VIRGIL THOMSON ON MODERN MUSIC:
CRITICAL WRITINGS IN THE NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE 1940-1954

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CRITICAL WRITINGS IN THE NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE 1940-1954

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ABSTRACT

The critical writings of the American composer Virgil Thomson have long been regarded as some of the most perceptive, engaging and informative of this century. The reasons for this are many; not only was Thomson a competent reviewer of performances and a convincing commentator on historical and socio-economic aspects of the modern musical world, but his writing style was invariably compelling. While his words have been disseminated to a large audience through articles in many periodicals and magazines, his writings in the New York Herald Tribune (1940-1954) displayed his ideas most visibly. Of the hundreds of articles and reviews that Thomson wrote for this newspaper, those which discuss modern music and issues affecting its composition and performance may be considered of paramount importance, since it is here that he reaffirms his most passionate convictions.

The first chapter of this thesis presents a discussion of the state of music and music criticism between 1920 and 1940, and examines Thomson's principal critical writings prior to his work on the Herald Tribune (focusing on his book The State of Music and his writings in Modern Music). Chapter Two examines Thomson's large collection of Sunday articles on modern music. Many of the concerns that arise here illustrate his fundamental views about

contemporary composition and performance institutions. The third chapter discusses articles which expose his convictions on the nature of music criticism, as well as ones which demonstrate the evaluative criteria that he employed in his performance reviews. In Chapter Four, Thomson's success as a critic in light of the aforementioned material is evaluated, and his alleged French/American bias is considered. Chapter Four is followed by a brief conclusion which reveals Thomson's primary goal as critic: to promote, interpret, and explain modern music.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Although remembered by many primarily as a composer of works such as the Pulitzer-prize-winning score to Robert Flaherty's film Louisiana Story (1948), and operas in collaboration with writer Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson also devoted substantial time and energy throughout his career to music criticism. Covering a wide range of topics, his articles and reviews are indicative of his interest in all aspects of contemporary culture. Among them one finds reviews not only of Western art music, but also jazz, popular music, film, theatre, and books. In many of his longer articles, this cosmopolitan critic also approached extra-musical topics in history, finance, and politics. In all of his writings he is informative, strong-minded, and entertaining.

In keeping with the multiplicity of his topics, Thomson's writings have appeared in a variety of periodicals, both musical and general, as well as several newspapers. These publications include Vanity Fair, Harper's, Vogue, Modern Music, The American Mercury, The Boston Transcript, and the New York Herald Tribune.[1] He also published lengthier discussions on music and

[1]His first published article, entitled "Jazz," appeared in The American Mercury in August, 1924.

musical issues in four books: The State of Music (1939, rev. 1962), Virgil Thomson (1966), American Composers since 1910 (1970), and posthumously, Music with Words: A Composer's View (1989).

Of all his articles and reviews, however, it is those which appeared regularly in the Herald Tribune, a paper with a daily circulation of 450,000 (750,000 for the weekly book section), that have been the most visible and influential.[2] In total, these number in the hundreds. With an engaging writing style and polemic approach, Thomson's writings immediately captured the interest, if not always the approval, of many of his readers.[3] As a result of their continued popularity, a substantial number of these writings were reprinted in the collections The Musical Scene (1945), The Art of Judging Music (1948), Music Right and Left (1951), and Music Reviewed 1940-1954 (1967). Some of his most celebrated articles and reviews have recently been reprinted again in A Virgil Thomson Reader (1981).

While many of Thomson's Herald Tribune criticisms offer insightful discussions of standard works and established performers, it is those on

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[2]Virgil Thomson, Music Reviewed: 1940-1954 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), v.

[3]The vast amount of correspondence from Thomson to his readers supports this observation. See Tim and Vanessa Weeks Page editors, Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 147-278.

modern music and modern musical issues in which he reaffirms his most passionate convictions. These are the writings on which this paper will focus.

Paris and America: 1920-1940

The aesthetic viewpoint that Thomson espouses throughout his Herald Tribune writings can be traced back to his early exposure to the cultural mecca of Paris between the wars. As a 25-year-old Harvard undergraduate, Thomson made a brief tour in France with the school's Glee Club in the spring of 1921, after which he arranged to take a one-year leave of absence to study composition with the renowned pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. He found the experience so culturally rewarding that when he returned to the United States in 1922 to complete his degree, he vowed to leave again for France as soon as possible. Finally, in 1925, he went back and established residency in Paris where he remained, except for brief visits to the United States, until 1940. In October of that year he returned to New York, where he lived at the Chelsea Hotel until his death on September 30, 1989.[4]

The Paris of the 1920s captured the imagination of Thomson as a young composer. As the centre of the avant-garde, this active city witnessed

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[4]For detailed biographical information, see: Kathleen Hoover, and John Cage, Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), and Thomson's own book Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1977).

first-hand the radical artistic movements of Dadaism, and later, surrealism, the first of which had a profound effect on Thomson's compositions of the time. Moreover, here he formed associations with the greatest artistic innovators of the period, including George Antheil, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, Christian Bérard, Georges Hugnet, and Henri Sauguet. To each of them, Thomson became both a friend and colleague.

Thomson's activities in Paris, both his lessons with Boulanger and his associations with other artists, helped his personal voice as a composer to emerge. In a letter to a correspondent, written on December 17, 1952, he explained that Boulanger's influence on him "consisted of some excellent training in counterpoint, harmony, and organ-playing[,] and in having put me at ease with regard to the art of composition."[5] While in agreement with his teacher's adoration of the works of J.S. Bach and Igor Stravinsky, Thomson did not share her enthusiasm for the music of Gabriel Fauré or Gustav Mahler. In

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[5]Thomson to a correspondent, 17 December, 1952, in Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, 260. See also: letter to Victor Yellin, 25 October, 1958, ibid., 327. Thomson's most significant compositions while under the tutelage of Boulanger included: Pastorale on a Christmas Plainsong (1922); Fanfare for organ (1922); three antiphonal Psalms for women's voices (1922); Tribulationes civitatum for mixed voices (1922); Passacaglia for organ (1922); Missa Brevis for men's voices (1924); Sonata da Chiesa for $E^{\flat}$ clarinet,D trumpet, viola, horn, and trombone (1926); and several short works. For a complete list of Thomson's compositions between 1922 and 1959, see: Hoover and Cage, 117-277.

a similar manner, Boulanger did not share Thomson's interest in the works of Darius Milhaud and Erik Satie.

In his autobiography, Thomson claims that his interest in French music and culture was not a repercussion of his having lived in France, but rather that he had "lived there, at some sacrifice to [his] career, because [he] found French musical disciplines favorable to [his] maturing."[6] Throughout his European residency in the mid 1920s, Thomson maintained ties with musical America, and his interest for and concern with the challenges faced by his colleagues at home remained strong. While a great many compositional options were available to those working in the United States during the 1920s, including developments which had originated in Europe as well as indigenous forms such as jazz, most composers focused on creating music which was simply "new." Two distinct factions were striving towards this goal. On one side were those interested in expanding the musical tradition by looking backwards, as Stravinsky did, to the Classical and Baroque eras, and infusing older forms with new musical material. Many of these neo-classicists were French-trained Americans such as Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, and Thomson himself. The second contingent active during the 1920s was the avant-garde, influenced primarily by the work of Edgard Varèse. While not an advocate of the futurist's noise-music, Varèse did eschew the traditional developmental

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[6]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, 326.

and variational approaches common to much of the composition at this time, advancing instead a belief in "the legitimacy of any sound as a vehicle for musical expression."[7]

Although each of these groups upheld different aesthetic points of view, both were part of what Aaron Copland has referred to as the "organized movement" of contemporary music.[8] There was an interest on the part of composers of all types of new music to arrange concert performances of their work. To this end, Varèse organized concerts of new European and American music in New York, California, Havana, and several European cities.[9] Moreover, along with Carlos Salzedo, he founded the International Guild of Composers (1921 to 1927), and its successor, the Pan American Association of Composers (1928 to 1934). Additionally, Copland and Roger Sessions ran a concert series between 1928 and 1931, and both Serge Koussevitzky and Leopold Stokowki promoted contemporary works on the concert programmes that they conducted. In 1923 another organization for the promotion of performance and composition of new music, The League of Composers, was

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[7]H. Wiley Hitchcock, Music in the United States, 3rd ed., Prentice Hall History of Music Series, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988), 194.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

established. Originally founded by members of the International Guild of Composers who disagreed with the Guild's practice of presenting only premieres,[10] this organization merged with the International Society for Contemporary Music in 1954. The executive director from 1923 to 1948 was Claire R. Reis, and from 1948 to 1950 Aaron Copland.[11]

The changes that were occurring in the musical world affected not only the nature of the music composed, but also music's power structure. While organizations such as the American Federation of Musicians (est. 1896), the American Association of Composers (1908 to 1934); and the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (est. 1914) continued to gain importance, new organizations, such as the American Composers Alliance (est. 1937), were also established.

Although the flamboyance of the roaring '20s diminished in the following decades, the onset of conservatism was not synonymous with complete artistic stagnation. During the 1930s, important changes resulted from developments in radio and recording. Although the record industry grew constantly through the 1920s, it declined with the onset of the

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[10]Founding members included composers Lazare Saminsky and Louis Gruenberg, as well as patroness Alma Wertheim. Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, Copland: 1900 through 1942 (New York: St. Martins/Marek, 1984), 94.

