

VIRGIL THOMSON:
MUSIC CHRONICLES



V I N C E N T G I R O U D

Having lived in France more or less continuously from 1924 on, Virgil Thomson fled Paris just before the city fell to the Germans and arrived in New York on 12 August 1940. A month later, Alexander Smallens, who had conducted the premiere of his *Four Saints in Three Acts* in Hartford in 1934 (as well as that of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* the following year), introduced him to Geoffrey Parsons, who coordinated cultural coverage for *The New York Herald Tribune*. Thomson was recruited at once as the paper's chief music critic, beginning on 10 October. He had tried his hand sporadically at music reviewing in the 1920s and 1930s, in *Vanity Fair*, of all places, and, especially, for *Modern Music*, the organ of the League of Composers, whose membership included several American composers, such as Aaron Copland and Walter Piston, who, like him, had studied with Nadia Boulanger. Writing for a daily with a circulation of more than four hundred thousand was obviously an altogether different challenge, which Thomson took up, as he put it, "in a spirit of adventure," all the more so since

Virgil Thomson: Music Chronicles, 1940–1954, edited by Tim Page (*Library of America*, 1,200 pp., \$45)

The Herald Tribune was, in his view, “a gentleman’s paper, more like a chancellery than a business.” Parsons gave him more or less free rein, and Thomson soon became New York’s most famous music critic – and the most feared. He remained with the paper fourteen years, and his reviews, along with other writings, some previously unpublished, have been collected by the Library of America into *Virgil Thomson: Music Chronicles, 1940–1954*.

As a critic, Thomson thought of himself, as he wrote in his autobiography, “as a species of knight-errant attacking dragons single-handedly and rescuing musical virtue in distress.” That he was not afraid to cause offense to the musical establishment was already in evidence in his 1939 book *The State of Music*, where a long chapter was devoted to “Who does what to whom and who gets paid.” The chief dragon he was determined to take on was the amateurism and snobbishness of the rich patrons of New York musical institutions, especially the New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera. He was equally determined to expose the mercantilism and cultural retardation of the “manipulators of our music distribution.” As for “musical virtue in distress,” it included, as he put it, everyone involved with music in a relation “based only on music and the sound it makes.”

Another dragon Thomson meant to confront was what he felt to be the excessive weight of the German tradition in American musical life. A Francophile whose musical pantheon ranged from Debussy and Satie to Edith Piaf (along with Duke Ellington one of the few nonclassical musicians featured), he never lost an opportunity to remind his readers that borders and monopolies did not belong in the world of music. Nor was he well disposed toward systems or schools. Not afraid to proclaim himself an anti-Wagnerian, he spoke respectfully, sympathetically even, of dodecaphonism and its practitioners, including the young Pierre Boulez and Luigi Dallapiccola, while making clear that he would not endorse claims that theirs was the music of the future. Even the neoclassicism of Stravinsky was felt to be an impasse (it would be interesting to read this self-professed “Stravinsky fan” on the master’s latter-day conversion to serialism).

The fourth dragon, and probably Thomson’s main *bête noire*, was fanaticism. Among music lovers, he saw it as a front for ignorance, among composers as a form of intolerance, or part of a

pernicious power- or money-grabbing strategy. The star system practiced by the two prominent New York musical institutions, especially after Rudolf Bing became general manager of the Met in 1950, was an equally pernicious way of maintaining audiences in a state of ignorance or semi-ignorance by making sure that their taste was carefully, but firmly, conditioned by “publicity machinery.” In reaction, Thomson was never swayed by star power, or by power tout court, as when reviewing, with delicious perfidy, the New York recital debut of Margaret Truman. Vladimir Horowitz, whom he thought vastly overrated compared with Arthur Rubinstein, was castigated as “out to wow the public” at all cost, even if it meant trying to convince one “that Sebastian Bach was a musician of the Leopold Stokowski type, that Brahms was a sort of flippant Gershwin who had worked in a high-class night club and that Chopin was a gypsy violinist.” The famous review of the 1940 Carnegie Hall recital of Jascha Heifetz, titled “Silk-Underwear Music” and ending with the word *vulgar*, is here, of course (“his justly remunerated mastery of the musical marshmallow. . . . If that is Mozart, I’ll buy a hat and eat it”). When it comes to violinists, his suffrage went to Jacques Thibaud and Nathan Milstein, neither a member of the “wowing school.”

