



Thomson, Virgil (1896-1989)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Critic and composer Virgil Thomson was a pioneer in creating a specifically American form of classical music that is at once "serious" yet whimsically sardonic. He is best known as Gertrude Stein's collaborator in two operas, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947).

The hymn melodies that shape the score of *Four Saints* are an echo of Thomson's earliest musical career, that of an organist in a Baptist church in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was born on November 25, 1896 into a tolerant, middle-class family. His mother especially encouraged his musical and artistic talents, which were obvious very early.

Thomson joined the United States Army in 1917 and served during World War I. After the war, he studied music at Harvard University, where he discovered *Tender Buttons* (1914), Stein's playful and elaborately encoded poetic work of lesbian eroticism.

He subsequently studied composition in Paris under Nadia Boulanger, the mentor of at least two generations of modern composers. In 1925 he finally met Stein, whose works he had begun to set to music. In Paris, he also met Jean Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky, and Erik Satie, the latter of whom influenced his music greatly.

There he also cemented a relationship with painter Maurice Grosser, who was to become his life partner and frequent collaborator (for example, Grosser directed *Four Saints in Three Acts* and devised the scenario for *The Mother of Us All*).

On February 8, 1934, Hartford, Connecticut saw the premiere of what is surely one of the strangest--indeed, *queerest*--works ever composed for the operatic stage, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the product of the collaboration between the closeted gay composer and the extroverted lesbian poet.

With a minimal plot focusing on Spanish Catholic saints Teresa of Avila and Ignatius Loyola and a score based, in great part, on Protestant hymns, the opera debuted with an all-Black cast under the auspices of the sardonically named Friends and Enemies of Modern Music, having, as might be expected, few others willing to back the production.

The work (which, in spite of its title, features a cast of numerous real and imaginary saints and four acts with a prologue) has never quite become part of the standard operatic repertory; it has nevertheless achieved a certain quirky longevity and stands today as its composer's best-known work.

More than a decade later, after the end of World War II and only months before Stein's death in July 1946, the pair collaborated on a second opera, *The Mother of Us All* (1947). While a more accessible work than *Four Saints*, Stein's apotheosis of suffragist leader Susan B. Anthony combines with Thomson's pastiche of nineteenth-century American popular and sentimental musical styles to create yet another unconventional piece of musical theater.



Virgil Thomson in 1947.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, June 4, 1947.
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Thomson was not, however, merely the man who set Gertrude Stein to music. From 1940 to 1954, he was the music critic of the *New York Herald Tribune*. In that role, he was noted for his stylish, opinionated, and at times acerbic essays on twentieth-century music, later collected in three volumes, *The Musical Scene* (1945), *The Art of Judging Music* (1948), and *Music, Right and Left* (1951).

Thomson continued to write and compose prolifically for the rest of his long life. He wrote more than 150 compositions in all, including scores for a number of plays and films. His score for the film *Louisiana Story* won the 1948 Pulitzer Prize for music.

Thomson's music is characterized by wit and playfulness and is rooted in American speech rhythms and hymnbook harmony. It partakes of Satie's ideals of clarity, simplicity, irony, and humor. Thomson's music influenced a number of his contemporaries, including most notably Aaron Copland, who always acknowledged his debt to Thomson.

Despite his association with noted lesbian figures, Thomson remained cautiously closeted for most of his life--at times problematically so. For many years--especially during the McCarthy era--he lived in fear that he might be outed and that such a revelation would have a detrimental effect on his career. It has been suggested--perhaps unfairly--that his friendships with women were motivated by a need to mask his homosexuality.

But in many ways Thomson lived an openly gay life. He and Grosser lived at the Hotel Chelsea, where he presided over a largely gay salon that attracted many of the leading figures in music and art and theater, including Leonard Bernstein, Tennessee Williams, and many others. He also encouraged many younger composers and literary figures such as Ned Rorem, Lou Harrison, John Cage, Frank O'Hara, and Paul Bowles.

Thomson played a crucial role in shaping twentieth-century American music, not only through his compositions and criticism but also through his incorporation of gay and lesbian icons as points of reference in his works.

A final opera, *Lord Byron* (1972), was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera but never staged by the company, apparently because of its then-taboo subject matter, the poet's incestuous relationship with his sister.

Thomson died on September 30, 1989, only a year after the death of Grosser.

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