[11]Rita H. Mead, s.v. "League of Composers," in The New Grove Dictionary of American Music, H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds., 1986 edition, 22.

depression: sales of records decreased from 100 million in 1927 to only 6 million in 1932.[12] By 1933 the record industry was on the verge of extinction.[13] Not surprisingly, radio broadcasts became a more economically feasible entertainment option for most.

Performing musicians also felt the effects of these economically difficult times. In 1933, 12,000 of the 15,000 musicians active in the New York city area were put out of work because of a combination of technological advances and economic depression.[14]

From the middle of the 1930s, American composers became increasingly interested in writing music which exhibited some hint of an American identity. As well, they became more concerned with the musical likes and dislikes of their audiences. According to historian Barbara Tischler,

> the modernist's approach to composition could do little to bring audiences into the concert hall. In general, few composers wanted or could afford to create music that no one understood or would pay to hear, and the challenge of the committed modernist as the decade of the 1920s came to a close was how to hone the qualities of his individual style and still reach an audience in his own country.[15]

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[12]Roland Gelatt, The Fabulous Phonograph: From Edison to Stereo (New York: Meredith Press, 1965), 255.

[13]Ibid., 265.

[14]Barbara L. Tischler, An American Music: The Search For An American Musical Identity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 135.

[15]Ibid., 108.

Even jazz, America's indigenous contribution to modernism, and one whose influence spread to Europe as invisible luggage of composers who left the United States in search of a European education, did not help to bridge the ever-widening gap between composer and public.

Much that was written about music during this period only made matters worse. Conservative music criticism and the unfair denigration of new music in the United States existed even in the progressive 1920s. At that time, the situation was similar to that in Germany at the turn of the century. When Arnold Schoenberg and the composers of the Second Viennese School began to write music which was radically different from their predecessors, they were, as Winton Dean has stated, "treated by many similarly to Wagner generations before, as not simply extending musical tradition, but rather plummeting into the unknown."[16] The German public had a great deal of difficulty accepting the new music, and attempted instead to hold onto the last bastions of Viennese classicism.[17]

Fortunately, not everyone was willing to sit idly by and accept the denigration of new music in the United States. The two poles of critical attitude — those with undeviating loyalty to the old and those willing to fight

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[16]Winton Dean, s.v. "Criticism," in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie. 1980 edition, 5.

[17]Ibid.

for the new, waged vicious critical battles against one another. In fact, Thomson referred to critical activities of this period as the "other war."[18]

As far back as 1916, a few dauntless meta-critics such as Sophie Gibling lamented the sad state of contemporary criticism.

> The modern critic, writing in the papers about yesterday's performance of a new symphony, is likely to give an impression of an exaggerated boredom, as if he had entered the concert hall late, and left it early.
>
> Whatever be the cause of the dryness and monotony of the modern musical criticism, and of its clinging to the formal and technical side, it remains true that we close volume after volume of it with a growing sense of incompleteness.[19]

Gibling later urged critics to aid in bridging the composer-public gap rather than increasing it.[20] Unfortunately, many of the critics active in New York at this time did not share her concerns. Typical of the comments which prompted her distress were those of William J. Henderson (critic of the New York Times and the New York Sun), who remarked that the difficulty of criticizing new music stemmed from the fact that it was not pure music like

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[18]Thomson, "A War's End," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 190; The Art of Judging Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 316.

[19]Sophie Gibling, "Problems of Musical Criticism," Musical Quarterly, i (1915): 244.

[20]Ibid.

that composed by Mozart and Beethoven, but instead required the listener to understand extra-musical elements such as philosophical associations.[21]

The invectives that appeared were not confined to articles on critical philosophy, but also permeated the concert review literature. Even Thomson's esteemed predecessor Lawrence Gilman wrote the following in a 1928 review of L'Histoire du soldat:

> It is probably the nearest that any composer of consequence has ever come to achieving almost complete infantilism in a score that is presumably intended to be taken with some degree of seriousness.[22]

During the 1930s, both the modern-music controversy and the problem of critical conservatism increased in severity. In 1935 critic Samuel Chotzinoff published the following passage on Alban Berg's Lulu:

> It is my private opinion that Mr. Berg is just a bluff. But even if he isn't, it is impossible to deny that his music(?) is a soporific, by the side of which the telephone book is a strong cup of coffee.[23]

The same composer received even more damning comments from Olin Downes, who remarked that same year in the New York Times:

> To us Mr. Berg and his ilk are becoming tedious, rather childish and distasteful. Isn't it time that we say 'enough'

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[21]W.J. Henderson, "The Function of Musical Criticism," Musical Quarterly, i (1915): 72.

[22]Nicolas Slonimsky, Lexicon of Musical Invective (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 202.

[23]Ibid., 55.

> to music which bluffs itself and will bluff us, too, if we allow it to do so? Who wants to be such a dupe of an artistic deception?[24]

Even Thomson himself agreed that "the time [the 1930s] was not for massive creativity, but rather for taking stock."[25] His contention with practising critics lay in the fact that many were not even willing to give new works a chance for survival, denigrating instead all music whose only offense was being "different."

Early Writings

Prior to his move to Paris, Thomson's critical endeavours included writing occasional articles for The American Mercury and Vanity Fair. Although his work was extremely well received, and although a writing career became a very possible option, he left for France stating, "my business is making music, not talking about it."[26] In fact, the eager composer eschewed all critical writing between 1925 and 1932. After that period he wrote occasional correspondence pieces for The Boston Transcript, The New Republic, The American Mercury, La Revue européenne, and Modern Music. It is the articles written for this last periodical, as well as the opinions

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[24]Ibid., 56.

[25]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, 326.

[26]Hoover and Cage, 48.

espoused in his book The State of Music, that form Thomson's most substantial critical endeavours up until his association with the Herald Tribune. In both of them his approach was to react directly to the problems facing composers of new music, i.e. their difficulties in securing performances of their works as well as in receiving honest and fair criticism.

I. Modern Music

In the case of his writings published in Modern Music, Thomson's efforts were supported by those of the League of Composers. In fact, it was the ideas of that organization and its journal which originally spurred him on to his life-long mission of defending and promoting contemporary music.

The League of Composers was established in 1923 by those aware that

> the cause of the living composer needed help: although sporadic attempts had been made at giving contemporary concerts, these did not fill the need for promoting much new music and stimulating interest in the problems of new composers.[27]

But the organization's activities did not stop at helping those who created new music. Both the organization and the composers themselves realized as well the importance of establishing an outlet for honest and constructive new-music

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[27]Claire Reis, Composers, Conductors, and Critics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 4.

criticism. To fulfil this need, the League of Composers' Review was born. The first issue carried the following credo:

> We believe that not only is too little modern music played, but that too little is written about it. It is clear that the persistent tendency to treat the works of living men lightly has weakened only in the face of repeated performance. By publishing authoritative and discerning criticism it is our hope to rouse the public out of a somnolent tolerance to a live appreciation of the new in music.
>
> In this magazine we shall present the opinions of informed men who accept the changing world of music to-day as inevitable.[28]

The review, renamed Modern Music on November 25, 1925, ran for 89 issues, finally ceasing publication in 1946 because of financial difficulties.[29]

Much of the journal's immediate success was due to the editor, Minna Lederman, who took the time to ponder the following question:

> Who could write about 'modern music' coherently, convincingly, and above all communicatively in the Turbulent Twenties, when modern music had, like Stephen Leacock's horseman, jumped into the saddle and ridden off in all directions at once?[30]

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[28]Prefatory material, League of Composers' Review, i/1 (February 1924); reprint (New York: AMS Press, 1966).

[29]The journal was published under the title League of Composers' Review from February 1924 to November 1925.

[30]Reis, vii.

After much deliberation Lederman decided that the answer lay with those who were involved in the production of new music — the composers. In light of the crisis facing contemporary music at this time, her choice was likely fuelled by the realization that they would also be the most enthusiastic spokespeople available. Taking as her model the composer-critics of the nineteenth century, Lederman assembled an impressive writing staff which, over the years, included Roger Sessions, Aaron Copland, Randall Thompson, Elliott Carter, Virgil Thomson, and many others.[31]

Thomson contributed 23 articles to Modern Music between the years 1932 and 1940, and a final one after accepting the Herald Tribune position in 1944. His writings cover a wide variety of topics including films, composers, theatre, and jazz, as well as commentaries on musical life in Paris. Throughout, he upholds the goals of the journal: to promote, educate, and inform.

In his first assignment for Modern Music, an article on the music of Aaron Copland, Thomson attempted to verbalize the subject matter of the composer's music, to describe his style as precisely as possible, and to place

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[31]For a complete list of American composer-critics and the number of articles each contributed to Modern Music, see R. M. Meckna, "The Rise of the American Composer-Critic: Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Virgil Thomson and Elliott Carter in the Periodical Modern Music 1924-46" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984), 235.

him in the context of others active at this time — (in Copland's case the association is with) Chávez, Varèse, and Antheil.

> There is real music in his pieces, true invention and a high (sometimes too high) nobility of feeling. He is not banal. He has truth, force and elegance. He has not quite style. There remain too many irrelevant memories of Nadia Boulanger's lessons, of the scores of Stravinsky and Mahler and perhaps Richard Strauss.[32]

Originality and the development of a truly personal style are considered by Thomson to be of paramount importance, and he mentions them in numerous articles. Another example appears in "Home Thoughts."

> They [Milhaud, Honegger, Poulenc and Auric] were the progeny of Stravinsky and Satie, formed closely after the parental images. Too closely. The principles of their expression, the modes of their feeling, the devices of their style are a heritage and not a creation, the unblended heritage of a mésalliance. Neither parent quite liked the result.[33]

In addition to exposing his personal views, the Modern Music articles also demonstrate Thomson's engaging writing style. Some of his articles employ a style that is primarily objective, or technical, in tone, such as the following one about Kurt Weill.

