice he never outgrew. After high school he became the star pupil of the first class of the newly established Kansas City Polytechnic Institute and Junior College, founding and commanding an elite literary group. It printed a magazine that, arrogantly immature as it must have been, was based on the same concept of the now-famous American and European "little magazines" of that period -- *Transition*, *Criterion*, the *Little Review*, *Broom*, etc. Virgil Thomson's band of little warriors also deemed it their mission to foster and promulgate the avant-garde for the benefit of humankind. They of course had no James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, or Hemingway on their rostrum. Virgil Thomson's provincial little magazine was only a student periodical of prewar America, but it was searching for the same kind of literary material that sophisticated people in the outer world, far from Kansas City, were looking for and publishing and of whose existence Thomson was probably unaware.

Virgil Thomson's instincts were right. By now he was aware of the multiplicity of his interests and it posed a dilemma for him. With two equally full-blown talents should he be a writer or a musician? He may have been an unconventional dreamer, lost in the world of his own ambitions, but these talents were real and he devoted his long life to them. He lived to be 92 and never grew up -- but he was always true to the boy born and raised in Kansas City, *Missouri*.

In 1917 Thomson joined the army, not entirely for patriotic reasons. His excessive energy needed an active outlet and he wanted to enlarge his horizons. Stationed in New York City, he savored its cultural and social life. He was a meticulous dresser, with Beau Brummel tendencies, always neat, shiny, and affable. He made many social contacts, a profession at which he was naturally adept, but found the homes of the rich not to his liking -- a prejudice he was soon to outgrow -- preferring to visit the Anglican and Catholic Churches where he was stimulated by their music, particularly the Gregorian chant.

Thomson was never, no matter what the circumstances, a procrastinating pleasure seeker of mindless entertainments. A perennial autodidact, he sought out only persons and interests that contributed all that was best and amusing that life had to offer. Typically, he applied himself to the rigors of military life with intelligence, efficiency, and enthusiasm. He appeared to be one of the boys, but in his heart he knew he was a few steps ahead and several feet above.

At the end of the war he was a second lieutenant in the United States Military Aviation Corps. The arrogant school boy who returned home was in no way chastened but more sure of himself than ever. He knew what he wanted to do -- make a career in music -- and was fidgeting to tackle anything the future had to offer. He had tasted big-time life, fallen in love with New York, and was beginning to learn how to function in a sophisticated, competitive environment.

But his parents were in no position to help him; they could not afford to send him to college. However, the ever resourceful young man found a way.

## **Harvard**

Thomson enrolled as a student in Harvard in 1919 financed by the Mormon Church; his friendship with Alice Smith, great-granddaughter of the church's founder, smoothed the way for him to attain a

scholarship. There he was fortunate to find two instructors that molded his thinking and gave him a glimpse of the world beyond Cambridge. His counterpoint teacher, Archibald Davison, was the conductor of the Harvard Glee Club and Thomson became its accompanist. Davison's enlightened ideas of choral music and vast knowledge of 15th- and 16th-century church music had a lasting effect on Thomson's musical style, sacred (*Missa Brevis*) and secular (the operas and the *Edward Lear* cantata).

Edward Burlingame Hill explicated the history of music in a broad philosophical way; his fresh ideas had nothing in common with the embalmed, fusty opinions of his academic brethren of the time. The freedom to investigate and amalgamate strands of disparate esthetic musicological thinking became a distinctive trait of Thomson's own critical writings.

The William Blake scholar, S. Foster Damon, introduced Thomson to the two dominant figures of his creative life, Gertrude Stein and Erik Satie. Years before they met Thomson was intrigued by Stein and challenged by her "Tender Buttons," still considered an arcane book. He sensed there was logic behind her puzzling arrangement of words and grammatical incoherencies. The simplicity and Puckish wit of Satie's music and his thumbing his nose at classical formulas aroused Thomson's natural tendencies toward irreverence.

### **Glimpse of Paris**

In the summer of 1921, at the invitation of the French government, Davison and the Harvard Glee Club embarked on a European tour. Thomson, who had just been awarded a John Knowles Paine Teaching Fellowship for a year's musical study in Paris, was the accompanist. The vivacity of the group's performance so impressed Satie, Poulenc, and Milhaud that they offered to write music for them. Before their first concert in Vienna, Davison became ill and Thomson at the last moment had to conduct in his place. He was a smashing success, never at a loss of self-confidence, and was not at all surprised to discover that he was perfectly at ease on the podium, and casually added conducting to his panel of achievements.

When they returned to Paris, Thomson was on his own. Any trepidation he may have felt was soon under control, and, like Aaron Copland, he became a pupil of Nadia Boulanger, but Thomson never completely fell under her spell as did Elliott Carter, Roy Harris, and many others who followed later. (Thomson named the American acolytes "the Boulangerie.") His reservations about her teaching methods did not apply to her attitude toward composition which she believed should be as unaffected and easy as writing a letter. She also extolled the clarity of the French classicists Rameau and Couperin, whose music rhetoric helped shape his own. This was the time when Boulanger's friend Igor Stravinsky was the avatar of Neoclassicism -- precision, directness, and wit were the order of the day. Thomson possessed all three.

Before long he was intimate with the intellectual world of Cocteau, Milhaud, and Honneger, and found that in many ways Paris reminded him of Missouri. Both cities were overflowing with energy, open to the new and exciting, but their differences were minimal -- Kansas City, young, raw and provincial; Paris the exact opposite. Thomson was growing up: 1921 was his year of enlightenment.

### **Return to America**

When Thomson returned to Boston, Harvard would not grant him another scholarship until he had earned his musical degree, but they softened the blow by appointing him assistant professor under Hill

and Davison and making him organist at historic King's Chapel where (like Charles Ives) he astounded his listeners with strenuous and discordant improvisations. At the same time he seriously continued his studies and amused and confounded his friends with his nonstop flow of nimble wit when they met to heatedly discuss the state of the arts and the affairs of the world at the exclusively highbrow Liberal Club.

After graduating in 1923, a Juilliard Fellowship enabled him to spend a year in New York, where he studied counterpoint with Rosario Scalero, the martinet teacher of Barber and Menotti. This gave him a proficiency he always used with ease in his later compositions, particularly the *Portraits*. He was glad to return to Boston, for in spite of its glamour and multitudinous offerings, he found New York, compared to Paris, commercial, strident, cold, and inhospitable to the arts.

Boston, too, was sterile and boringly decorous; he itched to move on to where the excitement was. But his finances were shaky, even though his income was nourished by checks from the periodicals he had begun to write for. In 1924, his career as a professional writer was initiated by H. L. Mencken, the caustic editor of the prestigious *American Mercury*. Mencken suggested that Thomson should write an article on jazz; it was the first serious discussion of the subject to appear in print. From then on he wrote pieces for *Vanity Fair* and other fashionable, quality magazines of the 1920s.

Before this he had been an occasional critic for the *Boston Transcript* and during the 1921 tour was its Paris correspondent, sending home news of French cultural life. Eventually he saved enough money to fulfill his dream to live, breathe, and work in Paris. He said, "I prefer to starve where the food is good."

But the most profound event of the Harvard years was his meeting Maurice Grosser and the beginning of their lifelong close companionship. Only Grosser had the intelligence, wit, and stamina to keep up with Thomson, and the patience to understand his often bizarre behavior.

### **Erik Satie/Gertrude Stein**

The talents of Thomson, were, by his own admission, brought to maturity by Erik Satie and Gertrude Stein. They brought to the surface ideas, feelings and reactions that had been planted in Kansas City, for in the theater of his mind, this was where most of his inner and artistic life was enacted.

Thomson's chemistry rejected the Teutonic mechanics of musical composition; the soul-searching symphonies of Bruckner and Mahler were alien to him. Satie and Stein were a breath of fresh air: modern, optimistic, enthusiastic craftsmen seriously dedicated to their art, but living in the here and now. They were not dwellers in some exclusive empyrean or members of the pleasure seeking, drinking, nihilistic crowd of the "crazy 20s" like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, the sort Thomson detested.

To the shy Erik Satie music was functional; it was found everywhere in the street, the cafe, the circus, the cabaret, all around him, not in the shibboleths of tradition. This appealed to Thomson whose fundamental belief was that music should be "as simple as a friendly conversation," not some abstruse statement composed in an emotional pressure cooker. (He modified this quite a bit later.) He learned from Satie that music's structure and form needed no arabesque scaffolding, no preconceived recipes. A composer should discover his own form as he proceeds to put the sounds he hears in his head on paper; he should be flexible, imaginative, unself-conscious, say what he has to say simply and know when to stop. This advice Thomson took to heart, and being, like Satie, a bit off the wall in his humor and a total stranger to any authority, he soon found a way to make this philosophy his own. But Thomson was no

carbon copy of Satie -- his style and personality were American to the core; his music sounds nothing like his Gallic mentor. Still Thomson would never have acquired his own original stamp without Satie.

It was his acquaintance with Satie's *Socrate* that overwhelmed Thomson and changed him forever. Its seemingly monochromatic surface and its sparseness were misleading. An intense drama was going on under and over the calm placidity of its few notes. Sounds and silences were woven into the text like a closely woven tapestry. *Socrate* was truly the 1920s, ahistorical, iconoclastic, like all that was happening in painting and literature, particularly with Stein and Picasso.

Thomson resented that he was often considered a clone of Gertrude Stein, but it must be admitted that a close reading of his words and music does suggest signs of an incestuous relationship -- he *was* partially intimidated by the Earth Goddess. Stein and Thomson hit it off he said "like two Harvard men" (a variant of Hemingway's "two brothers"). Both were intuitive artists -- although Stein denied her writings were in any way automatic (most critics say they are) -- who could simultaneously live inside and outside themselves. Stein's detached language and Thomson's explicative music are two sides of the same coin. Their dedicated seriousness does not disguise their unbounded, spontaneous humor. They were very funny people; their quips an expression of an unquenchable comic sense.