While never downright mean, and actually capable of great tact (as when reviewing Maria Jeritz’s return to the concert platform), Thomson was clearly not afraid to go on the offensive, and he often refers to the abundant hate mail his criticism generated from fans of all stripes – Germanophiles, Wagnerites, Toscaninites, etc. In his autobiography, he recalls with glee the hostility he faced, in particular, from the Metropolitan Opera Association and the board of the Philharmonic. His very first review, published on 11 October 1940, ends by quoting a friend (whom he subsequently identified as his lifelong companion, Maurice Grosser) on the orchestra’s not being “part of New York’s intellectual life,” a phrase he also used about the Met. When Arthur Rodzinski resigned as music director in 1943 owing to differences with the orchestra’s business manager, the musician-turned-impresario Arthur Judson (co-founder of two of New York’s most powerful musical institutions, CBS and Columbia Artists Management), Thomson, naturally, came out strongly in support of the conductor. For the Philharmonic’s association with illustrious visitors, such as

Gustav Mahler and Arturo Toscanini, what it lacked, in his view, was the kind of day-to-day artistic guidance the Boston Symphony had received from Serge Koussevitzky, the Philadelphia Orchestra from Eugene Ormandy, and the Cleveland Orchestra, beginning in 1946, from George Szell. One of Leonard Bernstein's early appearances with the Philharmonic is described as "vigorous and refreshing"; no doubt Thomson, who admired him, it seems, more as a technician than as a creator, applauded his appointment in 1958 as music director. Though rebuking Toscanini on his lack of interest in the music of his time, Thomson has fascinating comments to make on the star conductor. It is clear, however, that Ernest Ansermet, Sir Thomas Beecham, Pierre Monteux, and Fritz Reiner are for him in a different class.

On the subject of music criticism, Thomson tends to be characteristically modest: "The sole justifiable purpose of reviewing, in my opinion," he declared in 1953 before the National Institute of Arts and Letters, "is to inform the public; any other is an abuse of confidence." The critic ("a man of letters whose subject is music") "is under no necessity to edify anybody or to improve taste." His chief responsibility, Thomson claimed, was to describe and to explain the music being performed in terms understandable to the average cultivated reader. He was, of course, well aware that there is no such thing as a totally neutral description and that he could not avoid expressing an opinion, but this opinion, he maintained, was "not a very important matter." As a conclusion to the address he gave at Harvard, his alma mater, in 1947, he suggested that "a musical judgment is of value to others less for the conclusions reached than for the methods by which these have been, not even arrived at, but elaborated, defended, and expressed." What did matter to him was that, in the world where total amateurs, lacking even the most basic musical instruction, could make or break the careers of professional musicians, only a critic who was himself a musician had the necessary competence to describe music correctly.

Thomson was not the first American composer to write music criticism; William Henry Fry had contributed to the Philadelphia *National Gazette* in the 1830s and Deems Taylor to the *New York World* in the 1920s. He was, however, the first major composer to

do so. There had been a distinguished tradition in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Europe, especially in France and Germany. Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner had been active as critics; so had Hector Berlioz in Paris and after him Ernest Reyer, Gabriel Fauré, Alfred Bruneau, and Reynaldo Hahn, in particular – and one can imagine that Thomson missed none of the last-named’s weekly music chronicles in *Le Figaro*. If, like him, Thomson had such success as a critic, it was above all because he was a superb writer, never at a loss for the felicitous phrase; and that is what makes his reviews of musical events such an enjoyable read more than seven decades later.

