

Virgil Thomson

Composer and Music Critic

1896-1989

by John Arthur Horner

Virgil Thomson was a major voice in American music during the twentieth century, both as composer and critic.

Descended from landed gentry, immigrant farmers, Revolutionary War heroes, Baptist slave holders, and the man who saved the life of Henry V at Agincourt, Virgil Thomson was born in Kansas City, Missouri, on November 25, 1896. He later described Kansas City as “a neighborly jostling of culture, religion and low life.”

Thomson’s father admitted having no ear for music, but it played a large role in the Thomson house. Virgil’s sister Ruby enjoyed throwing parties, once inviting Harry Truman to play the piano, but by the time Virgil was ten, Ruby drafted him to play.

Thomson attended Central High School and was an honor student. He was already a professional organist when he graduated and had begun a lifetime of artistic and literary friendships. He enrolled in junior college and met lifelong friend Alice Smith, great granddaughter of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. Thomson often visited Alice’s house, playing the piano and debating with Alice’s father, Dr. Fred M. Smith, president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Thomson returned to Kansas City following World War I, and Alice talked her father into getting the church to lend Thomson money to attend Harvard. (Years later it took the threat of a lawsuit to convince Thomson to repay the loan.) At Harvard Thomson began composing seriously.

In 1921 Thomson went to Paris and studied with composition teacher Nadia Boulanger, with whom he often disagreed. While there, Thomson came to know James Joyce, Hemingway, e. e. cummings, Copland, Pound, Picasso, and Gertrude Stein. He set some of Stein’s writings to music and collaborated with her on *Four Saints in Three Acts*, a surrealist opera in four acts with 30 saints that was originally staged with an all black cast. They later wrote another opera together, *The Mother of Us All*.



Though influenced by European composers such as Satie, Thomson was grounded especially in American hymns and speech rhythms, and his work in theater and cinema continued to show this. His music for *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River* were strongly received, and his score for *Louisiana Story* (1948) received the Pulitzer Prize. In 1940, when he became the chief music critic for the *New York Herald*, he used that platform to champion American music.

Throughout his life, Thomson periodically returned to Kansas City, staying at the Muehlebach Hotel. He died September 30, 1989, in New York City. Leonard Bernstein referred to him as the “source” of twentieth-century American music. He was buried in Slater, Missouri, the town from which his parents had come.

Sources

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