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| **Thomson, Virgil (1896-1989)** |
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| Virgil Thomson was born in Kansas City, Missouri. During his childhood Thomson’s creative and intellectual gifts did not go unnoticed, and with the assistance of a scholarship financed by the Mormon Church, he enrolled in Harvard in 1919. It is safe to say that Virgil Thomson’s prestigious career as a composer, conductor and music critic for the *New York* *Herald Tribune* would have unfolded differently had he refused a trip to Paris as accompanist with the Harvard Glee Club in June 1921. The Glee Club toured Europe, accumulating an assortment of favourable reviews in the process. When the Glee Club arrived in Italy, its conductor, Archibald Davison, fell ill and turned the concert reins at Pesaro over to the young twenty-four-year-old Thomson, for what would prove to be one of the Glee Club’s most exciting performances. Having survived the demands placed on an American orchestra touring the artistic capitals of Europe, Thomson’s Harvard precociousness was transformed virtually overnight into an aesthetic maturity that his subsequent life and career would continuously validate afresh. |
| Virgil Thomson was born in Kansas City, Missouri. During his childhood Thomson’s creative and intellectual gifts did not go unnoticed, and with the assistance of a scholarship financed by the Mormon Church, he enrolled in Harvard in 1919. For an artist and intellectual living in the early twentieth century, however, there was nowhere more suited to the development of a modernist style and imagination than Paris, the artistic capital of Europe. It is safe to say that Virgil Thomson’s prestigious career as a composer, conductor and music critic for the *New York* *Herald Tribune* would have unfolded differently had he refused the trip to Paris as accompanist with the Harvard Glee Club in June 1921. The Glee Club toured Europe, accumulating an assortment of favourable reviews in the process. When the Glee Club arrived in Italy, its conductor, Archibald Davison, fell ill and turned the concert reins at Pesaro over to the young twenty-four-year-old Thomson, for what would prove to be one of the Glee Club’s most exciting performances. ‘In 1921,’ Thomson would later remark, ‘Europe itself had been the objective. That was where the good teachers lived and all the best composers – Stravinsky, Ravel, Schonberg, Strauss, Satie’ (*A Virgil Thomson Reader* 41). Having survived the demands placed on an American orchestra touring the artistic capitals of Europe, Thomson’s Harvard precociousness was transformed virtually overnight into an aesthetic maturity that his subsequent life and career would continuously validate afresh.    Thomson returned to Paris in 1925, and it was during this second trip that he not only began studying novel approaches to counterpoint, analysis and harmony under Nadia Boulanger, but he also had the good fortune of meeting Gertrude Stein. Drawing on his inspiration from Erik Satie’s minimalist compositions, Thomson began to develop in earnest a style and form that resonated more with the sounds one hears in the streets, arcades and cafes, than with the elevated ‘high modernist’ style of a Mahler or even a Stravinsky. However, it was not his music but his personal charm and conversational wit that solidified his relationship with Stein. Through their collaboration on the operas *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), Thomson was able to showcase his ability to translate into a musical syntax the humour, cadence, and tactility of Stein’s literary innovations. Thomson exhibited a rare talent for collaborative work, and it was his process of composition as much as the end-product of his work with Stein that permits his name to be associated with the very best of modernist culture.  Fig: Thomson + Stein.jpg  That Stein exerted a lasting influence on the development of Thomson’s identity as a modernist is reflected in much of his non-operatic work as well. Thomson’s more than 150 musical portraits (*Four Portraits for Cello and Piano* and *Five Ladies for Violin and Piano*) accomplished in music what Stein’s literary portraits achieved through the language of her prose. For his *Portraits* Thomson insisted that his subject be physically present while he composed their musical sketch, much in the way that a model would sit patiently in front of a painter. Thomson strongly believed that the presence of his subjects enhanced his concentration and, by extension, the process of composition as well.  By the end of his long career Thomson had amassed an impressive artistic and critical repertoire that included musical accompaniments for ballet (*Filling Station*, 1937), music for jazz ensembles (*Fanfare for France*, 1940; *Sonorous and Exquisite Corpses*, 1950; *Five Songs from William Blake*, 1951), film scores (*The Plough that Broke the Plains*, 1936; *The River*, 1937; *Louisiana Story*, 1948), compositions for orchestra (*Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, 1958; *Sabat Mater*, 1960; *Dance in Praise*, 1962), an autobiography (*Virgil Thomson*, 1966), books of criticism (*The Art of Judging Music*, 1948; *Music, Right and Left*, 1951; *Music with Words*, 1989), and not least of all, his critical review pieces for the *Herald* and other publications. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Circle Award, and a Brandeis Award, to name only a few, Virgil Thomson lists as one of the most influential American critics and artists of the twentieth century. Collected Works and Criticism: *A Virgil Thomson Reader*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.  *The State of Music*. New York: W. Morrow, 1939.  *The Musical Scene*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1945.  *The Art of Judging Music*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1948.  *Music, Right and Left*. New York: Holt, 1951.  *Virgil Thomson*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1966.  *Music with Words: a Composer’s View*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. |
| Further reading:  (Holbrook and Dilworth)  (Hoover and Cage)  (Page and Page)  (Shere and Tede)  (Tommasini) |