> There is no flavor of scholasticism or officialdom about him. His training, or at least his early experience, is that of a writer of sad popular songs, mostly about whores

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[32]Thomson, "American Composers VII: Aaron Copland," Modern Music, ix/2 (1932): 71.

[33]Thomson, "Home Thoughts," Modern Music, x/2 (1933): 141.

> and gangsters, the kind of thing that the French call chansons réalistes.[34]

Others involve a more subjective approach. In the following review of Igor Markévitch's music, Thomson shuns his objective clarity in favour of almost Schumannesque prose.

> What about little Igor's music? says my impatient reader. Quite equal to the occasion, say I, and very good. A bit self assertive perhaps and harsh like the taste of a slightly unripe pear (they must be picked a little green) but full of savor and with a kind of violent charm.[35]

When Modern Music ceased publication in 1946, Thomson wrote a touching "obituary" in the Herald Tribune, from which the following is taken.

> Modern Music, distinguished quarterly review edited by Minna Lederman and published by the League of Composers, has ceased publication after twenty-three years. Musicians and laymen who are part of the contemporary musical movement will of necessity be deeply moved by this announcement, because Modern Music has been for them all a Bible and a news organ, a forum, a source of world information, and the defender of their faith. It is hard to think of it as not existing, and trying to imagine what life will be without it is a most depressing thought.[36]

But of course, life for Thomson and other new-music enthusiasts did continue. In fact, rather than abandoning the ideas which he had fought so

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[34]Thomson, "Most Melodious Tears," Modern Music, XI/1 (1933): 13.

[35]Thomson, "Igor Markévitch: Little Rollo in Big Time," Modern Music, x/1 (1932): 20.

[36]Thomson, "A War's End," 316.

vehemently to uphold during his association with Modern Music, Thomson single-handedly continued the crusade for the acceptance of new music through his Herald Tribune articles. After 1946 he devoted increased space to reviews of new music. In the introduction to Music Right and Left, the collection of Herald Tribune articles spanning the years 1947 to 1950, he wrote:

> Over the years I find that my coverage has altered... Nowadays I pay less attention to the standard repertory and standard soloists, to what one might call the nationally advertised brands. They get covered, of course... but I like to examine the newer trends, the non-standardized musical life of outlying cities, experiments in the universities, everything that might be preparing the second half of our century for being different from the first.[37]

II. The State of Music

The other substantial source of Thomson's views prior to the Herald Tribune writings is his book The State of Music, published in 1939. This small volume illuminates many of his views on the workings of the musical world, the interaction of the different individuals within it (executants, employers, consumers, and producers), as well as the relationship between music and other arts, and between musicians and other artists.

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[37]Thomson, "Prelude," in Music Right and Left (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), viii.

While lighthearted descriptions of the lifestyles and habits of musicians, painters, and poets may be found within these pages, issues of a more serious nature including composers' finances, politics, intellectual freedom, and the need for professional solidarity are also discussed.

Typical of Thomson's prose style throughout the book is the following description, taken from chapter three, of the musical world and its relationship to the arts of painting and poetry.

> ...Music is an island, like Ceylon or Tahiti, or perhaps even more like England, which Bossuet called 'the most famous island in the world' ...The waters around it are teeming with digestible fish that travel in schools and are known as painters... Swimming around among these at high speed and spouting as they go are prehistoric monsters called poets, who terrify all living things, fish and islanders alike... These monsters are quite tame, however, in spite of their furious airs, and... since they have no industrial value just now, and since their presence offers no real danger to musical life or to the fishing industry (for they attack only one another), they are allowed to survive and are occasionally given food.[38]

In Dantean fashion, Thomson divides his musical island into four concentric circles.[39] The outermost is inhabited by individuals able to play a musical instrument, but not proficiently. The second level is labelled "the region of Special Skills," and is home to performers with proper musical

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[38]Thomson, The State of Music, 2nd ed. rev. With a New Preface and Postlude (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 53.

[39]Ibid., see Chapter Four, "Life Among the Natives," 61-62.

training. On level three reside the orchestral conductors. The final level, the island's summit, is home to the composers. Like the philosopher-rulers of Plato's Republic, this elite group is considered to be "the superior class... for the simple reason that they know more than anybody else does..."[40] about their field.

Although Thomson's divisions are interesting, one may challenge many of his details. For example, when discussing the first level, "Minimum Musicianship," he asserts that the ability to sing is not a valid display of musical literacy. Not only must one be able to read music (is he implying that singers cannot?), but one must also play an instrument.

Singers are given short shrift in the next level as well, and allotted only "a small terrain." Thomson remarks, moreover, that "the singers who have a right to inhabit the region of Special Skills are more often than not those who have had operatic experience."[41] He neglects to consider those singers who are skilled and well trained but do not have the opportunity, desire, or voice to gain such experience.

In his discussion of the level of Orchestral Conducting, questionable comments appear as well. Surely many would disagree with the assertion that the practitioners of conducting

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[40]Ibid., 62.

[41]Ibid., 61.

> have a happy life, not lonely on account of the attendant honors and general prosperity, but also because it is technically the easiest specialty in all music.[42]

Why, moreover, are only "orchestral" conductors mentioned here? Certainly there are proficient choral conductors as well.

Curiously, although Thomson reviewed both "cultivated" (art) music and "vernacular" music (folk, jazz, popular, etc.) throughout his career, the breakdown of the musical world presented in The State of Music is somewhat elitist. The musicians whom he accepts onto his musical island are all ones with standard, and it seems, classical, training.[43] Those who sing or play by ear are not permitted entry at even the lowest level.

Thomson's discussion of island life exposes his views on musical politics, and includes a chapter entitled "who does what to whom," one on publicity, and another on musical organizations. One of the most interesting chapters is the seventh, entitled "Why Composers Write How, or The Economic Determinism of Musical Style." Here he suggests that a composer's primary source of income determines his or her compositional style. For example, he offers the following remarks about a typical composer whose income is the result of non-musical employment:

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[42]Ibid., 62.

[43]Ibid. See the discussion on 58.

> The chief mark of his work is its absence of professionalism. It is essentially naive. It breaks through professional categories, despises professional conventions. The familiarity with instrumental limitations and current interpretative traditions that composers have who are constantly working with the most executant world is of great practical advantage in most respects. Your naive composer has no such mastery of well-known methods, no such traditional esthetic. The professional makes esthetic advance slowly, if at all, progressing step by step, in touch at all time with the music world. The naïf makes up his music out of whole cloth at home. He invents his own esthetic. When his work turns out to be not unplayable technically, it often gives a useful kick in the pants to the professional tradition. The music of Modest Moussorgsky, of Erik Satie, and of Charles Ives did that very vigorously indeed.[44]

There are others of significance who could be mentioned here, including Mily Balakirev and Nicolay Rimsky-Korsakov, as well as those less successful, such as Alexander Borodin.

Thomson divides his discussion on economic determinism into four sections: 1. "Non-musical jobs, or earned income from non-musical sources"; 2. "Unearned income from all sources"; 3. "Other men's music, or selling the by-products of his musical education"; and 4. "The just rewards of his labor."[45]

Some of the most pertinent comments are found in section three, under the subheading: "Lecturing, Criticism, and Musical Journalism." While some of the remarks offered are amusing, especially the assertion that it is

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[44]Ibid., 85.

[45]Ibid. See Chapter Seven, 84-124.

impossible for an active composer to be employed full-time as a critical journalist, this section also exposes some of Thomson's fundamental views on the function and process of music criticism.[46]

Throughout, the value of criticism by composers is emphasized because it is

> interesting to the musical public, because it is both authoritative and passionately prejudiced. It is interesting to the composer because he can use it to logroll for his friends and to pay off old scores against his enemies, as well as to clarify for himself periodically his own esthetic prejudices. Also, the forced attendance at concerts that writing criticism entails keeps him informed of current trends in musical production.[47]

While Thomson's first point, that such writing is informative and opinionated, is a valid one, the intention of later remarks about "logrolling" for one's friends and paying off old scores against one's enemies, seems less serious. As well, he points out that

> nobody who has ever tried to explain in writing why some piece got a cold reception that he thought merited better, or why some musical marshmallow wowed them all, has ever failed to rise from his desk a wiser man.[48]

Criticism by composers is also considered to be the most beneficial to the public. Unlike performing musicians whose interest "is held far more by

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[46]Ibid., 106.

[47]Ibid., 106-107.

[48]Ibid., 108.

the refinements of execution than by the nature of the music itself," the composer-critic is likely to take into consideration not only the performance, but also the composition performed.[49] In his later writings, including those in the Herald Tribune, Thomson upholds this same belief that criticism is at its best when it offers its readers information and explanations about musical composition and composers.

The subsection which follows, entitled "The Appreciation-racket" also contains material relevant to a discussion of the Herald Tribune writings; some of the remarks foreshadow Thomson's later focus on the hazards of promoting a standardized repertory. The primary objection advanced in this section is against the literature written for music appreciation courses. Thomson charges that it "transmits no firm knowledge and describes no real practice."[50] Rather than promoting an active approach to musical learning, most music appreciation courses promote a "passive" one — reading about music, and listening to recordings of music. In Thomson's view, the best way to learn about music is to experience musical performance first-hand.