Stein and Thomson were advocates of immediate gratification whose bland innocence, a grand joke in itself, was a self-conscious adaptation. This is perhaps more true of Thomson for he was not in the long run the formidable force in music she was in literature (and was too smart not to know it). He was always fully aware of what he was doing and why; there was a basic honesty in his craftsmanship. It must have given him an added pleasure to know that his listeners (or readers) enjoyed his blandishments.

Stein restored words and their sounds to a primal purity before they grew up and became encrusted with meaning. Her words, stripped of what we expect them to mean, stand naked on the page, each one a "thing" having a reality and sound of its own. Her words are analogous to Satie's and Thomson's music. The semantic sense of her words is subordinated to achieve only a *functional* effect -- color, sound, rhythm -- a technique she derived from the cubistic paintings that adorned the walls of Stein's studio in the rue de Fleurus.

Thomson applied a similar technique to his music, liberating notes from their usual moorings in their musical environment and syntax. In the Stein operas this works like an algebraic equation, one side (notes) equals the other (words).

But the aural experience of music is more complicated. Its simplest gesture has a complex and psychological meaning; it is a moving entity and the listener cannot stop its flow (as we can reread a book or look again at a painting to study its properties). Furthermore we have to have some semblance of a musical education to understand (read) a page of music. The composer's responsibility is different than a writer's and to understand Thomson's simplicity we are confronted with a problem. His use of well-known folk tunes and unadorned triadic tonality were the equivalent of Stein's literary dislocations. Listeners must not only adapt to rapid juxtapositions of mood, rhythm, harmony, and styles but they must react in a new way to music already familiar in an entirely different context. It is the strength and weakness of Thomson's music that we must know what the composer is up to and what he means by it. If we respond favorably it is delightful, if not, it has no meaning. Thomson assumes his audience is educated; the naiveté of his music is, on the contrary, sophisticated.

When Stein and Thomson wrote together as a unit, the music was exactly right and appropriate; without her text it is a different story: the music then (in the way that music is considered abstract) has to fend for itself.

Well aware of the differences of literature and music, Thomson, being a writer as well, saw their similarities. Both Stein and Thomson were involved in deconstructing their language, as, in his quiet way, was Satie. Working so closely with Stein, Thomson found his own way of solving musical problems. He made the listener a partner through his arsenal of extraneous references in the creation of the work. This is a novel idea, calling for a new process of listening and reading. (Stein did the same thing in her writing.) The ringmasters at the center of it all were Stein/Thomson, the roles they assumed in their everyday life. (This is a not a negative comment. It is Stein's and Thomson's greatest contribution to modern culture.)

Another important factor is the impact of painting on Thomson's development. He had a passion for it and was involved in it, even in his Missouri days. His sister had a talent for painting chinaware and he had an almost professional knowledge of all branches of pictorial arts. In Paris he was on intimate terms with many great painters -- Jean Arp, Christian Berard, Marcel Duchamp, Picasso, and of course, Maurice Grosser. This had an enormous affect on his style and thinking.

### **Interlude**

This monograph is not a chronicle of Thomson's life; it focuses only on his *developing* years and the people and events salient to his evolution as a composer and writer. It is impossible, without writing an exhaustive biography, to discuss his life in a sequential manner. His life in America, only touched upon here, did not have the color of the Paris of the 1920s. The "character" Virgil Thomson became is more predominant, particularly in his later years. The following pages are designed as "snapshots" to give only a partial sense and flavor of the man and his times.

### **Paris**

When Thomson returned to Paris in 1925, the city was in the midst of a revolution. The Western World since the end of the 19th century was undergoing an intellectual and creative renaissance, new ideas in every branch of human endeavor were skyrocketing. The avant-garde was actively responding to the social, political, and artistic stagnation it had inherited. Other cities -- New York, Vienna, London, Berlin - were just as frenetic and exciting. But Paris was cheap, tolerated all varieties of experimentation, both artistic and sexual, anonymity was taken for granted, there was not the pressure of aggressive competition of American life.

Thomson was not the only American who migrated to Paris, as any of the infinite books on the subject attest, but the city resonated a deep chord in him; he was endowed with a Parisian soul. All his life he remained a Parisian man of the 20s. He was a shrewd Mark Twain character, bedazzled by the illuminati of the Parisian carnival, although it did not take him long to be accepted and feel at home in it. Never a major player on the world stage -- not a Picasso, Stravinsky, Stein, or Joyce -- he was nevertheless more than a transient bit player.

### **Bernard Fay**

A key figure in Thomson's access to acceptance of him by the Parisian intelligentsia was Bernard Fay. He was a friend of H. P. Parker, theater and music critic of the *Boston Transcript* for whom the fledgling Thomson wrote critical articles. Fay, a French historian who had studied at Harvard, was instrumental in his government's invitation of the Glee Club to perform in Paris. Parker gave Thomson a letter of introduction to Fay, who knew everybody worth knowing in the social and intellectual world, and who opened the door to Thomson meeting Milhaud, Poulenc, Auric, Hemingway, Cocteau, and Satie. Also as foreign correspondent for the *Boston Transcript*, Thomson had access to all the important events taking place at the time.

### **George Antheil**

With the bravura of youth Thomson was ready to take on the world. In George Antheil he found an ally just as, if not more, combative than he: two gallants, equally volatile, confrontational, bright, and alert. Antheil was a pet of the literary pace setters, like Joyce, Pound, and Cocteau. Their alliance, based on mutual admiration of each other's talent and promotional facility, had a latent underside -- their fierce, overactive egos, kept under wraps for a time. An eventual blowup was inevitable. These bold gentlemen diligently wooed all the right people, zeroing in on wealthy American women who congregated in Paris. This was not a cynical, nefarious, or unscrupulous method, but a matter of survival, a phase of almost every artist's career. The Paris critics were notoriously contemptuous, and the public lethargic and indifferent. For centuries only through patronage could the "new" come into being.

### **James Joyce**

The legendary Sylvia Beach, the owner of the most famous bookstore in Paris, Shakespeare & Co., cleared the way for Antheil to meet James Joyce. Joyce had a fine tenor voice, loved opera and modern music, and was an admirer of Antheil, who in turn introduced Thomson to the great man. Joyce immediately saw that Thomson's intelligence was out of the ordinary, and he was impressed by his music. The author of *Ulysses* suggested they should collaborate on a ballet based on a scenario from his *Finnegans Wake*. Thomson very reluctantly turned it down out of loyalty to Gertrude Stein. She would have been furious and would have considered it an act of betrayal of their friendship.

### **Ezra Pound**

Another friend of Beach, Ezra Pound, latched onto Antheil and was the contributing agent in the latter's fatal fall from grace. Pound wrote an embarrassing book, *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*, in which he spouted a lot of nonsense about a subject of which he was totally ignorant. Unfortunately Antheil, who had nothing to do with the book, was considered a willing partner in crime and was vilified. It led to his ostracism from the intellectual community.

Thomson from the first saw through the machinations of the self-serving Pound and never warmed up to him. The poet considered Thomson an enemy.

### **New Friends**

But for a while Thomson and Antheil were inseparable and gave a series of Friday afternoon concerts devoted entirely to their works, sponsored by the millionairess Mrs. Christian Gross. At one of them, the first performance of Antheil's rambunctious *Ballet mécanique* caused a scandal and was the talk of Paris. Ironically, this performance was the beginning of the unraveling of Antheil's career, though even before

this Thomson's attraction to Antheil's music was less intense. He remembers, "The career was more interesting than the composer."

Stein was not musical but she was always interested in any trend that was rumbling through the "in" cliques of Paris. *Ballet mécanique* was the latest rage, discussed everywhere, and so she invited Antheil to visit her. Even the nervy Antheil was uneasy about meeting the towering Stein so he took Thomson with him for protection. Stein immediately took a shine to Thomson but Antheil was never asked again. In all fairness to Antheil, Thomson was no stranger to Stein's work, and she in turn recognized in him the makings of a disciple. Not only was he an accomplished musician, he was exceptionally well acquainted with literature and painting. He invited her to a one-man (his) performance of Satie's *Socrate*. Stein's companion Alice B. Toklas had a respectable musical background. As a result this *Socrate* reading further cemented the budding friendship of the three of them and eventually led to the creation of *Four Saints* and *The Mother of Us All*. Toklas was the guiding hand behind the scene of this literary-musical duo relationship, even though initially she was not taken in by Thomson (probably resenting his closeness with her innamorata). It all worked out well; Thomson and Toklas, besides sharing their affection for Stein and each other, shared imaginative recipes. Thomson never forsook Toklas. Years after Stein's death, he was instrumental in helping her in countless ways when she was in need -- from food packages during and after the war to helping her sell at the best prices paintings left to her by Stein.

### **The Launching of *Four Saints***

The artistic and commercial success of *Four Saints* must all be credited to Thomson's skill in diplomacy, tact, persuasive power, and flair for organization. For three or four years he had been playing and singing the score for anyone whom he could corral. Thomson, never a virtuoso, was an engaging and amusing performer. His comments and parodies of music were hilarious, particularly a devastating version of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Everybody loved *Four Saints* but no one offered to put it on the stage. It was eventually produced under the auspices of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music. The financial backing was raised by Chick Austin. Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, and the architect Philip Johnson helped in this matter.

During a 1932 visit to America, Thomson's friend Carl Van Vechten, music critic and author of mildly naughty novels, kept the wheels turning. At one of his parties, he introduced Thomson to the painter Ettie Stettheimer, the youngest of three sisters whose salon was one of the most influential in America. In Stettheimer Thomson recognized the person who would be the stage designer (entirely in cellophane) of the opera. Frederick Ashton, who was to become the director of the Royal Ballet, devised the choreographic movements. He engaged John Houseman, then unknown, to be director, and Alexander Smallens (who one year later was to conduct the first performance of *Porgy and Bess*) to lead the orchestra. *Four Saints* premiered in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1934.

