



Tilson Thomas, Michael (b. 1944)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Conductor, pianist, and composer Michael Tilson Thomas has become in a relatively short time one of the most prominent American conductors of his generation. Perhaps most significantly, he is the first gay conductor to achieve such prominence without masking or hiding his sexuality.

Tilson Thomas does not discuss his homosexuality or his personal life with the public, but his dedication to creating and presenting music that explores the gay experience confirms his importance as a gay conductor.

Born on December 21, 1944, Tilson Thomas grew up in an artistic family--his grandparents, the Tomashevskys, were well known in Yiddish theater. He attended the University of Southern California, where he studied composition, conducting, piano, and harpsichord.

After winning the Koussevitzky Prize at the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood in the summer of 1968, Tilson Thomas became the youngest assistant conductor in the history of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In 1969, he garnered great critical praise by conducting the second half of the symphony's New York concert after its musical director, William Steinberg, became ill.

From that point on, Tilson Thomas steadily rose in the world of classical music. He served as conductor of a number of prestigious orchestras, including as associate and principal guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1970-1974), as music director of the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra (1971-1979), and as principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic (1981-1985). In 1988, he became principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

In 1995 Tilson Thomas stepped down from his position at the LSO to become the music director of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. Not only has he impressed audiences with his musical vision, talented conducting, and prolific number of recordings, but he has also used his position to commission works by gay composers that use the medium of classical music to represent gay life and gay history.

Tilson Thomas has acknowledged that he is something of a maverick in the music world. Known for his dedication to innovative and inventive composers, he has persistently performed their works in the hope that he might expose his audiences to the wonderful diversity of classical music in the United States.

To this end, he organized the American Mavericks music festival in San Francisco in June 2000. The festival highlighted the works of such composers as Lou Harrison, Lukas Foss, Earle Brown, Steve Reich, David Del Tredici, and Meredith Monk.

Tilson Thomas has similarly pushed audiences to rethink the relationship between classical music and homosexuality by celebrating openly gay composers such as Harrison and by commissioning works from Del Tredici and others that explicitly explore the experiences of gay men and lesbians.

Although gay men and lesbians have long been present in the world of classical music, both as performers

and as audience members, they have often remained invisible. Tilson Thomas has taken bold steps to change this.

In May 2001, Tilson Thomas conducted the premiere of Del Tredici's *Gay Life*, a series of pieces he commissioned that are based on poems by Allen Ginsberg, Thom Gunn, and Paul Monette. The work both explores the experiences of gay men in America and also delves into the challenges that gay men have faced in their struggle to survive the AIDS epidemic.

In addition, two of Tilson Thomas' own compositions have added to the small but growing classical music repertoire focused on gay subjects. *Three Poems by Walt Whitman*, written for baritone and orchestra, and *We Two Boys Together Clinging*, for baritone and piano, use Whitman's poetry to explore intimacy between men.

As a prominent American conductor, Tilson Thomas has displayed his mastery of tradition and his sense of musical adventure. His decision to live openly and his support of other gay musicians have enhanced his stature, both professionally and morally.

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About the Author

Geoffrey W. Bateman is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military*, as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.