His second objection, and one which becomes vital to a discussion of the Herald Tribune writings, is that, in these courses,

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid., 112.

> music is neither taught nor defined. It is preached. A certain limited repertory of pieces, ninety per cent of them a hundred years old, is assumed to contain most that the world has to offer of musical beauty and authority.[51]

By introducing listeners to a constricted repertory, Thomson believes that music appreciation courses are contributing to the development of a concert-going public interested only in hearing works from the standard repertory.[52] Adding to the severity of the problem he observes that the word "music" was typically used in these courses to refer to "the instrumental music of the Romantic era, predominantly symphonic and predominantly introspective."[53]

Although the terms "objective" and "introspective" appear infrequently in Thomson's writings, they require some clarification. He explaines that during the compositional process a composer must employ a variety of different "devices" in the pursuit of subject matter. In the case of instrumental music in particular, this task is a difficult one.

> If [the composer] calls it The Rustle of Spring or Also Sprach Zarathustra, we can take him at his word. But if he calls it Fifth Nocturne or Symphony in F, we can never be sure. Sometimes it is an objective piece that was written to illustrate some program that he isn't telling us,

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[51]Ibid., 114. N.B. When Thomson says "ninety per cent of them a hundred years old," he is also referring to music that is more than a hundred years old.

[52]Ibid., 116.

[53]Ibid., 115-116.

> and sometimes it is a depiction of non-verbalized visceral feelings. In the latter case, the subject-matter is pretty hard to describe verbally.[54]

Continuing on this topic, Thomson suggests that, while music lacking an admitted programme has been referred to as "absolute" since the nineteenth century, he prefers to use the term "introspective" since, in this case, the music's subject matter is concealed from the listener and is known only to the composer. In "objective" music, on the other hand, some sort of perceptible depiction is intended. Since Thomson points out that the terms "absolute" and "programmatic" were first coined by the Germans,[55] one could question whether or not the reason for this suggested change in terminology is an attempt to eschew musical Germania. (Thomson's attitude towards music written by German composers will be discussed in Chapter Four.)

Examination of Thomson's activities and primary writings prior to 1940 illuminate the origin of many of his views, including his aesthetic position. His early experiences, specifically his activities in Paris, played an integral role in his development not only as a composer, but also as a critic. It was during this time too that Thomson's critical raison d'être, his goal of being a spokesperson for contemporary music and contemporary musical issues, first emerged.

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[54]Ibid., 84.

[55]Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SUNDAY ARTICLES: THE STATE OF MODERN MUSIC

For Virgil Thomson, 1940 was charged with unexpected surprises. On April 18 he wrote to his editor Minna Lederman:

> Paris, which has always been compared to New York or to anything Italian, a quiet city... has become even more reposeful to the ear than it was. One almost wishes for a little roar sometimes, so pleasantly suburban have our lives become.[1]

When the peacefulness of Paris was dissolved by the activities of the war, Thomson left his surrogate homeland and returned to the United States.

When he arrived in New York in October, penniless and without plans, Thomson again encountered the unexpected; this time the consequences were positive. Almost immediately after returning home he was offered the position of music critic on the New York Herald Tribune, by the paper's chief editorial writer Geoffrey Parsons. While, only one year earlier, Thomson had rejected the idea of writing criticism full-time, claiming that it would make

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[1]Virgil Thomson, "Paris, April 1940," Modern Music, xvii/4 (1940): 204.

composition impossible, he now welcomed the option.[2] He offers the following candid reasons for accepting the position.

> ...The general standard of music reviewing in New York has sunk so far that almost any change might bring improvement. Also I thought perhaps my presence in a post so prominent might stimulate performance of my works.[3]

In his autobiography, Thomson claims that he originally responded to the employment proposal with considerable scepticism, questioning

> why a musician so little schooled in daily journalism, a composer so committed to the modern, and a polemicist so contemptuous as myself of music's power structure should have been offered a post of that prestige.[4]

For him, the answer was a simple one.

> It was on the evidence that I could write..., because of course reviewing music or reviewing anything is a writing job. It's nice if you are experienced in the field

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[2]Thomson's fear that writing criticism would stifle his work as a composer was unfounded. In fact, his years on the Herald Tribune yielded some of his most important compositions to date. These included, among others, music for the documentary films Tuesday in November (1945) and Louisiana Story (1948), the opera The Mother of Us All (1947), Three Pictures for Orchestra (1952), Five Songs from William Blake (1952), Four Songs to Poems of Thomas Campion (1951), two books of piano études, and fifteen musical portraits. For a complete list of Thomson's compositions during his association with the Herald Tribune, see the list of works in the Hoover-Cage book, as cited in Chapter One, 117-277.

[3]Ibid., 321.

[4]Thomson, Music Reviewed: 1940-54 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), vi.

> you are writing about, but writing is what you are doing.[5]

Thomson's position on the issue of a music critic's degree of topical knowledge is not adequately represented by this last remark. While he did, of course, regard writing skill as a universal requirement of the field, he also considers it necessary for a music critic to possess a solid musical background. When involved in the task of choosing occasional writers for the Herald Tribune several years later, he even stated, "I used no one not trained in music, for my aim was to explain the artist, not to encourage a misunderstanding of his work."[6] Similarly, he once answered a letter to a reader seeking employment as a music critic with the following remarks:

> I am afraid I cannot help you to realize your life-long ambition to work for the New York Times. I could not even do much about it at the Herald Tribune, since there is no vacancy in our musical staff. If there were I should recommend the employment of a professional musician with some literary experience rather than a journalist with a deep love of music. Sorry.[7]

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[5]Thomson, A Virgil Thomson Reader With an Introduction by John Rockwell (New York: E.P. Dutton Inc., Paperback ed., 1984,) 549.

[6]Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1977), 334-335.

[7]Thomson to a reader, 10 December, 1941, in Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, Tim and Vanessa Weeks Page, eds. (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 172.

During his fourteen years with the Herald Tribune Thomson was responsible for one Sunday article and two reviews per week for seven months, a number that was reduced during the other five.[8]

The State of the Modern Musical World

While Thomson's performance reviews provide lively reports of musical events, his Sunday articles offer a more panoramic view of the contemporary musical world. Here one can find articles dedicated to specific composers, including Kurt Weill, Arnold Schoenberg, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and Béla Bartók, discussions about musical life in the United States as well as in Mexico, France, Germany, and Russia, book reviews (especially at Christmas time), and letters from Herald Tribune readers. In addition to his commentary on strictly musical topics, financial, political, and historical issues are explored. As a result, his articles transcend most other journalistic criticism of the time by offering not only musical commentary, but perceptive social and historical commentary as well. That others, particularly his colleague Aaron Copland, also contributed to this practice cannot be denied, but with his posting as a full-time critic, Thomson had the advantage of being able to articulate his views to a large readership on a regular basis.

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[8]Ibid., 335.

Among the many points of focus that the Sunday articles take, one belief is reiterated frequently: music should be considered culture, not business. Thomson asserts, in fact, that all art is a cultural and intellectual right of the public. Therefore, the institutions presenting artistic performances should make the fulfilment of the "cultural obligation," not box-office returns, their primary concern. In his view "...music is purely a cultural and educational manifestation and forms no part of the entertainment trades, of show business."[9] Similarly, "we do not expect culture to show a profit, we expect of it spiritual and intellectual benefits, which are without price."[10]

While the content of the Sunday articles is diverse, the main issues may be illuminated by examining the writings on the symphonic and operatic genres, as they were given particular emphasis. In addition to presenting his views on the current state of symphonic and operatic composition, Thomson also explores the financial and political state of New York's corresponding

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[9]Thomson, "Bigger Than Baseball," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 388.

[10]Thomson, "Reconverting Opera," in The Art of Judging Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 102. While Thomson's comments regarding the importance of fulfilling the cultural obligation seem to contradict his earlier admission (see page 32) that he hoped his position on the Herald Tribune would stimulate performances of his works, he would likely argue that his goal (since he was a contemporary composer), was again a cultural, not financial, one.

musical institutions: the New York Philharmonic (Philharmonic) and the Metropolitan Opera House (Met).

> The Metropolitan Opera Company, the Philharmonic and other symphonic foundations, the Stadium and similar summer establishments in other cities are, in theory at least, devoted to performing only such music as will raise the cultural standards of their communities and limited in that effort only by the cultural resistance of those communities.[11]
>
> ...For all the good intentions of their backers and all the struggling of their conductors to enlarge [the performance repertory], it is more notable for its standardization than for its comprehensiveness.[12]

In the case of both the Philharmonic and the Met, Thomson suggests that two interrelated factors are responsible for the neglect of the cultural obligation: 1. the promotion of a standardized repertory and 2. a concern with profits. In his view, the primary offenders of these crimes against culture are the orchestral and operatic management boards. He charges that their practice of promoting musical conservatism is perilously fused with the problem of financial concerns, since the habitual promotion of a constricted repertory is a result of management's interest in offering only time-tested, profit-generating works.

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[11]Thomson, "The Cultural Obligation," in The Musical Scene (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 263.

[12]Ibid., 263.

The New York Philharmonic

According to Thomson, the difficulty that the symphonic genre faced in fulfilling its cultural obligation resulted from widespread conservatism, manifested in both the policy of its performing institutions and factors inherent in the compositional form itself.