Stein and Thomson agree that Maurice Grosser's clever scenario was a major factor of the opera's success. The first audience, the elite of the social and theater world, was stunned, amazed, delighted; no one quite knew what to make of it, particularly the critics, who found the music reactionary and shocking. Praise was universal for the graceful and beautiful black cast, a probable first in the history of opera. *Four Saints* was such a provocative, notorious success that it was transferred to Broadway for an eight-week run (before Menotti's *The Medium* and *The Telephone*). Thomson at last was the most discussed composer in America.



## Women in His Life

Thomson was never a misogynist; he was always attracted to women of intelligence and sophistication and they were drawn to him. Although these relationships were Platonic, they were not ephemeral or shallow. Some were patrons who helped him during difficult times but he was never a sycophant playing a game for financial support. A man so fiercely independent in every corner of his life allowed no one to control his actions. Loyalty was one of his virtues, and long after their separation he remembered these women with respect and love.

Two other women besides Stein and Toklas played a major role in his life. Louise Langlois, a French woman of a distinguished professional family, was 40 years older than he, although he didn't know this until after her death in 1936. An elegant woman of exquisite taste, kind, ethical, and loyal, she was the archetype of the French upper-class as he was of the American Midwest. To Thomson, who saw all of France, not just Paris, as a mirror of Missouri, Madame Langlois (he always called her that) reminded him of his family, a replica of his Kentucky aunts who always wore formal taffeta dresses and diamond earrings when they came to visit. Next to his mother and sister, Madame Langlois was the most important woman in his life, a maternal friendship that lasted for 13 years.

Quite different was his relationship with his "girlfriend" Mary Butts, an intimate of the Cocteau coterie and a remarkable English writer of decadent habits. Thomson said she was very "decent in spite of it all." Butts was a heavy drinker, took opium, adored all-night parties, dabbled in mysticism, believed in incantatory magic -- all the fads and crazes Thomson would have no part of. Somehow these two complex, widely divergent people hit it off from the beginning. They were both gifted, fun loving, adventurous, and completely involved in the arts. Butts introduced him to new ways of thinking and responding to areas of experience unknown to him before. Seven years older than Thomson, twice married, she was no innocent fairy-tale princess. Her knowledge of culture was as far reaching as his. She was his equal in any battle of verbal persiflage.

But she miscalculated; she thought she knew how to maneuver him. To Thomson, their relationship was primarily artistic and intellectual, although their ethics and lifestyles were diametrically opposite. To Butts, the ultimate goal was matrimony. When Thomson at long last realized how things were drifting, he absconded as fast as he could. It saddened him that he was unable to make the final commitment she hoped for. This emotional relationship was, except for that with Maurice Grosser, the most personal in his life. In his own way he loved her as intensely as she loved him. When she died in 1937, he said he felt "like a widow."

## 17 quai Voltaire

Thomson was intimate with Les Six and other French musicians but not entirely an integral part of all their activities. It was true that he did employ some of their techniques in his music and was influenced by their street-wise braggadocio, but there was something un-French and very American about it that they could not quite understand. Only Milhaud, who left Paris to become secretary to the French ambassador of Brazil and had seen more of the world than other young parochial Parisians, grasped what he was up to -- an American style of French music. In his book *Notes Without Music* he writes "Thomson is the real disciple of Erik Satie and divides his time between New York and Paris to the great benefit of cultural relations between the countries."

But musicians were only a segment of Thomson's world; any casual guest list of his chic Friday night dinners (shades of Sunday evenings in Kansas City) hosted by the jovial, informed, and snappy American host in his small apartment at 17 quai Voltaire will attest to that -- Gide, Duchamp, Hemingway, Hart Crane, Janet Flanner, Picasso, Mary Garden, Cocteau, Scott Fitzgerald, Stein, Beecham, Christian Dior, etc. Here food and wine were a connoisseur's dream, the conversation and gossip on an Olympian level. To be dissected at such an assembly was considered an honor.

Stein had found this apartment for him in an area of Paris alive with the ghosts of Ingres, Voltaire, Delacroix, and Wagner. 17 quai Voltaire was Thomson's home in Paris until he sold it at a handsome profit in the 1950s. To pay the rent must at times have been a burden, but Maurice Grosser lived with him when he was in Paris and shared expenses. They were an odd couple, Grosser being just as unkempt as Thomson was fastidious. Like Auden, Thomson was a finicky old maid in his habits and daily routine. The painter's disorderliness was everywhere, and Thomson's tolerance admirable; their home life was stormy, but their deep relationship made anything possible.

## II. The Musician

### The Operas

#### *Four Saints in Three Acts*

*Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927-33), the first of the two Thomson-Stein operas, is the most abstruse. Stein conceived her libretto during her hermetic period, as Thomson was positioning himself in the Erik Satie-Kansas City orbit. He had apprenticed himself by setting Stein's "Susie Asado" (voice and piano, 1926), "Preciosilla" (1927), and one of his early successes, "Capital, Capitals" (four male singers and piano, 1927), and felt he was now ready to wrestle with an opera. Stein was charmed and flattered when he suggested a large-scale work, and enthusiastically agreed.

Since there is no plot or formal structure -- except that imposed upon it by Maurice Grosser with Stein's consent -- does the opera make any sense or is it just an elaborate intellectual prank? Does it have any meaning? Thomson says the slightly zany libretto is about many things, but that fundamentally the activity of 21 (not four) saints in four acts (not three) is an allegory of the quotidian life of creative people like themselves, enjoying life in contemporary Paris. The characters, the singing nuns and monks, are artists who gaily concentrate all their efforts on nonmaterialistic matters such as writing an opera or milling around in heaven, uninhibitedly striving to be saints.

Stein has never been explicit about the meaning of her text; gives no clues to the idiosyncratic components of the piece -- riddles, rhymes, children's games, jingles, repetition, numbers, names, non-sentences, words in no logical order, to mention only a few. Some phrases have become classics of the English language: "How many doors are floors are there in it," "Pigeons on the grass alas if they were not pigeons what were they," "To know to know to love her so," "Saint Theresa half in half out of doors," "What is the difference between a picture and pictured," "Four saints it makes it well fish."

Stein loved Spain, its people, its landscape, and its saints. This is rather odd, for she told Thomson and others that she had no religious belief and denied a hereafter. If this were really true, why did Alice B. Toklas, her lifelong companion, also Jewish, years after Stein's death, convert to Catholicism so that she could be reunited with her "beloved"? She must have known something Stein would not reveal to Thomson or anyone else.

Thomson always believed that Stein, who was not immune to jealousy, pictured herself as Saint Theresa, and James Joyce, whom she considered her only living literary rival, was Saint Ignatius.

With whom was Thomson consciously (or unconsciously) competing? He only admits the score was an homage to Kansas City. But he is explicit about how he responded to Stein's text and how he found an appropriate music for it. The deceptive, bland style of his diatonic harmony and plagal cadences refers deliberately to the Protestant hymnal, and the many parlendo passages make a sly reference to Anglo-Saxon liturgical chant. The music is a potpourri of tempo changes and sounds -- a Baptist choir and its accompanying harmonium, waltzes, patter songs, tangos, foxtrots, sentimental parlor songs, folk dances, street music, ragtime, marches -- the sonic life of 19th-century mid-western America. It is a witty reverent-irreverent commentary and elaboration of the text. Except for a few places, he avoided dissonance because it would have been inappropriate to the ebullience of the text and would have retarded the energy implicit in the movements of the words and pauses between them. The music annotates the text; it does not sit on top of it. It is not an underpinning or a description of mood or emotion of which there is none in the opera. There is only a feeling of a constant interior movement of happiness: behind the static activity on the stage, the saints are bubbling over with life, having a grand time. No wonder the simplicity of the score was baffling and controversial when it was first performed in 1934. Thomson's music is a jolly partner of this jolly romp. His setting of Stein's text is adroit as a tightrope walker; he never flubs a beat of her prose rhythm and does so without parodying her cubistic manner. He found an equally original solution of his own, understood her unusual style, and forged an equally singular style to allow her words to come through.

Admittedly, the text is more outrageous, but Thomson's pokerfaced score is just as eccentric. Thomson and Stein were solipsists, fully aware of what they were doing and how they were doing it. Their supposed innocence is specious but adds to the sense of fun once we are aware of the sleight-of-hand trick they are performing.

An underlying stratum of the opera is its theme of a desire to return to a lost Eden (a wish Thomson never abandoned); it gives a fairy-tale polish, an idyllic sheen of a Golden Age. These two Americans in Paris had a deep-rooted nostalgia for their young years, memories hidden under layers of cosmopolitan sophistication. It is perhaps the reason that there is no tension, conflict, or evil in the opera. It is a carnival of childlike, not childish, religious mysticism by two supposedly nonreligious people.

Thomson's nothing-on-the-page score (a Thomson trademark), written at a period when harmonic and rhythmic complexity was all the rage, was considered either reactionary or revolutionary. But no one denied its American authenticity. Today we wonder what the furor was all about.

Although written nearly 70 years ago, *Four Saints* is still original, fresh, and controversial and did change the course of American opera. Only in recent years are there signs of appreciation for what Stein and Thomson have done. A few figures such as Philip Glass and John Cage have openly acknowledged their theatrical debt to Thomson. Their music and librettos are of course more advanced and very different, but the thrust of their dramaturgy is not. Thomson's music *per se* has no followers. His age and its specific problems are long since past, and no one will ever duplicate the guile of his not-simple-at-all simplicity. Besides, the combination of two such rare, droll, and outlandish creators like Stein and Thomson are infrequent in the history of culture and in the history of early 20th-century modernism. Their fortunate partnership was unique. They were made for each other.

## ***The Mother of Us All***

*The Mother of Us All*, written 20 years later, has many of the attributes of *Four Saints* but is a richer, more mature, work. Humorous as the opera is, there is a sobriety, a serenity quite different from the shimmering spontaneity of its predecessor. Stein and Thomson have not abandoned their wit, gaiety, and irreverence but the fun and games of the Parisian twenties are over. The ruder world of 1947 has become obtrusive, its creators wiser and disillusioned.

