

“Four Saints in Three Acts”—“Original” cast recording (1947)

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Essay by David W. Barber (guest post)*



Virgil Thomson

Born in Kansas City, Mo., where he learned piano and later church organ, American composer/critic Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) studied at Harvard, developing an interest in the piano music of French composer Erik Satie. A scholarship year in Paris nurtured this interest, and after graduating in 1925, he moved there for further study, staying until 1940. (Asked why he had chosen Paris over Germany, Thomson’s answer was simple: “I preferred to starve where the food is good.”)

Paris in the 1920s and ’30s--after the First World War and before knowledge that there would be a Second--was home to composers, writers, artists and other creative types who came to be known as the Lost Generation, a term the poet Gertrude Stein coined to describe what seemed a loss of purpose or direction after the horrors of the war. French painters Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall were part of this artistic crowd, as were American ex-pat writers Stein, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Among the composers Thomson came to know were Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and others of Les Six. In time, Thomson became a pupil of the great musical teacher Nadia Boulanger, who had earlier taught fellow American composer Aaron Copland.

Guided by Boulanger and absorbing other influences, Thomson developed a musical language that, although perhaps not as expansive and identifiably “American” as Copland’s, displays what music historian Donald Jay Grout calls a sometimes “neo-primitive” style. Steeped in the church hymns of his youth, the impressionistic harmonies of Debussy and a playfulness from Satie, his music, as music writer David Dubal notes, is mostly diatonic, with splashes of bitonality and polytonality and even some contrapuntal moments. The result, as Dubal says, can be “unexpectedly refreshing.” What often appears simple, even minimalist, in his style can be deceptive, says music historian Richard Anthony Leonard. “Essentially a miniaturist and a dealer in vignettes,” Leonard says, “Thomson developed a style that is disarmingly uncomplex.

Its naiveté, however, is that of the complete sophisticate, springing from a mind that is urbane and highly cultured.”

On returning to America, Thomson was to bring much of this sophistication to his work as a music critic for the “New York Herald Tribune” from 1940 to 1954, producing what Dubal calls “the most clever, most perceptive and most influential music criticism ever written in America.” It was a dual role, as composer and critic, that Thomson took seriously.

“Every musician ... is obliged to make musical judgments and to act on them,” he wrote in his 1947 essay “The Art of Judging Music.” “Even the composer, no less than the scholar, the pedagogue, the executant and the reviewer, is constantly under the necessity of making a fair estimate, and a decently responsible one, of other people’s musical output.”

“What makes possible the writing of good music, beyond that talent for handling sound that is required for being a musician at all, is emotional sincerity and intellectual honesty,” he wrote in another essay. “Unless he has a good heart ... and a strong, vigorous mind, he will not write any music capable at once of touching the human heart and interesting the human mind. Art that does not do both dies quickly. And longevity is the glory, perhaps even the definition, of civilization’s major achievements.”

Both as critic and composer, the value of “good music” continued to concern him. “When music shall have become just another consumer commodity like chewing gum, its grand epoch shall be over,” he wrote in a 1962 book, “The State of Music.” “Already a great deal of it is designed, like central heating, to be merely present. Keeping the rot peripheral, preventing it from infecting the heart, is not going to be easy. Too many people make money out of it.”

But before that, while still in Paris, Thomson was to compose his first opera, “Four Saints in Three Acts,” written in 1927 and ’28 to a libretto in Stein’s eccentric prose and poetic style, including a setting of her oft-quoted line: “Pigeons on the grass alas.” (Stein was later to provide the libretto for another Thomson opera, “The Mother of Us All,” written in 1947 and based on the life of 19th-century feminist Susan B. Anthony.)

The first performance of “Four Saints”—remarkable at the time for having an all-black cast of singers and chorus (directed by prominent choral director Eva Jessye)—took place in February 1934 in Hartford, Conn., sponsored by the Society of the Friends and Enemies of Modern Music. The narrative concerns primarily two 16th-century Spanish saints—the mystic Teresa of Avila and the missionary Ignatius of Loyola, co-founder of the Jesuits.

The opera met with mixed success. U.S. music critic Paul Rosenfeld, reviewing the first performance, said: “To a kind of slow barrel-organ tune, the chorus began singing: *Four saints prepare for saints. It makes it well fish.*” He later references “Stein’s lazy verbal expressions and Thomson’s simplistic score” and says “the music suggested burlesqued Anglican chants suddenly turning into ‘My country ’tis of thee.’” Of Thomson’s music, Rosenfeld says: “His score is very little, does very little” but “is perhaps witty.” Ultimately, he calls it “a thirty-minute vaudeville stunt stretched out to the length of eighteen saints in four acts and two and a half hours.”

U.S. composer Ned Rorum, who knew Thomson in New York, said the scenes in “Four Saints”: “appear interchangeable,” though later assessments by others have been far more enthusiastic. Leonard says “Four Saints” “is an operatic hors d’oeuvre as clever as it is original” and Dubal calls it “as madcap and exuberant today as it was when first performed” in 1934.

After the Hartford performance, it opened on Broadway on Feb. 20, 1934, directed by the young actor/director John Houseman. It was later performed as a concert oratorio for CBS radio, broadcast in 1942 and again in 1947—the recording of which has now become part of the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.