Although in agreement with most commentators that "...America is now [1941] the seat of a vigorous musical culture,"[13] Thomson finds that, particularly in the case of symphonic composition, it is also a conservative one. In "Five Symphonies,"[14] the then current popularity of symphonic composition is referred to as a "dangerous path." He remarks, moreover, that "nowadays every child in a conservatory, or just out of one, will write you a symphony with no more sense of sin than he would have in taking a highball."[15]

The main reason offered for this assertion is that none of the composers whom he considers to be true musical innovators, including

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[13]Thomson, "Philharmonic II," in John Vinton, Essays After A Dictionary (London: Associated University Press, 1977), 61.

[14]This article is titled "Five Symphonies" (in Music Right and Left [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951], 108) because in it, Thomson claimed to offer not only general comments on the state of the symphonic genre, but also to discuss "five notable new symphonies." His list consists of four works: Honegger's Fourth (Deliciae Basilienses), Antheil's Fifth, Rosenthal's Christmas Symphonies, and Cowell's fifth.

[15]Ibid.

the form for its own sake."[16] While this observation is valid in the case of the first three composers mentioned, Strauss is an odd, and in fact incorrect, inclusion, since he composed two works in this genre: one in D minor (1881) and another in F minor (1884). One can only speculate on the reason for Thomson's faux pas — since both of these works were written very early in Strauss' career, it is plausible that Thomson did not consider either one innovative or significant, and thus disregarded them.

Thomson's disgruntlement with the state of the symphonic genre stemmed not only from the conservative elements in the works composed, but also because of problems attributed to New York's principal symphonic performance institution, the New York Philharmonic. The Philharmonic Symphony Society, the oldest orchestra in continuous operation in the United States, has a lengthy history reaching back to 1842.[17] Throughout its years of operation it has boasted many conductors of note,[18] including Theodore Eisfeld (1848 to 1865), Gustav Mahler (1909 to 1911), Josef Stransky (1911 to

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[16]Ibid., 108.

[17]Irving Kolodin, Francis D. Perkins, and Susan Thiemann, s.v. "New York," in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie. 1980 edition, 179.

[18]For a list of the New York's Philharmonic's principal conductors and their years of association with the orchestra, see Howard Shanet, Philharmonic: A History of New York's Orchestra (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), 788.

Eisfeld (1848 to 1865), Gustav Mahler (1909 to 1911), Josef Stransky (1911 to 1922), Willem Mengelberg (1921 to 1930), Wilhelm Furtwängler (1925 to 1927), Arturo Toscanini (1927 to 1933), Carlos Kleiber (1930 to 1932), Bruno Walter (1931 to 1933), Dimitri Mitropoulos (1949 to 1957), and Leonard Bernstein (1958 to 1969).[19] In its early years, the repertory performed was primarily German, reflecting both the training of its conductors and the ethnic background of a large proportion of the orchestra and its audience. Between 1850 and 1860 approximately 15% of New York's population consisted of German immigrants, and for the orchestra's first concert season, German musicians occupied 22 of the 53 chairs. By 1855, the thirteenth season, the figures were 53 and 67 respectively. Approximately 70% of the repertory performed during these early years was written by German composers.[20]

While Thomson's criticisms of the Philharmonic in the 1940s and 1950s were fervent ones, he was not the first to suggest repertory reform. As far back as 1854 a critical dispute over this issue occurred. When Louis Antoine Jullien, a French guest conductor, presented William Henry Fry's Santa Claus: Christmas Symphony, one reviewer responded by stating that "Mr. Fry's 'Santa Claus' we consider a good Christmas piece: but hardly a

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[19]The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "New York," 179-183.

[20]Shanet, 109.

composition to be gravely criticized like an earnest work of Art."[21] The composer himself responded, outraged, with an eleven-page letter that was published in Musical World as well as Dwight's Journal of Music.[22] He complained that there should be "better treatment of Americans by Americans."[23] Along with George Bristow, Fry attempted to persuade the Philharmonic, as the leading orchestra of the country, to "actively cultivate American music."[24] Unfortunately, the conflict was not easily resolved, as American music was not as fashionable a commodity at that time as German music was.

The suppression of works by American composers was also a concern during Toscanini's reign. In Philharmonic: A History of New York's Orchestra, Howard Shanet remarks:

> the only aspect of [Toscanini's] art that was criticized with any frequency was the rather limited nature of the repertory that he performed. The standard works of Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner (excerpts from the operas) made up 40 per cent of his programs with the Philharmonic — about a third more space than most

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[21]Ibid., 111.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Ibid., 111-112.

[24]Ibid., 114.

other American orchestras were allotting to those composers.[25]

When Thomson began writing about the Philharmonic in 1940, the issues of repertory, and inconsistent playing emerged as the two main problems. Regarding repertory choice, the focus of the battle had changed: instead of fighting for the performance of American works, he was interested in broadening all areas of the performance repertory, and, in particular, increasing the number of performances of contemporary works.

In a 1941 article titled "Philharmonic I," he begins by stating "there is no denying that musical and music-loving circles in New York are disturbed about the Philharmonic."[26] His suggestion for the alleviation of both the problem of repertory choice and performance standards is to turn "...the attention of all concerned to policies rather than to personalities."[27] His reference to "personalities" is to the orchestra's practice of hiring "big name" guest and part-time conductors, none of whom are able to devote enough time to "...weld the orchestra into a stable unit."[28] They have, moreover, no involvement in the Philharmonic's policy-making, something that Thomson

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[25]Ibid., 270.

[26]Thomson, "Philharmonic I," New York Herald Tribune, 18 May, 1941, VI/6.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

considers imperative if the condition of the orchestra is to improve. "The announcement of a season of guest conductors," he explains,

> would seem to mean that a further unfortunate thing has happened, namely that the initiation of musical policy at the Philharmonic has fallen temporarily into the hands of the management and the governing board. It is difficult to imagine a parade of eight guest conductors as being the wish and proposal of the conductor the eight are invited to replace. Managers and governing boards are always giving birth to bright ideas about musical policy, but it is the conductor's business to say no to these (unless they are sound musical ideas, which is seldom). He is named and given his authority by the board for that purpose. A musical foundation must have its musical policies defined and executed by musicians, just as scientific foundations must have theirs defended and executed by scientists.[29]

His concern about the frequency of guest conductors during the early 1940s was not unwarranted; for example, thirteen of them appeared in the 1942 season alone.

The issue of orchestral leadership in New York was an ongoing problem, one which Thomson wrote about again five years later in an article titled "Philharmonic Crisis." Here the dilemma is addressed more directly:

> Arthur Rodzinski has gone and done it. For years the knowledge has been a secret scandal in music circles. Now he has said it out loud. That the trouble with the

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[29]Ibid.

> Philharmonic is nothing more than an unbalance of power.[30]

According to Rodzinski,

> the three pillars of a soundly run orchestra ...are the board, the manager, and the musical director. As the New York Philharmonic is run, these three pillars are not of equal importance, as they must be.[31]

Thomson echoes the conductor's view, remarking that a musical director should be responsible for the "hiring and firing of musicians, their training and discipline, the composition of all programs and their public execution..."[32] The manager, on the other hand, should oversee the organizational aspects of running the orchestra, of business and diplomacy, and function as "a go-between in whatever brush-ups occur between the conductor and the trustees."[33] He or she should not be responsible for assembling the concert programmes or choosing guest conductors and artists. If this occurs, the balance of power is upset and the orchestra cannot continue to function successfully.

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[30]Thomson, "Philharmonic Crisis," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 198.

[31]Shanet, 305.

[32]Thomson, "Philharmonic Crisis," 199. Thomson's assertion that the musical director should be responsible for the hiring and firing of musicians is likely a reference to Rodzinski's controversial firing of 14 string players shortly after his appointment to the position of musical director in 1943.

[33]Ibid.

At the time, Thomson's remarks in "Philharmonic Crisis" were extremely urgent ones. During the 1946-1947 season Rodzinski resigned as musical director, claiming that the orchestra's manager was "interfering with his artistic privileges and responsibilities."[34] This event was especially disturbing to Thomson, who felt that Rodzinski had "done more for the orchestra... than any other conductor in our century..."[35] Furthermore, he commented that "what awaits his successor is anyone's guess."[36]

Thomson's admiration of Rodzinski was threefold: he was dauntless in his dealings with the orchestra's management board, he was an advocate of contemporary music, and he arranged occasionally for composers, including Roy Harris, Darius Milhaud, and Thomson himself, to appear as guest conductors.[37]

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[34]Shanet, 307.

[35]Thomson, "Philharmonic Crisis," 199.

[36]Ibid., 200.

[37]For a list of the repertory that Rodzinski programmed, see Shanet, 506-529. Thomson conducted one work on a concert of both February 22 and 23, 1944. Milhaud conducted two works on concerts of December 6 and 7, 1946, and Harris conducted one work on February 21 and 22. During this time it was commplace for composers to also work as conductors, teachers, and critics. "Conflict of interest" was not considered an issue.

After Rodzinski's resignation, the orchestra remained without a musical director until 1951. Bruno Walter was appointed from 1947 until 1949, but he chose to take the title Musical Advisor.

> When the Philharmonic-Symphony Society, in 1943, honored me with an invitation to becomes its Musical Director, I felt obliged to answer that, because of my age, I did not feel able to fulfill the manifold obligations connected with such a position and especially to cope with the very extensive concert schedule of the Society.[38]

Realizing the severity of the orchestra's predicament, Walter was willing to offer his services until another director could be found.