The libretto is more coherent, both verbally and dramatically, almost has a story line, a sea change from the dada activities of *Four Saints*. Stein is no longer as Steinish and Virgil Thomson once again skillfully shaped his score to her almost naturalistic text. The music is an amplification of the grab-bag style of *Four Saints*, but the hand is firmer, more self-assured and audacious, if not quite as buoyant. It is even more American, consisting of the same assortment of sentimental ballads, hymns, waltzes, etc., to which are added trumpet calls, circus band music, drum rolls, fanfares, and oratorical slogans to capture the rambunctiousness of the political arena. As in *Four Saints* all the music is of his own invention. Here he is more 20th-century, writing impressionistic, descriptive music (the Snow Scene in particular), love duets, trios, wedding and funeral music.

The score, like *Four Saints*, is far more than a parade of American vernacular set pieces. There is an overall architecture that gives cohesion and substance to this work -- a firm theatrical unity. The variety of the music, its mathematical balance, the precision and logic of its movement, the color of the orchestration, and Thomson's by now famous musical affinity for setting Stein's texts make this work *sui generis*.

The opera is ostensibly about the career and dedication of Susan B. Anthony to the 19th-century activities of women's rights told by Stein in her own unique and charming way. The people in her version are anachronistic. Few, if any, had any relationship to Susan; John Adams died 20 years before Lillian Russell was born; Ulysses S. Grant discusses Dwight D. Eisenhower; the debate between Daniel Webster and Susan never took place; they probably never met. Other 19th-century figures -- Andrew Jackson, Anthony Comstock, Thaddeus Stevens -- never knew or were aware of each other. Some characters were close friends of Stein -- Constance Fletcher, a playwright (in the opera loved by John Adams), and the Yale librarian, Donald Gallup, who would later oversee the publication of her posthumous works.

Beneath all the folderol on the stage, a rumbling sense of desperation is evident. The raucous energy of the political meetings, the give and take of debates, the wry comments of the characters, even the tender love scenes, cannot hide the fact that change is in the air. It is this double awareness of inaction in action that makes the opera so compelling. By some mysterious alchemical process, only Stein and Thomson together could achieve this active stasis. Odd as these operas are, they have a touching human quality, and in this one the two collaborators reveal their hearts on their sleeves. Virgil Thomson let his guard down and wrote some very, for him, intimate if formal and restrained love music (certainly not Tristan and Isolde -- he was a cool customer, not an overheated romantic). But then the lovers didn't even live in the same century. Thomson's music in these scenes of Victorian ardor adumbrates the style of equivalent situations in *Lord Byron*.

Stein's libretto has a cutting edge: it does not have the naive blithe spirit of *Four Saints*. Like Thomson, she knew the America they both loved was gone forever and wrote a moving and eloquent valentine to rural America at the turn of the century. On another level she used political hoopla as a shield to tacitly

admit that possibly her life was not quite the success she had so belligerently proclaimed it to be; maybe she was *not* the savior of 20th-century literature or even one of its blazing pioneers. The end of the opera, the resignation of Susan B. Anthony -- and Thomson wrote some lovely music for it -- points to this possible conclusion. Susan's last words, "Life is strife, I am a martyr all my life not to what I was but to what was done. But do we want what we have got has it not gone, what makes it live, has it not gone, because now it is had it my long life." Are these the last words of Gertrude Stein?

But the opera is not heavy in its execution. It has all the Stein-Thomson wit and charm and lively fun. Yet when we leave the theater and think about it we cannot deny that it has a rueful quality, a mature, resigned acceptance, without bitterness or mawkish tears, of the fragility of life. In her later writing, Stein was much more conciliatory toward her readers and discarded most of her previous gnomic experimental methods. Does this opera tell us why?

It is quite evident that the close relationship of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas is openly displayed in the opera by Susan and Ann. Throughout their lives, it was handled tactfully, and the emotional scenes in the opera that portray this situation are delicately written. Neither Thomson nor Stein were in any way vulgar people, and even when and if their work had an autobiographical component, it was most artfully and tastefully handled.

The many-faceted elegancies of *The Mother of Us All* are what fascinate us. What on the surface appears to be a good-natured political cartoon is in reality something quite different. Not only is it an affectionate foray into our historic past, but two artists are saying goodbye to their past and perhaps to each other. (Stein died the same year she wrote the libretto.) There is much more here than meets the eye and ear. *The Mother of Us All* is like a precious heirloom, grandmother's handmade quilt, faded photographs of remote relatives, contact with another age, time, and place. It strikes a chord in us that sets in motion feelings of homesickness hidden deep within us, not sad, not saccharine, not sentimental. It makes us aware of our poignant human oneness.

As Stein wrote, "When this you see, remember me." And Virgil Thomson found just the exact, heartrending music for this, for which he, too, will be remembered.

### ***Lord Byron***

*Lord Byron*, the most complex of Thomson's three operas, was written about 30 years after the Stein collaborations. Like its predecessors, hidden beneath its surface lies a myriad of meanings. Unlike the Saints and Susan B. Anthony, the life and psychology of a decadent English poet would be an anomaly in Kansas City.

The situations and characters in *Lord Byron* would be at ease in an Oscar Wilde or Noël Coward play. It is supposedly about a poet who had had the bad taste to leave a much too frank memoir to be published after his death; this precludes his burial in Westminster Abbey by the Anglican Church. At least such a farcical situation opens and closes the work. On a deeper level *Lord Byron* is a portrait of a man who has experienced everything; his jaundiced eye has seen all the tricks the world can play. Life is closing in on him, everything is fraught with danger. His milieu, the rich aristocracy, is unhappy in ways the bourgeoisie could never conceive. The private life of such people is lived under a glass dome where every move is instantly telegraphed to their intimates like a seismographic report. Byron, melancholy, brooding, profligate, undisciplined, accomplished, handsome, sought after, was deformed from birth

with a clubfoot. All that wealth and fame had to offer could not compensate for or make him forget it. It was the central fact of his life and the unstated core of the opera.

It is interesting that Virgil Thomson spent seven years, late in life, on this particular subject. If, as he admitted, he had a continuing fascination with the poet (so did Gertrude Stein), he must have felt that they had something in common. What was it? Was this worldly man really at heart a romantic in the Byronic sense, even though all his life he cleverly denied it?

Lord Byron was certainly not a family man. Neither was Virgil Thomson. But he, unlike Byron, was not a licentious libertine, for whatever hidden passions or proclivities he may have had, outwardly he was respectable, courtly, and decorous.

Jack Larson's intelligent libretto -- a drawing-room conversation piece -- is riddled with spicy, explosive subjects that imply incest, adultery, homosexuality -- subjects clean living Americans only enjoy watching on televised confessional shows. But this is an adult opera and Thomson's polished music reflects the moods and feelings of elegant members of London high society, where love and temptation are more complicated. The music, like this society, operates behind a screen of polite masks; it often has the power to punctuate the veneer of that society's tightly controlled emotions, even at times to indicate graphically to the listener what is not expressed in words.

The music is regal, courtly, and in the many madrigal passages one senses a subtle homage to Purcell and the Elizabethans. Its strategically controlled arias, duets, choruses, and ensembles have the dignity of a social ritual, almost a masque. Its sound is Anglo-Saxon, its musical ambiance, liturgical hymns and 19th-century English, Irish, and Scottish ballads, and a not so distant connection with the parlor songs sung in Missouri of the same period. This is Thomson's most ambitious score, and he has put a great deal of himself in it. It contains many commendable things, but it lacks the sustained lyricism needed to make it absolutely convincing. The opening elegy ("Byron is dead") has the nobility and solemnity of a Roman frieze, the evocation he achieved in *Solemn Music* and *Wheat Field at Noon*. The emotional music verges on passion but never quite achieves it; the passages of rapier thrust dialogue are accompanied by witty and ironic music that could underscore a Restoration play. There are only a few flickerings of Parisian days, the inevitable waltz, usually in reference to Byron's clubfoot ("It's the one dance your leg can do naturally"). But here the waltz does not have the gaiety of the early *Synthetic Waltzes*, the *Mayor La Guardia Waltzes*, or the Lillian Russell waltz in *The Mother of Us All*. Its dramatic purpose is ambiguous, almost ominous. The stag party is rather tame, only mildly ribald, never riotous, well-dressed gentlemen at a posh gentlemen's club. There are references to Thomson's favorite tune, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," as well as "Auld Lang Syne," "London Bridge is Falling Down," and "Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms." Considering the inflammatory nature and implications of the theme, the score and libretto are models of tact and good taste. As connoisseurs of Byron's life and psychology, Thomson and Larson understood that the poet's real passion, in spite of his many amours and excesses, was not basically sensual; his passion was the passing scene, the actualities of life, what happened to him and the people he was associated with -- in short, he was a man very much like Virgil Thomson. Perhaps this is why he was drawn to Byron.

*Lord Byron* is Byronic in that it is about a subject and yet is apart from it. Thomson and Larson observe and comment on the events and characters but give no clue to their own attitudes to them or their problems. They seem to have taken Auden, Kallman, and Stravinsky, the creators of *The Rake's Progress*, as their model. (No comparison of the two operas is meant.)

This aloofness is fascinating but frustrating. It is why we admire *Lord Byron* but do not love it. We are not musically or dramatically caught up in it on a human level. It is a sort of highbrow whodunit, with an ambiguous last scene. Who really was the man about to be buried? The Establishment has rejected him on the grounds of rigid 19th-century morality. The writers deplore this Victorian viewpoint; for them only the great English poets -- Milton and the rest -- have the acumen to accept him as one of their own, suggesting that an artist's true worth can only be judged by one's peers.

This banal, snobbish, and old-fashioned conclusion is surprising and unsettling, and slightly offensive, especially in an age when bedroom biography is a *sine qua non*. Either Virgil Thomson was hiding something or he was forcing us to think and draw our own conclusions. It was his style to do both.