To be sure, he has his blind spots. Like so many French-educated musicians of the period (Ravel, for one), he has no particular liking for Tchaikovsky. Admirers of Sibelius will wince at the Second Symphony’s being characterized as “vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description” (and, elsewhere, “third-rate”); and one may recall that Sibelius had been championed by Thomson’s arch-rival, Olin Downes of *The New York Times*. Mahler fans will be similarly distressed to see the *Resurrection* Symphony dismissed as “respectfully derivative from all the Germanic clichés of its time” (“Really, how pretentious can you be about a thoroughly conventional harmony-and-counterpoint exercise on the C-minor chord?”). The First, Eighth, and Ninth Symphonies and *Das Lied von der Erde* are more kindly treated. Thomson views Mahler as self-consciously standing at the end of the great German tradition and yet, as he sees it (while predicting a torrent of hate mail), surprisingly close in some respects to the French impressionists. Even so, his true sympathies lie elsewhere: “Noble but not wholly satisfactory work” is how he sums up his impression of the Eighth. Berlioz’s *grandes machines*, even Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, are not really his cup of tea, either. Shostakovich’s Seventh (the *Lenin-grad*) strikes him as “thin of substance, unoriginal, and shallow” (“It could have said what it says in fifteen minutes, or it could have gone on for two hours more”). Some of this distaste may, admittedly, be in reaction to the propaganda fanfare that had greeted the U.S. premiere of the work, at a time when “Uncle Joe” had become a valuable military ally. The Eighth (“as plain as the nose on your face”) elicits similar unenthusiastic comments two years later.

When Thomson returns to the case of Shostakovich in 1948–49, he is clearly less interested in his music than in exposing the plight of composers under Stalinism.

Richard Strauss is another composer who receives mixed reviews. “I can take a nap here and there,” Thomson writes about *Der Rosenkavalier*, “without seeming to miss anything, because when I wake up the music is always doing exactly what it was when I dropped off.” With Strauss’s late operas, Thomson confesses he has little or no acquaintance. Save for one passing reference to the *Four Last Songs* and another (not caught by the indexer, incidentally) to the *Metamorphosen*, there are hardly any mentions of any works later than *Ariadne auf Naxos*, whose first New York professional presentation (in 1946, unbelievably) receives lukewarm appreciation. As a result, Strauss is treated essentially, and thus incompletely, as an exponent of *Expressionismus*. Yet, as seen at the Met in 1952, *Elektra*, conducted by Reiner with Astrid Varnay in the title role, Elisabeth Höngen as Clytemnestra, and no less than Set Svanholm and Paul Schöffler as the male leads, is appraised as “the finest musical performance of any opera that I have ever heard.”

Like every critic, Thomson is at his best when discussing what he feels passionately about, and the cause dearest to his heart is that of contemporary music, especially that of American composers, who he feels are underrepresented in the New York musical scene and, as a result, underappreciated by New York audiences. He is always worth reading on the subject of modern music in general, commenting sympathetically on musicians as diverse as George Antheil, John Cage, Elliott Carter, Copland, Henry Cowell, David Diamond, William Schuman, Randall Thompson (whose First String Quartet is a favorite of Thomson’s), and many others. Given his own involvement in the genre, American opera is a topic of particular interest, with penetrating observations on Marc Blitzstein and Gian Carlo Menotti. His admiration for *Porgy and Bess* is not unqualified, but even his qualifications are illuminating (as is everything he writes on Gershwin, whom he knew personally). To be sure, there is no lack of back-handed compliments, even to composers he professes to love, such as Roy Harris and Lukas Foss. Yet even when discussing works he obviously does not much like, such as Barber’s Second Symphony, Thomson al-

ways takes pains to convey a precise idea of the music. Though clearly appreciative of technical mastery, he is even more sensitive to style and even charm (“we have no place in our vast system of musical distribution for music without charm,” he notes about Roger Sessions).