For the 1949-1950 season the Symphony Society appointed Dimitri Mitropoulos and Leopold Stokowski as co-conductors; both had appeared as guests frequently during the Walter years. Finally, in 1951, Mitropoulos was appointed Musical Director, a position he held until 1957; he continued as co-conductor with Leonard Bernstein the following year. Thomson looked favourably on Mitropoulos's appointment and remarked:

> The works announced by Dimitri Mitropoulos for his Philharmonic program of next season... give a strong impression that this conductor will follow the policy that has always been his of offering many rarities, revivals,

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[38]Shanet, 305.

> novelties, of avoiding more than most conductors do the beaten path and the Fifty Pieces.[39]

Although enthusiastic about the proposed broadening of the repertory, Thomson's satisfaction at this time remained incomplete. While more new works were being performed, he felt that they were not being programmed in a responsible manner. His concern lay in the fact that the programmes presented a mix of works by established composers with unknown or recent composers. For Thomson, this practice was a blatant admission of the establishment's interest in business rather than culture; it demonstrated the Symphony Society's fear that a concert would not attract a large audience unless it included works from the standard repertory. For example, the following two concert programmes were conducted by Mitropoulos in 1950. These were chosen at random from the lengthy list of concerts conducted by him during this year.[40] The order of works listed does not necessarily correspond to the order in which they were performed.

a. December 8, 1950

Křenek: Concerto No.3, for piano and orchestra
Liszt: A Faust Symphony

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[39]Thomson, "How Mitropoulos's Program Policy Can Either be Supported — or Killed," New York Herald Tribune, 30 April, 1950, V/6. NB: Thomson used the epithet "Fifty Pieces" to refer to the standard repertory.

[40]Shanet, 552-559.

Mozart: Overture to The Magic Flute
Rabaud: Symphonic Poem, La Procession nocturne

b. April 14, 1950

Chabrier: "Joyeuse marche"
Chabrier: "Fête polonaise," from Le Roi malgré lui
Shulman: Concerto for violoncello and orchestra (first performance)
Schubert: Symphony No.2 in B^b major

Thomson believes that such standard repertory enticements — luring listeners to hear Křenek by programming Mozart and Liszt, and similarly, including Schubert on a concert featuring a premiere by Shulman — would not be needed if the orchestra were to depend on subscription sales rather than on single-ticket buyers. He charges:

> Subscribers do not ask themselves whether they are going to enjoy a concert; they wait till it is over to express their response. Even if they are disappointed in a given program, their continued patronage is determined by their enjoyment of the whole season. They calculate from a larger repertory basis than the buyer of single tickets can do. The latter wants his money's worth in one evening.[41]

Although these remarks are intended to add more weight to his belief that the number of contemporary works performed should be increased, they are unsubstantiated.

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[41]Ibid.

While many of Thomson's readers agreed with his suggestion of broadening the performance repertory,[42] their support was not unanimous. In "Protest About Programs," written in 1950, he offers a few of his readers' most vehement comments. While most echo his own views, one particularly interesting letter advances the opposite position.

> As far as I am concerned, and I know I speak for many of my fellow-subscribers, one more season of the inferior programs [and] this one will be my last! I am only renewing in the hope that some of the standard repertory, the 'fifty pieces' as you dispose of them, will be played — and will be performed as if they were worthy of the performance. It is one thing to introduce one new work on a program, quite another to foist off two or three [of] these most frequently in the company of the most banal compositions of the second-rate composers. For the sake of novelty and variety we are being denied the most exquisite and eloquent musical creations.[43]

In reference to this letter Thomson ends his article by stating simply "no comment from this department."[44]

Unfortunately, letters such as the one quoted above mirrored the views of the Symphony Society. Although Mitropoulos attempted to uphold

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[42]See Thomson, "Wholesalers and Jobbers," New York Herald Tribune, 21 January, 1951, IV/9, and "Getting Around the Middleman," New York Herald Tribune, 11 March, 1951, IV/5.

[43]Thomson, "Protests about Programs," New York Herald Tribune, 3 September, 1950, V/4.

[44]Ibid.

his credo that "...it is only fair and artistic to present every kind of music,"[45] he decided to limit the number of new works to only two per month. Although not stated, Thomson intimates that the conductor was coerced into this action by the Symphony Society board members.

Two weeks after "Protests about Programs" was published, Thomson wrote an article which attempted to add fuel to his side of the argument. In "Taste Survey" he cites the questions and answers from a listener survey instituted by the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, designed to ascertain what the orchestra's listeners, not management, were interested in hearing. Included were questions which attempted to discern the following: 1. What type of music did the audience prefer? 2. Who were its favourite composers? 3. Was it interested in hearing American music? 4. What was the attitude towards modern music? and finally, 5. What type of music is preferred by listeners of different ages?[46]

The results showed that the majority of concert- goers preferred the music of the Romantics, defined in the questionnaire as music centred around Brahms and Tchaikovsky. The ten favourite composers in descending order were: Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Bach, Mozart, Wagner, Debussy, Chopin, Sibelius, and Haydn.

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[45]Ibid.

[46]Thomson, "Taste Survey," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 320.

In addition to this advocacy of the musical canon, the audience polled admitted an interest in hearing more of both American music and modern music. The age of listeners was found to play a role in this last result; those most interested in modern music were under the age of 40.

One of the most important results revealed that while inexperienced concert-goers were very open to hearing new music, most seasoned listeners preferred works of the Classical-Romantic repertory. The results indicated further that a listener's preferences changed over time, becoming gradually more conservative.

Although he uses some of the information from this survey to support his argument that many members of concert audiences are interested in more varied programming, Thomson's intended comparison between Indianapolis and New York is like comparing apples and oranges, and his summation of the survey is lacking in specific details. For example, he does not discuss how the survey was administered, what segment of the audience was involved, how much modern and or American music the listeners were interested in hearing, what modern and American composers they preferred, or even the length of the concert season in each location. At an even more basic level, it cannot be assumed that the preferences of the Indianapolis audience corresponded directly with those of listeners in New York.

While Thomson's persistent assertion that performance institutions should aspire solely to fulfilling a cultural need might not be called naive, it is at least idealistic. He was, of course, very aware of and concerned with the financial plight of performing organizations in the 1940s and 1950s, but he believed that the financial situation would not improve until audiences were offered more interesting programmes; more people would be interested in attending concerts that included works from outside the musical canon. While Thomson remained adamant in this regard, there was a legitimate concern by many that more interesting programmes would in fact diminish the audience's interest in attending concerts.[47]

Another belief espoused in the Herald Tribune writings is that readers should be informed of the financial state of their local performing institutions. Consequently, Thomson devotes a substantial number of articles to discussions of music's financial state, many featuring statistics. When the New York Philharmonic's deficit reached a staggering $150,000 in 1950, up from $81,500 of the previous year,[48] he suggested that the government of New York underwrite a percentage of it, in order to guarantee the orchestra's continued existence. The Symphony Society of New York claimed that while

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[47]See the discussion on page 44.

[48]Thomson, "Philharmonic Finances," New York Herald Tribune, 19 November, 1950, V/6.

the financial problems were essentially under control for the 1950-1951 season, it was the sufficiency of support of subsequent seasons that would prove difficult. A spokesperson for the society even went so far as to say that the society "cannot go on taking part of our capital funds to bring music to the people of New York."[49] Thomson replied:

> Thinking that the society existed only for the purpose of bringing music to the people of New York, their reporter inquired of the Philharmonic office and also of Mr. [Floyd G.] Blair [President and treasurer] just what he had meant and what was the situation anyway.[50]

The concern was that if the deficit continued, or increased, the $400,000 of available capital would be depleted quickly. The only funding that would remain to combat the deficits of subsequent seasons would consist of the yearly interest earned from the endowment fund — an amount of only $160,000, not enough to cover the orchestra's operating costs.

Although fund-raising attempts had been made to replenish the reserve, they were not very successful. Suggestions were made that the municipal government should offer funding, but this alternative was approached with suspicion by all involved. Not only was the Symphony Society afraid that it would be required to swear allegiance to governmental interests and sacrifice its independence, but the government organization

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

harboured scepticism as to the orchestra's cultural value. On this point Thomson remarked:

> The city does need to be assured that the institution is filling a cultural need, also that it is being operated with a reasonable degree of responsibility. The institution needs to know that whatever aid is received is sincerely intended to further a musical purpose and not for anything else.[51]

The type of financial aid that institutions such as the Philharmonic were lobbying for, and eventually managed to acquire, was of a different nature. They were willing to accept government assistance in the form of an exemption to the federal government amusement tax, which was a 20% tax on tickets. Only those organizations which could prove that their purpose was an educational one, rather than a luxury or method of entertainment, could gain such an exemption. Many orchestras had tried to establish this position, but the government was not easily convinced. The orchestra societies felt that if the tax were removed, they could continue to charge the same price for tickets, using the 20% to counter operating costs.

Corresponding to his view that the musical director and the public should be involved in decisions regarding concert programmes, Thomson suggests that these groups should be informed of an orchestra's financial situation, especially if it is not positive. He asserts that the public

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[51]Thomson, "The Question of Municipal Help for Our Symphonies and Operas," New York Herald Tribune, 22 October, 1950, V/5.

> will save a cultural institution that the people of that city believe in. The value of a symphony orchestra to commerce has long been known. But when orchestras are in trouble, everybody, including the board members, is likely to sit back and hope somebody else will find the energy necessary to raise the money that will get the orchestra out of trouble.[52]

Thomson's remark about the value of a symphony orchestra to commerce calls for explanation. The view that he is supporting here is not that the presence of an orchestra increases a city's employment opportunities, but rather that large companies, those which provide jobs, are more likely to establish bases in a city that offers cultural activities.[53] He points out that "it has long been known from history that culture follows commerce. Today it is clear also that commerce follows culture."[54]

To illustrate his point regarding the importance of keeping the public informed when a performing institution is experiencing financial difficulties, the example of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra is cited. Thomson explains that when Manuel Rosenthal took over the conductorship in 1949, the orchestra subscribers numbered 400. By 1951, only two years later, the number had risen to 3,400. This drastic increase resulted not only from

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[52]Thomson, "Seattle Survives," New York Herald Tribune, 14 January, 1951, IV/9.