An oddity of all these operas is that they open with a drumroll, a procedure used for every public occasion to draw attention to whatever was being offered, from a military parade to a raree-show or a circus. Did Virgil Thomson mean that art was nothing but a sideshow of life? Or did he mean that art, as ritual, must be paid attention to, for *that* was what life was really about?

### **Other Compositions**

Virgil Thomson wrote reams of music in many genres, from piano pieces to operas and concertos, but after he found his basic methods of expression, he did not deviate much from them. Therefore, only a few of his many works will be discussed. Being acutely aware of who he was and what he wanted to achieve, perhaps so complex a person could never have fully attached himself to any one style, although Debussy and Satie revolutionized his thinking. His individualism was expressed by any musical technique, past and present, he thought he needed, from chant to 20th-century fashionable techniques; a true eclectic long before the word became today's cliché.

The most significant trait of this admixture is nostalgia. Not for a moment did he forget his *doppelgänger*, Missouri: Paris may have been his city but Kansas City was his home town. This trait distinguished him from all other composers of that period and made him, as Aaron Copland said, the "Father of American Music." Copland sagely spotted and grasped the reverberations of this style in the 44 measures of the second-act Intermezzo of *Four Saints*. (Thomson has never been given credit for his influence on the music of Copland and his school.)

Thomson foraged freely and borrowed economically with no frills and roulades; the result is very sophisticated, very French, very sec and as American as apple pie. Simple on the surface, the music is never naive. The composer was urbane, surprised by nothing; he believed that writing a symphony or constructing a sentence should be practical and workmanlike, like designing a building or an automobile. This should not blind us to the fact that Thomson was foremost a creative artist, who when he sometimes allowed his emotions to surface could compose tender music, compassionate and riddled with longing.

### ***Sonata da chiesa***

His first major work, *Sonata da chiesa*, written in 1926 as a graduation piece for his study with Nadia Boulanger, is a seminal prelude to his entire career. It was a deliberate prank, academically a learned parody poking fun at its own seriousness, very much the attitude of his friends Poulenc and Cocteau. The structure is traditional, its disparate instrumentation innovative. The first movement is discordant and unresolved, a sound he cultivated by less stringent, polytonal (augmented triads) means over the

years -- the Snow Scene in *Mother of Us All* (1947), movements of his three symphonies (1928, 1941, 1972), (Symphony No. 3 is an orchestral version of his Second String Quartet), and concertos (Cello, 1950) (Flute, 1954), some of the *Five Blake Songs* (1951), and *Pange Lingua* (1962) for organ. But this sound is at its most consistently extreme in the *Shipwreck and Love Scene from Byron's Don Juan* (1967) and at the end of the *Requiem Mass*. Yet this kind of music also has a dignity that filters through works like *Wheat Field at Noon* (1948) and *A Solemn Music* (1949). In this *Sonata* Thomson, ever alert to hidden and esoteric jokes, may have been parodying Stravinsky's homage to Debussy, *Symphony of Wind Instruments* (1920), and saying farewell to Boulanger, an admirer of the great Russian composer.

The tonal blocks of the opening chorale that move like an iceberg wend their way through all his music. Against this is a peculiar melismatic melody which could be (to him) a distillation of liturgical chant, another quintessential ingredient of his style. The second movement is a tango, the first of many he was to write. (Tangos and waltzes surely had some personal significance to him. He never abandoned the style.) Here the undulating rhythm in the woodwinds accompanies a strange viola solo, a similar device he used in the first Portrait, a "Portrait of Señorita Juanita de Medina Accompanied by Her Mother." The display of the double fugue in the last movement is Virgil Thomson flexing his muscles; he always relished the challenge of contrapuntal techniques.

### ***Symphony on a Hymn Tune***

The witty *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* (1928) was the first appearance of a style adumbrated in *Four Saints*. Here Thomson began to shed his antipathy to expressing personal feelings, but he did so in an elegant, reticent way. The *Symphony*, also his first large-scale orchestral foray, is basically a series of variations on *Foundation* (and other hymn tunes). It is a soundscape that strips the Missourian of his French clothing. Thomson has come home to Kansas City. From now on his music is thoroughly American, nervous, energetic, humorous, sentimental, and nostalgic. Now his style is distinctively recognizable -- cinematic, shifting rapidly from one episode and genre to another, direct, never striving for dramatic heights. Like Satie, he discarded any overblown, philosophical, overwrought emotional patina that had accrued to music over the centuries. Music was "a normal function of life," "should not strive for 'greatness'." But on closer inspection we also have here an inkling of his later neo-romantic style. Hearing this work, or later ones like *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), we are caught up short. They do not tie us up in neurotic knots; they are touching, sad, alive.

This is achieved by the barest of means -- the lonely sound of a train whistle passing in the night (nostalgia), the Sunday school hymn (when we unquestioningly believed in what we were told), a ticking clock (Proustian passage of time), barn dances (rough but polite), street sounds, country life, the commonplace experiences of everyday activities (composed by a man who reveled in the sybaritic life).

### ***Filling Station***

Virgil Thomson's *Filling Station* (1937), a ballet, would never be mistaken for Milhaud's *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, but it has a similar nonchalant, jaunty, French esprit. It was the first classical ballet with a definite all-American theme, preceding Copland's later incursion into the field, *Billy the Kid* (1938). The scenario was by Lincoln Kirstein, another French-American and founder with George Balanchine of the American Ballet Theatre. It included, besides the inevitable romance, truck drivers, gangsters, holdups, state troopers, a chase, a happy ending -- all the ingredients of pop art. The music ranged from the inevitable



tango (recycled from *Sonata da chiesa*) to Salvation Army band music. Though dated, it has aged well and is of great historical interest.

## Films

The scores he wrote for the three Pare Lorentz films, *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), *The River* (1937), and *Louisiana Story* (1948), are Thomson at his shining best. There are only a few traces of Paris in this homespun music. Every note is honest, sincere, and without wrapping himself in the American flag, he recreates the time, place, and people of rural life during the Depression years of the 1930s. *The Plow* and *The River* are pictorial documentaries, illustrating the human tragedies of unemployment in towns and cities, the pathos of drifters that resulted from the devastation of the soil of the Great Plains from Texas to Canada, and the use and abuse of Southern waterways before the reclamation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. To prepare himself for this assignment, Thomson immersed himself in the study of folklore material. The scores utilize a large quota of music based on back-country sources -- white spirituals, hoedowns, cowboy songs, blues, folk tunes, fiddle tunes, banjo music, ballads -- they are so cleverly blended and redeployed with Thomson's own original music that it is impossible to tell them apart.

For *Louisiana Story*, written ten years later, Thomson culled material from *The Southern Harmony*, *The Sacred Harp*, the recordings of John and Alan Lomax, and particularly *Louisiana French Folk Songs* by Therese Whitfield. This film is also a documentary but has a slim scenario, the experiences of a young boy caught in the warfare between the encroaching oil industry and the Bayou inhabitants who have lived on the land for generations. There are two orchestral suites from the score.

Cajun music forms the basis of *Acadian Airs and Dances*, by now a Thomson classic. *Louisiana Story Suite* is more dramatic, composed in four sections of classical forms, and depicts the rite of passage of the boy. (1) Pastorale. The boy paddles his canoe through the bayou and is almost capsized by an amphibious oil-well tractor. (2) Chorale. A hymn tune accompanies the pumping of oil by a derrick while the boy wonders at its mechanization. (3) Passacaglia. The boy steals some alligator eggs and is attacked by the enraged beast. (4) Fugue. The boy fights for his life and is rescued by his father before the reptile can drag him into the swamp. This score, which deservedly won a Pulitzer Prize in 1948, contains impressionistic and 12-tone devices, a deft mixture of Paris, Vienna, and our Deep South.

## ***Three Pictures for Orchestra***

Virgil Thomson's understanding of what a painting is and how it is painted by the artist is a key to our understanding of his *Three Pictures for Orchestra* -- "The Seine at Night" (1947), "Sea Piece with Birds" (1952), and "Wheat Field at Noon" (1948). They are not like the tone pictures of Richard Strauss or Hector Berlioz; they tell no story, have no implied action, no symbolic meaning. They are abstract musical compositions -- something we listen *to* the way we look *at* a painting. They are to be experienced as we experience a Cézanne or a Mark Rothko. They are "out there" as a painting is, and their full meaning comes only after seeing or hearing them, not while we are looking or listening. Although a total impersonal response is probably impossible, our first impact with these works, our personal reaction, is secondary. Later, after another viewing or hearing, we become involved in them and can reconstruct them in our own way and bring to them whatever we think they suggest or evoke.

The titles of the *Three Pictures* are an exact description. They are clues supplied by the composer to help us visualize exactly what this unadorned, nonrepresentative music is. It *is* the Seine, the sea, the birds, the wheat field. Thomson's program note on the *Seine* delineates what we are to listen for, using words that show the music's affinity with painting. He says the "melodic contours are deliberately archaic" (the lines), "the harmony for purposes of *perspective* is bitonal...polytonal," "there are scales...sets of...triads... four-note chords...organ sonorities" (color). Could anything be plainer?

What we hear listening to "Sea Piece with Birds" is not a Debussyan evocation of the sea. We sense something mysterious and brooding, sunlight on the water, unfathomable depths, cacophonous cawing of gulls, a musical experience similar to what we have when we look at a painting by Winslow Homer.

"Wheat Field at Noon" is a sonic equivalent of viewing a work by Andrew Wyeth -- the color of the meridian sun, symmetrical rows of wheat, lonely expanses of land and space. But the music does not explicate such an imaginary painting, it *becomes* the painting itself.

In these works Thomson is not weaving on the nostalgic loom. There are no hymns, dances, or parlor songs. Music is heard through our ears without the intervention of emotion. The style is not picturesque but dissonant, granitic, serial writing organized in an original tonal way. "Wheat Field" particularly is closely related to the gravitas music of *A Solemn Music*. Gertrude Stein would not approve. These works have nothing in common with *Four Saints* except Virgil Thomson.