When it comes to his international contemporaries, Thomson tends to show his partiality toward the French. Of the Six, Darius Milhaud, whose versatility evidently dazzles him, receives the most praise, followed by Arthur Honegger and Francis Poulenc, whom he admires above all as a songwriter; interestingly, posterity has reversed this order. He thinks highly of Henri Sauguet and Manuel Rosenthal and salutes Olivier Messiaen as a genius, even though the latter’s religious preoccupations clearly are of little interest to him, prompting him, even, to evoke Aimee Semple McPherson (the Messiaen fan club will not be amused). Paul Hindemith is treated with respect rather than loved. On the other hand, Thomson has kind words for Kurt Weill and even Hanns Eisler (“that rare specimen, a German composer without weight”). Fellow opera composer Benjamin Britten (in *Peter Grimes*) is criticized for his “none too happy handling of English vowel quantities,” while *Billy Budd*, heard in Paris in 1952 (under the composer) during Nicolas Nabokov’s *Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century* festival, is “a very dull opera.”

Being active at once as composer and critic put Thomson, obviously, in a tricky position. References to his own work are sparse and on the coy side in the earlier years (“There was a piece of mine on the program, too”), still rare but a little more assured later on, such as when he names himself among the five prominent American composers active before the war or identifies himself as the chief proponent of musical neo-Romanticism. He clearly was careful to avoid any suggestion that he used his position to advance his composing career. Did he, in fact, hurt it? The 1940s and 1950s were for him a period of remarkable productivity, during which he produced two symphonies, his second opera in collaboration with Gertrude Stein (*The Mother of Us All*), a cello concerto, a ballet with Agnes de Mille, film music, incidental music, and the symphonic poem *Three Pictures for Orchestra*.

Thomson is the first musician to be honored by the Library of America. This volume consists of Thomson’s own generous anthol-

ogy of his reviews, as collected in the volumes *The Musical Scene* (1945), *The Art of Judging Music* (1948), and *Music Right and Left* (1951), supplemented by previously uncollected articles included in *Music Reviewed* (1967), twenty-five additional reviews from the *Herald Tribune*, three related essays and questionnaire answers, and eight prewar articles, mostly from *Modern Music*. A second volume, in addition to *The State of Music* and *American Music since 1910* (1971), will include chronicles from later years collected in *Virgil Thomson by Virgil Thomson* (1966), and uncollected speeches and reviews, some of which appeared, in particular, in *The New York Review of Books*. The editor, Tim Page, himself a former music critic with *The Washington Post*, is an eminent Thomsonian: as he tells us, he was recruited by the composer in 1986, along with his wife, Vanessa Weeks Page, to edit the volume of *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, in which, to the Pages' dismay (as we are told), Thomson revised the texts of the letters and rewrote the editors' comments.

At the end of the volume are a useful chronology, and a no less useful biographical index of all musicians discussed by Thomson. The index is thorough and lists almost all musical works discussed. Beckmessers will quibble with a few details: Endrèze did not have a fifty-year stage career in Paris; the cabaret singer known as Polaire was born Émilie Bouchaud, not Bouchard; Paul Bowles's 1944 ballet was titled *Colloque sentimental* in the singular and Werner Egk was not "von," nor the playwright Feydeau Jacques but rather Georges (Thomson's mistakes in all cases – another being a diacritic on the first *e* of Lefébure – but repeated by the editor); nor was Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* written during World War I since it was premiered in May 1914; nor is Florent Schmitt's opus 65 *Le Rêve*, as Thomson has it, and even less, as "amended" by the editor, *La Rêve*, but *Rêves*. These minor blemishes are negligible in a volume anyone with interest in music will want to have and return to for information, enlightenment, stimulation, and sheer pleasure.