[53]Thomson offers support for this assertion in "Bigger Than Baseball," 387.

[54]Ibid., 388.

> the giving of good concerts,... but also [from] [Rosenthal's] ability to interest the whole population of the city in the orchestra's achievements.[55]

When the management board decided that there was not enough funding to sustain the entire 1951 season, its reaction, which Thomson claims is typical, was to cancel concerts. Rosenthal, on the other hand, chose to present the public with a factual account of the problem. With assistance from local radio stations and the press, he managed to arouse enough interest and awareness in the orchestra that a sum of money larger than that needed to guarantee the remainder of the season was raised immediately.

In 1952, Thomson's lamentation about the state of contemporary music, including the activities of the New York Philharmonic, abated somewhat. During that year he published an article titled "Bigger than Baseball," which offers information and statistics taken from the latest bulletin of the National Music Council.[56] While the Council's goal was to explain and discuss proposed government subsidies, Thomson's article extracts statistical information to extol the then favourable condition of the arts in the United States.

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[55]Ibid.

[56]Report on Proposed Federal Government Participation In The Fine Arts by Helen M. Thompson, Executive Secretary in "Bulletin Of The National Music Council," September 1953, 3-7.

He begins by admitting that he is pleased with the report's findings that because

> a large part of our nation is involved in some way with music, nobody has to worry right now about the state of the art. It is in every way a going concern.[57]

Similarly, his concluding comments are positive in tone.

> To occupy the young, to ennoble adulthood, to train the hand, elevate the mind, lift up the spirits, and at the same time make business boom — all these are what America expects out of music and, surprisingly enough, gets.[58]

Both points appear even more powerful since they offer so direct a contrast to ones made only three years earlier in an article titled "The Outlook."[59]

The statistics that Thomson borrows from the bulletin to support his views on the positive state of music are as follows. At the time (1953), one-fifth of the population of the United States (about 30 million of the 150 million people) was "...actively interested in concert music,"[60] while in the preceding year, only 15 million people watched major-league baseball games, and only 5 million played golf. Concert-ticket sales for musical events reached $45 million

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[57]Thomson, "Bigger Than Baseball," 385.

[58]Ibid., 388.

[59]Thomson, "The Outlook," New York Herald Tribune, 31 December, 1950, V/7.

[60]Thomson, "Bigger than Baseball," 384.

while baseball's earnings were $40 million, and those of football $9 million. Even classical recordings grossed an impressive $60 million; accounting for 24% of total record sales in the country.

Thomson also points out that at that time there were 80 opera companies in nineteen states, a total of 938 orchestras, 150 musical periodicals, 750 critics, and 1,196 writers on musical subjects. Approximately 20 million students were studying music, and more than one tenth of the population was taking some type of music lessons. Moreover, 15,000 of the school orchestras were performing symphonic repertory, and music instrument sales had tripled within the last ten years. Both Thomson's article and the Bulletin discuss the cultural importance of the arts in society, the problems of mistrust between artistic organizations and governmental agencies, and the importance of keeping the public informed as to the state of their local arts institutions.

But while "Bigger than Baseball" offers carefully selected information which helps to support Thomson's view of optimism, the Music Council's Bulletin explains that the currently luminous state of music is not without a darker side: the total deficit of major orchestras in the United States rose to almost $4 million, unemployment among musicians remained high, and those few who managed to find jobs, even in major orchestras, earned an average of only $1,800 per year. According to the United States Bureau of the Census

Occupational Earnings Report from 1949,[61] "musicians and music teachers" (male) earned an average of $2,700.[62] This amount was slightly lower than that earned by clerical workers and school teachers.[63] The most recent United States Census report, for 1979,[64] does not offer earnings for the category of "musicians and music teachers." It does, however, state that "artists, performers, and related workers" (male), earned an average of $18,704[65] in 1979, and "art, drama, and music teachers" (male), earned an average of $20,435.[66] These amounts are comparable to those earned by both clerical workers and school teachers during 1979.[67] The reason for the seemingly low figure offered by the Bulletin of the National Music Council for 1952

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[61]U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population: 1950, vol. IV, Special Reports, part 1, Chapter B, Occupational Characteristics. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956).

[62]Ibid., 1B-183.

[63]Teachers' earnings were $3,463 (Ibid., 1B-183) and clerical workers' were $3,185 (Ibid., 1B-185).

[64]U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population: 1980. Subject Reports. Occupations by Earnings and Education. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984).

[65]Ibid., 65.

[66]Ibid., 45.

[67]In 1979 "secretaries, stenographers, and typists" (male) earned $18,803. (Ibid., 93) "Teachers" (male), non post-secondary earned $17,466. (Ibid., 299).

(compared to the census report of 1949) is difficult to explain, since the Bulletin does not divulge the source of its information.

As Thomson intended, "Bigger than Baseball" did help to disseminate the information presented in the Music Council's Bulletin to a wider audience. But, as in "Taste Survey," he offers only carefully selected information. In the former article his aim was not only to inform his readers that music was currently enjoying a position of relative stability. He also implies that the public needs to persist in its involvement in and awareness of musical activities in order to ensure that operations continue to run smoothly.

The Metropolitan Opera House

Thomson's discussion on the state of opera in the United States consists primarily of his views on events occurring at the Metropolitan Opera House. As in his articles on the New York Philharmonic, he centres on issues regarding the fulfilment of the cultural obligation. In the case of the Met, financial prosperity emerges as an essential factor for achieving what he considers to be success; financial prosperity is imperative for the production of new works.

Throughout these articles, three related areas of concern recur: the Met's financial status, standards of performance, and choice of repertory.

Like the Philharmonic, the Met has a lengthy and involved history. It began on October 22, 1883, with a production of Gounod's Faust. Originally established as a social gesture by wealthy New Yorkers who could not obtain boxes for the operatic productions at the Academy of Music, the Met has come to achieve not only a national, but an international reputation.[68]

In its early years, the Met was essentially a German opera house. Under the management of Leopold Damrosch from 1884 to 1885, and Anton Seidl from 1886 to 1890, all works, even Il Trovatore and Aida, were produced in German. In 1891, under manager Maurice Grau, the repertory was expanded to include works in French and Italian. When Guilio Gatti-Casazza took over the position in 1908, aided by the musical efforts of Toscanini and the financial help of Otto Kahn, opera flourished. During this time too, a policy was instituted ensuring that opera would be produced in its language of composition.[69]

Although the Met did well under Gatti-Casazza's leadership, the onset of the Depression quickly depleted the reserve fund. Out of necessity, seasons were shortened to sixteen, and later, fourteen weeks. In 1935 Gatti-Casazza retired and was replaced by Herbert Witherspoon, who died while

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[68]The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "New York," 172-176.

[69]Ibid.

planning his first season. He was then replaced by Edward Johnson. During Johnson's era, few new works were produced, and Italian opera dominated. Johnson was the manager when Thomson acquired his critical post at the Herald Tribune. During his tenure as critic, Thomson witnessed two major changes at the Met, in 1940 and in 1950. Since the focus of his comments correspond to the circumstances surrounding each of these changes, the articles dealing with these events are best discussed chronologically.

In all of the articles, one point in particular becomes clear: producing opera is an expensive endeavour. In light of this, it seems that after financial near-ruin in the mid 1930s, the decision by the Met's management to focus on financial concerns in the early 1940s was a legitimate one. On May 31 of that year, a revolutionary step towards financial stability was taken: the land title of the Metropolitan Opera House, held by the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Board, was handed over to the Metropolitan Opera Association. Before that time, the Met's primary financial source was a private company whose members, or shareholders, paid the property taxes, maintained the building, and occupied the socially significant boxes in the house.[70] When the property title was sold to the production company, the Metropolitan Opera Association, the Met became a public institution. This meant that it was considered a non-profit-making institution of recognized

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[70]Ibid.

public service, and, under the New York State laws, was permitted to raise funds for both its endowment and maintenance.[71] In order to secure the transaction, the Metropolitan Opera Association had already managed to raise $1 million through public appeal. Part of this amount was needed to secure the acquisition of the house; the rest was used to establish the Metropolitan Opera Fund "to maintain and advance the opera."[72] The intention was that the money would

> ensure the continuance of opera in an appropriate location..., provide a sound financial basis for the continued production of opera, [and] for improvements to increase the comfort of patrons..., enhance the production of opera[,] and... extend the educational facilities...[73]

This change, referred to "democratization,"[74] was intended to expand "the services of the Met to the musical life of the city and the nation."[75] One of the most immediate results was increased financial gain. This was due in part to the fact that approximately half of the previously privately subsidized boxes in the house were removed and replaced with seats

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[71]Thomson, "To The Metropolitan" New York Herald Tribune, 16 February, 1941, VI/6.