## Portraits

Virgil Thomson was not the initiator of musical portraits. Composers had always written them. Robert Schumann, also literary and musical, wrote many personal ones deeply concealed in all his music. His portraits, like Thomson's, include not only the sitter but ideas and events that occurred to him during their composition.

But Thomson's portraits are singular in that they were drawn from life. Gertrude Stein did this in literature and Thomson, ever her disciple, aspired to do so in music. The score page was his canvas. The "model" would sit for his or her portrait. Thomson then proceeded to write, automatically, whatever came into his head, pausing at certain places to read what he had done, then continue to add new material, again pausing and adding until he was satisfied that he had captured the sitter's total and individual personality. If someone else was in the room, or something happened during the procedure, he would include that in the portrait, as well as any stray thought or reminiscence that came into his mind. He cites as an example that "When I did *Mora Maar*...he (Picasso) came along, out of curiosity...he got into the portrait...he couldn't be in a room without being noticed."

He composed more than 150 portraits: Picasso, Mina Curtis, Lou Harrison, Sylvia Marlowe, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Aaron Copland, Maurice Grosser, Eugene Ormandy, Alexander Smallens, and others. The majority are for piano, and if performed as a group, tend to be monotonous. They are clever and witty, but more is needed to hold our interest, particularly since most of the people portrayed were known principally to the composer. This makes their personalities indecipherable, since the sitter is long since dead. Even if we know that "Miss Furr and Miss Spune" were painters and "Marthe-Marthine" played the violin, it does not contribute to our enjoying the music. Most of the portraits today give the impression of "in" jokes; their manipulation of academic forms -- scales, canonic passages, wrong notes, waltzes, childlike exercises, classical allusions, hymns, etc. -- soon become precious, coy, and

manneristic. They rarely use a piano's panoply of sonic resources. To come alive for us today they need the color of instrumentation to bring out any originality they may contain. Those written for instrumental combinations, or later orchestrated by the composer (or others), are far more accessible and interesting. Among them are *Five Portraits for Four Clarinets*, which includes "Portrait of a Young Man in Good Health" (Maurice Grosser with a cold) and three portraits of the painter Christian Bernard; *Five Ladies for Violin and Piano* (one of whom is Alice B. Toklas); *Family Portrait for Brass Quintet*; and *Four Portraits for Cello and Piano* (including "Bugles and Birds," a portrait of Picasso). An excellent book on this subject is Anthony Tommasini's *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits*.

It is obvious that Thomson was not really at ease in writing for the piano. One of the exceptions is the charming Suite from his 1975 ballet, *Parson Weems and the Cherry Tree*. Thomson's handling of colonial music at the time of Washington is the American Thomson in full bloom; its reels, ballads, and English and Scots tunes exactly on target.

### **Choral Music**

For a composer who claimed he had no metaphysical beliefs, and was only a "nominal Christian," Thomson wrote a considerable quantity of sacred music from his Harvard days to the neglected *Missa pro defunctis* (1960). This Requiem Mass is defrocked church music, part secular, part sacred, connoting an attitude toward the church devoid of piety and unctuousness. It is apparent also that this music, which runs the gamut from simple arrangements of hymns ("My Shepherd Will Supply My Need," [1937], "Variations on Sunday School Tunes," [1926-27]), to choral works like *The Nativity as Sung by the Shepherds* [1967]), is conceived as pure theater. The ritual of the liturgy fascinated him, he says, not theological, philosophical, or mystical ecstasies. This music, like everything he wrote, is an admixture of all the ingredients of his secular style (it even includes an occasional touch of jazz in the Mass), yet in spite of its diversity it conveys a warm, reverent attitude toward humanity. Thomson may not have been a reverend, but his church music is never irreverent.

### **Songs**

Virgil Thomson's place in the history of American art song is undisputed. The clarity of his prosody, like Samuel Barber's, is the barometer by which all composers in this genre are measured. Barber and Thomson were temperamentally and musically completely antithetical, but they did share intelligence of a high order, an oversupply of trenchant, sophisticated wit, a profound love of language, and an illimitable knowledge of the arts.

In Thomson's setting of poems, as in his operas, each word is given priority at the moment it is sung. The words are not embellished by an elaborate, coloristic piano accompaniment. The piano has no separate identity, it moves along with the voice as an equal partner. Its function is modest, never bringing attention to itself -- Liszt could never paraphrase it. Chords are interjected at incisive moments, as are playful scale passages, recitatives, hymnlike phrases, all the paraphernalia found in his other works.

In their undramatic way, the songs are very theatrical -- Thomson boasts of being a man of the theater -- but his theater is one of gestures, not of action. The singer and pianist are like two well-seasoned performers who have timed every movement and never upstage each other. All the songs, whether they are Elizabethan settings of *Thomas Campion* (four songs), or *Shakespeare Songs*, or sardonic like "The Cat," oddly liturgical like the five *Praises and Prayers*, menacing like "The Tiger," witty like "Two by

Marianne Moore," subtle and sadly lyrical like the Kenneth Koch set *Mostly About Love*, or nonsense ditties like Edward Lear's "The Courtship of Bongly Bo," or the dada-like "Portrait of F. B." -- all, by some thaumaturgic trick, are homogeneous. Their world is exclusive, controlled, and inhabited by Virgil Thomson. If one desires to explore this world, there is an abundance of material to choose from.

Three works for voice and orchestra have been unduly overlooked -- *Five Blake Songs* (1951) and *Feast of Love* (1964), and *Collected Poems* for Soprano, Baritone, and Piano (or Orchestra, 1959). It is possible that Blake's poem "The Tiger" could have had a private meaning for Thomson. He set the poem twice, earlier as a song and later as one of his *Five Blake Songs*. In both settings, the music is frightening and spooky. In the first version a few dissonant chords set the mood. In the *Five Blake Songs*, the coloration of the orchestration, particularly the growling brass, makes the words seem even more foreboding. The texts of these songs are not the mystical Blake, but the innocent English poet, a literary brother of the Robert Louis Stevenson whose *A Child's Garden of Verses* has the same childlike quality. Thomson's setting of Blake's "Land of Dreams" is perfect, the music not only matching the mood of the text, but does so by creating an English-Scots atmosphere, an atmosphere which permeates most of the cycle. *Collected Poems* is a witty setting in Thomson's American style of Kenneth Koch's poetic montage.

The carnal *Feast of Love* is an erotic setting of a randy poem, *Pervigilium veneris*, of the second or fourth century A.D. The music is never openly bacchantic, but as in *Lord Byron*, its not-so-hidden passions are expressed in civilized, Olympian terms. The deft orchestration is rife with stimulating suggestions.

## **Coda**

Is there an easily recognizable Virgil Thomson sound, as there is a Copland or an Ives? In his Americana music, yes, but it is remote and, at present, has no place in our current vogue. There is, too, a groundswell of Anglo-Saxon secular and church music that places it in the mainstream of traditional counterpoint, though in his own free-wheeling way. Ironically, Thomson's French style (not his French bias) never had the sensual sound of the native impressionists.

More than most composers, Virgil Thomson was a "personality," the making of which was a lifelong occupation and in the long run tripped him up. He was too clever in his use of source material, had too unappeasable an appetite for everything about and of music to make an indelible inroad into any one field (except the stylish brand of Americana he originated in the Stein operas). His wit was too verbal and cerebral to translate fully into music. Here his writing took over. His "personality" had more than one trained outlet. The music he gave us, much of it individual, is not the whole man; the writer is just as significant. Music may have been his centerpiece -- he certainly believed it was -- but we know when we hear his compositions that there is more than meets the ear.

## **III. The Personality**

### **The Man of Letters**

Virgil Thomson is our most audacious and witty music critic. His fine-tuned prose is impeccable, his knowledge encyclopedic, fearless, and blunt to the point of rudeness. He was funny even when he was offensive. With a wicked tongue he gave away trade secrets. Reading him was a daily necessity, the only critic who told the truth as he saw it, who was up and who was down in the seesaw of the music world. He was more often right than wrong and the problems he discussed have not disappeared. The power of

the media, conglomerates, and technological exploitation is even more pervasive today; the cast of characters has changed, not the scenario. "We are fighting for our professional living against distribution" he wrote in the 1960s.

He was a bull in a China shop, not geared for making friends. He deflated Toscanini and Jascha Heifetz ("silk-underwear music"). He thought the inflation of their personalities got in the way of their performances. Powerful icons were laid waste -- the Metropolitan Opera berated for its outmoded and snobbish policies, the stranglehold and ruthlessness of the Columbia Artists hierarchy exposed. (A great deal more may be found in *A Virgil Thomson Reader* edited by John Rockwell.)

Of his eight books, all contain incisive insights worth pondering, especially *Virgil Thomson, The State of Music*, and *The Art of Judging Music*: his elucidation of how, why, and for whom a composer writes, the manifold tactics he is often forced to devise to earn a decent living, how he maneuvers in society, the inner workings of musical politics, the ground-breaking exposé of "the music education racket," the difficulties of the real life of real musicians in the real world. This pragmatic and no-nonsense attitude was counterbalanced by an uncanny prescience; he seemed to be able to see around corners and be a few paces ahead of everyone else. In 1946 he told Pierre Boulez that "by using a carefully thought out and complex way, you produce by 30 a handful of unforgettable works. But by then you are a prisoner of your method...so you write less and less...without freedom, no one is a master."

Thomson was certainly not the only composer of his generation to write intelligently about music. Marc Blitzstein, Elliott Carter, Roger Sessions, and Aaron Copland too had a firm command of language and had perceptive things to say, and, like Thomson, were leading contributors to Minna Lederman's journal *Modern Music*. But Thomson was not only a *professional* writer and a *professional* composer but a *professional* critic on a daily newspaper. *The State of Music* (1939), his first book, was a minor bombshell. From then on he was an established writer as well as a composer.

Geoffrey Parsons hired him as critic for the *Herald Tribune* (1937), where he soon became the indisputable king who reigned over the New York music scene for 14 years until his decision to quit and devote himself entirely to composition (1951). But not quite. *Virgil Thomson* by Virgil Thomson, which appears to tell all, was published in 1966; other books followed. In the 1970s *The New York Review of Books* became his major outlet. Here some of his important essays first appeared, including "Cage and the Collage of Noises," "Making Black Music," "The Ives Case," "Stravinsky's Operas," and "The Art of Judging Music." The last book he wrote, *Music with Words*, was published in the year of his death.

Preceding Virgil Thomson as composer-critic-journalist was the genteel Deems Taylor, who wrote for *The New York World* and *The New York American* and had two operas produced at the Met (*The King's Henchman* and *Peter Ibbetson*). His music is pleasant, if not very distinguished, a bit on the lavender side like the novels of James Branch Cabell or Thornton Wilder. One of the wits of his day, Taylor was a member of the Algonquin Round Table, and the beloved radio commentator for the Sunday broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. He wrestled with many of the subjects that Thomson did. Taylor was good-natured, an old school gentleman, amusing and truthful but unaggressive; he had none of the panache of Thomson's cool, patrician style. "Sassy but classy," Thomson modestly said of himself, and it was true.

Thomson's writing made him many friends and an equal number of enemies; his criticism of composers past and present, personal and idiosyncratic, was on balance evenhanded and fair. If he thought a

composer had something of his own to say and did so by a direct, unencumbered route, he approved -- Carl Ruggles, Edgard Varèse, or the French-oriented Mexican Silvestre Revueltas. The French, of course, could do no wrong, and his bias toward them was often excessive. (We can dispute his belief that Honegger's *Pacific 231* is one of the masterpieces of the 20th century.) Poulenc, Milhaud, Sauguet, Satie, and later Messiaen were luminaries in his galaxy.

His disdain for Rachmaninoff, Sibelius, Hindemith, Britten, and Shostakovich was undisguised. They were camp followers of the long-vanished Romantic Age of Brahms and Mahler. John Alden Carpenter's flirtation with French music was whipped cream. John Cage, in 1950, wrote a book-length study of Thomson's music at Thomson's request but made the cardinal error of doubting that his music had relevance for the coming generation (the 1960s). Cage admired most of Thomson's work but not enough to satisfy Mr. Thomson who retaliated years later in the *New York Review* article mentioned above. From then on there was a polite abyss between them, although Cage always acknowledged his debt to Thomson.

Thomson's attitude toward Charles Ives and George Gershwin is a little more complicated, subtle, and personal. He admired them and their music, but there is a barbed reluctance to truly accepting them. They were musically suspect, for they undermined his authority and could not be fobbed off with a glib quip. They were (and are) considered *the* American composers by the general public.

Ives challenged Thomson on his own territory. By more complex and dissonant means, he used the same bric-a-brac montage of 19th-century memorabilia to evoke the American past. But Ives's past was puritanical New England, stiff, stuffy, the snobbish Northeast, not the homespun, middle class, relaxed, unassuming Midwest of Thomson. They certainly had much in common, especially Anglo-Saxon hymnology, but the plain religion of the Kansas City Baptist Church was far removed from the Concord Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The two composers are polar personalities, Ives introspective, craggy, eccentric; Thomson extrovert, cosmopolitan, a witty denizen of Gay Parée. Ives, a full-time, successful business man, was only a part-time musician, not a professional musician; Thomson a thorough, professional musician but a business man of quite a different sort. Besides, Ives was a very wealthy man.

The Gershwin problem was more obvious. His natural genius was undeniable, he exuberantly and effortlessly exuded music like Schubert. But he had no formal training (at least Ives had that), and his music lacked structure and form, was not professional. Gershwin's *Piano Concerto* (1926) was a loose cannon next to Aaron Copland's (1927) (one of Nadia Boulanger's star pupils), yet the Gershwin composition had the audacity to become an American classic, appreciated by millions, while the Copland, fine as it is, a period piece. Even worse, Gershwin's jazz was white man's jazz, ersatz, not the expression of what Thomson truly (and rightly) thought jazz to be, an authentic expression of a social condition -- the music of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor was authentic jazz, felt and experienced as an inborn part of their heritage. Gershwin was a by-product of commercial Broadway, his music a combination of Harlem and the synagogue. Thomson's posture was not insincere. During the 1930s, when the question of highbrow/lowbrow music was first seriously discussed, Thomson sided with the academics. Milhaud's use of jazz (just as ersatz) in *La Création du Monde* (1923) was the first salvo of the argument. The Gershwin problem is still being squabbled over. Thomson entered the fray 60 years ago.

His letters from his earliest years are those of a born writer, exhibiting all the artfully contrived, wonderful phrases of his published writing. Unfortunately, his early flashes of poetry, feeling for nature, and descriptive writing diminished as he grew older, as if he had decided to dampen that segment of his imaginative response as being too intimate or sentimental. However, curiosity, perspicacity, intelligence, and a zest for life never deserted him, nor did his ardor for recipes, both American and French. While thinking of food, he gave us food for thought.

### **Aaron Copland**

At the Yaddo-Sessions concerts in 1931 Copland programmed Thomson's uproarious setting of Gertrude Stein's *Capital, Capitals*. This witty composition of the dialogue of four cities put Thomson on the map; its nonchalant impudence and Parisian flavor was enjoyed and discussed. Thomson was stimulated by this and wrote two *Piano Sonatas* in a similar vein; the first one for Gertrude Stein. She could only play white notes and the span of an octave was all she could handle. (Thomson later orchestrated the second sonata.)

So it was from the very beginning of their careers that Thomson and Copland were intertwined, and it is no accident that they are credited with being the fathers of the American music that came of age in the 1930s. The next 15 years or so belonged to them. Thomson was there first with the Stein operas and the technique he unveiled in *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* set the tone. Copland always acknowledged his debt to Thomson, saying that "he is about as original a personality as America can boast." We forget Thomson's contribution because Copland's brand of Americana, *Billy the Kid*, *Our Town*, and *Appalachian Spring* continue to dominate our concert life. The composers do not sound alike -- Copland having added other styles to his arsenal -- but they are united in their devotion to the American scene. And they were devoted to each other throughout their long lives. In the 20s, they had Boulanger in common; but Copland's Parisian orbit, even peripherally, was not that of Thomson's. Two extraordinary talents -- Copland a New Yorker, gentle, ever helpful, rather sober, introspective; and Thomson, Parisian Midwesterner (and vice versa) volatile, party going, extroverted -- they were the Siamese twins who were possessed by a desire to forge a new American music, and they did.

Almost inadvertently Thomson helped launch Copland's career (and many others). In 1924 Thomson wrote a review for the *Boston Transcript* of a concert given in Paris by Serge Koussevitzky. It was this piece that alerted the American music establishment to Koussevitzky's ability and eventually led to the conductor's ascendancy to the papacy of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Koussevitzky premiered a Copland piece, *Music for the Theater*, in 1925. What he has done for music by commissioning works by most of our top-notch composers cannot be overestimated. Thomson was not among them. Thomson had other advocates, his scores were widely played by his boon companion, Sir Thomas Beecham, Eugene Ormandy, Stokowski, and others.

During the post-World War II years, Thomson and Copland divided the spoils of victory between them; their affection for each other never diminished and their commendation of each other's music never flagged. When Copland flirted with serialism Thomson was respectful if not convinced; nor was he dishonest about Copland's inability to write a first class theater piece (except the ballets). Copland accepted Thomson's comments gracefully and constructively.

This period was indeed a time of great musical ferment in our history, as if the musical *Zeitgeist* of Paris had taken flight and landed in New York. Composers of every shape and size were busily at work, many

seeming to live on a different planet -- Roger Sessions, Elliott Carter, Walter Piston, Samuel Barber, Roy Harris, William Schuman, Wallingford Riegger, Carl Ruggles, Harry Partch, Edgard Varèse, Marc Blitzstein; the list could be extended. In this hassle of activity no one claimed to be king of the hill; they were members of a large wrangling family, the community of music -- but when the chips were down, friend or foe came to each other's aid and stood as one against any Philistine invader.

To the generation of the 1950s Copland's musical syntax became the most accessible; it was obvious that Thomson's French leaning and unique sophisticated music belonged to him alone. Yet, though his musical style may not have been a clarion call to the young, he was still very much a star performer, his high-pitched voice heard above the cacophony around him. Believing that as generations change the avant-garde becomes the old guard, and in time the old circle will reform and be again in the ascendancy, he was positive that his music would also be returned to the fold.

He continued to compose constantly (until the end of his life), wrote essays, book reviews, and criticism, lectured, conducted, taught at prestigious universities, was one of the founders of the Arrow Music Press, the American Composers' Alliance, the Music Critics' Award, sat on the board of ASCAP, and was awarded many accolades and honors. He expected this as no more than his due, but it did not subdue his sense of humor. "My academic gowns can be worn in academic parades or as bathrobes."

### **John Houseman**

In 1934 Thomson was in Paris, savoring the success of *Four Saints*, when he received a letter from the director of that opera, John Houseman, suggesting he return to New York and join him in a new "Off-Broadway" project, the Phoenix Theater. They would produce old and new serious plays calibrated for a thoughtful audience at affordable prices. This appealed to Thomson, who was intoxicated with the theater ever since, at the age of 12, he saw his first opera. The aura of theater magic making was in his blood, not the smell of greasepaint (he was not that kind of artist) but the challenge of solving the specific problems that each play demanded -- music to clarify its mood and inner substance -- that is what he loved to write. He was gifted as a composer who could annotate not dramatize what was happening on the stage. His theater was one of ideas, words, and lyricism -- not physical activity or soaring emotions. He was a master of background music -- a phase of theater music little appreciated, understood, or discussed. It is what makes the Stein operas and the Lorentz films so original and so successful.

Thomson's scores for the Houseman productions are mostly first rate, but unfortunately are so integrated with that specific theatrical experience that they cannot be performed as pure music. They were not conceived as such and fall into a category of music that is ironically of no use outside the arena of the theater pit.

The first score he wrote was for Countee Cullen's version of Euripides' *Medea* -- a project in which the young Martha Graham was involved, but which never materialized. Later Thomson arranged the choruses he had written for it (*Seven Choruses from the Medea of Euripides*) as a successful concert piece. Archibald MacLeish's dramatic *Panic* was substituted. It was however Kathleen Connell's production of *Romeo and Juliet* that changed the course of American theater. Playing Romeo was a magnetic young actor, Orson Welles, who was soon co-producing with Houseman plays for the WPA (Works Progress Administration) financed by the US government. Thomson's powerful score for a black



version of *Macbeth* was followed by music for Leslie Howard's *Hamlet*, Tallulah Bankhead's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the sensational *Injunction Granted*. The success of these works led to Thomson's ballet *Filling Station* and film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*.

Though Houseman was the synergist of this laudable phase of Thomson's career, it led to a dead end. The composer did not continue working with him and Welles when they originated the Mercury Theater. Later, Houseman and Thomson patched up whatever differences they had (Welles, by this time, had moved on to Hollywood) and collaborated on the famous production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1957) with Katharine Hepburn and Alfred Drake. Thomson's essay on this subject is one of the most illuminating of its kind (1959). The score for Robert Lewis's production of Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* is also top-drawer Thomson.

Houseman's later triple career as a film director, writer, and actor is common knowledge. Their feelings for each other surfaced again when Houseman directed Thomson's *Lord Byron* when it premiered at the Juilliard School of Music in 1972.

### **New York**

Years before the war forced him to leave Paris, Thomson was aware that the frothy days of his former life were over. In 1933 he had told Lincoln Kirstein: "The dominant chic is no longer the Americans in exile -- Pound, Stein, Hemingway -- but Marxist-tinged German refugees, a result of the influx of exiles from Hitler." (His upbeat manner always hid a penetrating political awareness, though he was in no sense "political.")

Thomson's resilience made readjusting to living in New York a non-traumatic event. Without missing a beat he settled in its cultural life, and sought and found new opportunities. Shrewdly in the 1920s and 1930s, though Paris was his mistress, he always kept an affair going with New York, often returning there to compose film scores, theater music, ballets, chamber, and choral works by request and commission.

His intellectual curiosity never diminished; he kept abreast of all that was new, gathering the young around him -- Ned Rorem, Lou Harrison, John Cage, and Frank O'Hara. They were fascinated by his *con brio* spirit, his healthy vitality; he was a paternal figure to them, with all the love-hate such a symbiotic relationship incurs. Ned Rorem, his most gifted pupil -- writer and composer -- in his fearless and honest diaries has written a vivid and often touching chronicle of the years he had known him. Another pupil, Paul Bowles, known now for his somewhat decadent novels of exotic behavior, was in his incarnation as a musician, a gifted writer of songs and theater music.

Thomson's gradual loss of hearing did not put a damper on his activities, but it was a problem to his close associates. During a lull in a conversation or attending a concert he would doze off, but at the appropriate moment would manage to wake from his theatrical somnambulism to come out with the witty zinger they were waiting for.

Thomson did make a miscalculation that had a negative effect on his career. When he retired from the *Herald Tribune* he thought his position secure enough to guarantee him performances by the major American orchestras. He was wrong; his too honest reviews had irritated many established institutions and his works were only sporadically programmed. Part of this neglect may have been due to his musical style, but certainly a major factor was personal, a retaliatory vendetta against him. His second mistake

was that he did not attach himself to any one well established publisher, preferring to control his own financial and distribution destiny. In his last years he did try, unsuccessfully, to change his situation. Because of this, throughout his career he had no professional organization that was obligated to publish and promote his music as one of their "house composers." Of course, he was published and performed, but not with the devotion he would have had if he was one publisher's "property."

### **Hotel Chelsea -- The Last Years**

In 1934 Thomson became a resident at the Hotel Chelsea in New York, a Victorian building that opened in 1884. Many literary people -- Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Wolfe, Tennessee Williams -- have lived there. Despite its regal elegance, it always had a slightly randy, seedy appearance.

Entering his apartment on the 9th floor, you walked into a past era which was very European, and which left contemporary obstreperous New York far below. Every object in it was a significant part of his history and revealed the cultural milieu of a man whose life for more than half a century was spent interacting with the international avant-garde, particularly the Paris of the 1920s. The enormous sitting room, because of pictures hung on its red and blue walls, made the apartment seem larger than it was. Book cases contained works of his friends old and new -- first editions of Stein, Cocteau, Cummings, Joyce, Gide, Faulkner, William Carlos Williams, James Merrill, Edward Albee, and Truman Capote. Photographs, periodicals of the 20s, paintings and sculpture by Maurice Grosser, Jean Arp, Florine Stettenheimer, Leonid Berman, Christian Berard, Yves Tanguy, Paul Tchelitchew, every one an irreplaceable visual memoir of a lasting friendship. A grand piano, a fireplace, his favorite armchair, and a large cupboard dominated the room. Conspicuous on the top of the cupboard was a set of Vuitton luggage. This was both a pretentious display of vanity and a constant reminder of his hasty retreat from France with Man Ray in 1940. That's all he could manage to take with him.

To these rooms like pilgrims to a hermitage came the elite of the day -- Stravinsky, Boulez, Beecham, Oscar Levant, Bernstein, Tennessee Williams, Philip Johnson, Peggy Guggenheim, Edward Albee, and others. They came for the same reason artists congregated at 17 quai Voltaire, debonair conversations and fabulous food. Thomson was an amazing cook and could whip up a gourmet meal with a few cans from the supermarket. Always impeccably dressed, he reigned like a beloved maharaja, although his activities were more restricted than in former years. Like Truman Capote, whom he resembled in size (5'2"), he was to the manner born, his chic parties a social event.

From his command post in the Chelsea, Thomson directed and conscripted, admonished and advised by phone -- usually from his bed, clad in expensive, bright pajamas -- all those around him, a power broker with a wide reach. He was more informed about the inner mechanism, frictions, and amours of the New York scene than almost anyone, his experience and acquaintances were worldwide, and his total recall of everyone and everything mind boggling. His barbs could still barbecue, but when the tantrum subsided and the verbal dust settled, whether wounded or unscathed, one had to grudgingly admit there was still fire in the old volcano. His faculties were in fine working order, his advice or scolding not always unbiased, but never without some degree of truth, if often painful.

There was at times a soft mellowness to some of his outbursts; if you defended yourself in a manner he could respect, the sentimental, Midwestern boy could be glimpsed. An example of this is the following true story.

Thomson had an appointment with the editor of one of his several publishers. After the usual sparring and aggressive discussion of the technical matters he did not approve of -- his way was always the only way music should be printed -- Thomson spied on the piano a three-volume set of *Byron: A Biography* by Leslie A. Marchand, which the editor had just purchased. Thomson suddenly relaxed, was warm and gracious, his conversation nearly civil. When he left the room he had under his arm the *Byron* (he was then in the throes of writing the opera). The editor quietly said: "Excuse me Mr. Thomson, but the books under your arm belong to me." Thomson, without batting an eye, with an innocent and sheepish smile (hiding the wolf), returned the books and replied: "Oh sweetie, I *really* thought you had bought them for me." The two men shook hands affectionately — like father and son — it was a draw.

From the 1930s until he died in 1964, Cole Porter lived at the Waldorf Towers on Park Avenue. From the 1940s until his death, Thomson lived at the Hotel Chelsea on West 23rd Street. These men of two remarkably divergent worlds and talents had one thing in common: they were both Midwesterners whose cosmopolitanism outdid any metropolitan boy in their urbanity. The immensely wealthy Porter, a dominant figure in high society, was crippled by a riding accident that destroyed his legs. His parties were social events, his wit and dinners the delight of the international jet and theater set. A world traveler, Porter was during the 1920s a darling of the Parisian beau monde. Endowed with gifts that could not be duplicated, Porter and Thomson deftly handled the English language with dexterity and clever buoyancy.

Thomson sported many of the traits and foibles of the very rich of which he hankered to be a part of -- the world into which Porter had always moved and belonged. Thomson and Porter, who drank from the same font of inside knowledge and gossip, were never happier than when they were the center of their own circle. From different backgrounds, they were brothers under the skin -- quick-witted, exuberant, hard-working, impish, inventive, sophisticated, glamorous. They added to the gaiety of our nation.

### **The Very Last Years**

The last years of his life must have been an ordeal for him, although he seemed to enjoy every acerbic moment of it. To act the part and truly believe one is a living legend was surely extremely exhausting for even Virgil Thomson who spent his entire life being VT. He was both a delight and a problem to his "everbest" close circle of friends. Only his lifelong companion, Maurice Grosser, with a cleverly modulated gentle reprimand, a soft word, or a pat on the hand, could keep him under control when he became intractable. Only Grosser could resolve an awkward situation without rancor or embarrassment. Grosser died a year before Thomson, and the composer told one of his everbest friends a few months before his own demise that "it's almost unbearable. I've had enough." On 30 September 1989 he died quietly, in style, and had a self-organized memorial at St. John's "too-too" Divine Cathedral in New York.

How can one give even a partial picture of a creative artist so enigmatic? He disturbs us, makes us think about our attitudes, perceptions, and prejudices. No one will ever know what was going on in his unquiescent mind. Was he deeply disillusioned under his boulevardier exterior? Were his bombardments of bon mots and one-upmanships his first line of defense? Against what? Is laughter truly, as the philosophers tell us, the opposite of tears? Was he really the world-weary Lord Byron? Did he learn this at an early age in Missouri, where his ashes now lie quietly in Slater, not far from his beloved Kansas City?