[72]George A. Sloan, "To the Music Critic," New York Herald Tribune, 23 February, 1941, VI/6.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid.

available for public sale. Information regarding the financial state of the Met at this time is confusing, as different books offer substantially different figures. While Irving Kolodin, in The Metropolitan Opera, states that losses totalled $171,462 for the 1939-1940 season,[76] a more recent book by Martin Mayer claims that this is a mistake, and that the figure reflects not losses but profits.[77] Both are in agreement that the income of the 1940-1941 season was $2,116,000; after expenses the total loss was under $51,000.[78]

Thomson was not averse to the Met becoming a publicly owned and financed institution; in fact he stated that "I welcome, as do most musicians, the recent reorganization of the Metropolitan."[79] What he did dislike was the term "democratization." In 1941 he remarked

> I am rather at a loss to know what is meant by that phrase... Certainly opera has always been a completely democratic entertainment. From grand tier to gallery, there has always been present a greater cross-section of society than can be found in any other wing of flesh-and-blood theater.[80]

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[76]Irving Kolodin, The Metropolitan Opera (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 423.

[77]Martin Mayer, The Met (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 215.

[78]Ibid., 218.

[79]Thomson, "To the Metropolitan," VI/6.

[80]Thomson, "Democratizing the Metropolitan," New York Herald Tribune, 2 February, 1941, VI/6.

The difference of opinion that occurred between Thomson and those running the Met over the meaning of this term resulted from the fact that each was defining it in a different way.

By "democratization" the Met management board meant that progress was being made "in the policy of expanding the services of the Metropolitan to the musical life of the city and the nation."[81] One example of this expansion was that in addition to the Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts, which had been occurring since 1931, a Thursday night broadcast was also established, offering a panel discussion about the upcoming Saturday performance.[82]

While Thomson had nothing against this type of expansion, he felt that "democratization" was not the correct word for it. In his view, this term could only be applied legitimately if all operations of the Met, not only finances, but also management and programming, were turned over to the public. While he observed that financial changes had definitely taken place in light of the events of 1940, the performances remained the same: "like those of any other repertory theater in the world, [they] vary from good to bad by way of indifferent."[83]

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[81]Sloan, VI/6.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Ibid.

Throughout the early 1940s the problem of performance consistency was one of his primary concerns. He felt that since the financial state of the Met had improved, the management was under the misconception that it was operating successfully, neglecting to notice the lingering artistic problems. In a 1941 article, presented as an open letter titled "To the Metropolitan," Thomson asserted:

> the Metropolitan Opera Company owes us, its local and nation-wide public, a conservation in these troubled times of the highest musical ideals and the highest professional standards of musical execution.[84]

Later that same year he elaborated on this point.

> I understand the box-office has never done better. That's fine. Performances have been better, though they have at times been worse, too. What they seem to lack is unity and style. It is as if nobody around really cared.[85]

Towards the middle of the decade his opinions became increasingly vehement. In 1944 he wrote an article titled "What's Wrong with the Met?" where he explained that if the performances were not so unpredictable and inconsistent he would not be complaining.

> But being as they are — sublime, ridiculous, and everything in between — and being also the visible reason for existence of a corporation that raises money by public passing of the hat and that is recognized by the state as of cultural utility, they make one wonder willy-

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[84]Thomson, "To the Metropolitan," VI/6.

[85]Thomson, "Democratizing the Metropolitan," VI/6.

> nilly whether we, the public, are getting all we are entitled to out of our contributions.[86]

Additionally,

> ...if the one quality manifested consistently in recent years by the Metropolitan Opera performances underneath all the sincere effort exerted by the various artists and all the real talent, even genius, these have shown for putting over a show in spite of difficulties — is a lack of taste, of judgment, of showmanship, of style, then the institution's directorial and organizational staff is at fault. This does not mean that the staff should or should not be altered. It means that the institution's whole conception of what opera should be needs to be altered, and radically. There is too much inefficiency there and not enough idealism.[87]

Thomson's objection to the Met's conception of opera, as well as what he refers to as its lack of idealism, is due to the fact that it is antithetical to his own idealistic vision of performance standards and repertory choice.

The observations that he offers at the time regarding inconsistency and bad management were not unfounded. While Edward Johnson (manager from 1935 to 1950) did sustain the opera, even in times of financial gravity, commentators have suggested that his business skills were inadequate. In his book The Met, Martin Mayer writes:

> ...the fact was that Johnson knew little about running an opera house, and he never learned. Strong artists and (eventually) strong conductors pulled the company through, and offered highlight performances long

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[86]Thomson, "What's Wrong with the Met?," 181.

[87]Ibid., 183.

> remembered, but there was throughout the Johnson period a catch-as-catch-can quality about the Met that lowered the average level far below what should have been possible.[88]

While Thomson remarks that the Met conductors and singers are good, the orchestra mediocre, the chorus bad, the stage direction timid, the scenery water-soaked and the lighting unrehearsed, he admits that somehow, good performances manage occasionally to take place.

The second important change to occur at the Met during Thomson's tenure was one of management: at the end of the 1949-1950 season Johnson retired from his post as manager, and Rudolph Bing was appointed.

Bing's plan to revitalize the Met involved narrowing the performance repertory temporarily and refurbishing old productions. His goal was to improve the "visual aspect of opera[,] so that the sights would be more harmonious with the sounds."[89] Thomson observed that not only did this improvement occur, but it was accomplished "...without permitting deterioration in the high musical standards of the house."[90]

Under Bing's direction $200,000 was spent on productions of old works in 1951 alone. "Next year [1952, the Met] will spend that much more"

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[88]Mayer, 231.

[89]Ibid., 240.

[90]Ibid.

Thomson states. "The policy is sound, but it carries the house no farther, repertory-wise than maintenance and upkeep."[91] The Met's repertory, under Bing's direction, was limited to 21 works for a 22 week season. One of the changes least well received was the omission of Parsifal, which had been produced every year for 31 seasons. It was replaced by two performances of Verdi's Manzoni requiem.[92]

Although Thomson looked upon Bing's appointment favourably for the most part, he remained concerned with the Met's repertory choices and financial state. In "What Bing Has Done," he cautions that "no company in the world has ever survived long on a repertory of the past. Pure Box-office is poison."[93] In Thomson's view, the Met's only hope of returning to its "golden epoch" is to reinstate "...its long neglected policy of production of at least one new work a year and of giving New York the best new works produced anywhere in the century..."[94]

Of course, even Thomson had to admit that the ongoing problem at the Met was a financial one. The operational loss of the 1950-1951 season was

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[91]Ibid.

[92]Kolodin, 507.

[93]Thomson, "What Bing Has Done," New York Herald Tribune, 18 March, 1951, V/4.

[94]Ibid.

$430,502.94, and $473,000 for the 1951-1952 season.[95] In "The Outlook" (1950) he remarked:

> ...with enforced financial compromise cutting every corner, the Met does not and cannot offer to the nation a standard of musical efficiency at all comparable to that long embodied in the work of our great orchestras.[96]

Unlike the problem expressed in the case of symphonic repertory, Thomson's contention here was not that the works being composed were too conservative; rather, too few works were being written, and those that were could not be produced by the Met. In 1951 he quotes Bing as stating:

> No one in the world of the theater puts on any show unless he is convinced that it will either be a 'hit-success' or at least attract sufficient public acclaim to justify the effort. I cannot see why this sound principle, which is commonly accepted in the theater, should be a criminal offence when applied to the opera.[97]

Thomson's reaction to such a statement was predictable. Holding on to his idealistic beliefs, he argued that the only way to add new works to the repertory was to simply try them out — regardless of the anticipated financial risk.

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[95]Kolodin, 522.

[96]Thomson, "The Outlook," New York Herald Tribune, 31 December, 1950, V/7.

[97]Thomson, "Spokesman for the Met," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 339.

Contrary to the intimation that the management's reluctance to offer new works was due to more than simply monetary reasons, Bing's own comments suggest that he too lamented the opera house's predicament. In his memoirs, he relates a variety of anecdotes supporting the interest in contemporary opera.

> ...I had been brought up in a school where it was a matter of routine to present premieres every season, and in England I had co-operated wholeheartedly in launching Britten's The Rape of Lucretia and Albert Herring.[98]

Indeed, he once tried to convince Aaron Copland and Thornton Wilder to collaborate on a new opera for the Met. Unfortunately Wilder declined, replying that "I'm convinced that I write a-musical plays..."[99] Another time Bing was approached by composer William Schuman, then president of the Juilliard School, who proposed to offer a $100,000 fund for the production of new American operas. Bing was asked to calculate how many new works could be produced with this amount of funding. After examining the costs of past new works, specifically the production of Peter Grimes in the 1947-1948 and 1948-1949 seasons, he calculated that $100,000 would provide the minimum needed for the production of only one new work. Finally, he

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[98]Sir Rudolph Bing, 5000 Nights at the Opera (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), 208.

[99]Ibid., 288.

recounts that George Antheil once offered his opera Volpone to the Met for production. Bing had no choice but to decline the offer, adding the following discouraging comments:

> it would be utterly mad and indeed unjustified if the management was contemplating spending a great deal of money on the production of an opera which, however good or interesting, will most likely not be a box office success... If and when the Metropolitan will be on a financial basis that it need not look to the box office every night for survival, then the time will come to further contemporary works and, of course, in that line, predominately American works. At the moment, there is nothing left for me but to say clearly and unmistakably that there is not a ghost of a chance.[100]

By 1953 Thomson's support of Bing's regime had waned. Although he agreed with the original decision to narrow the repertory temporarily, with the aim of offering a few well-presented productions, he was no longer willing to support it, since the initial effectiveness of the plan had dissipated. He asserts that because of constant cast changes, the only result after three years of restricted repertory is that a few works had been presented, and not very well. In "Bing's regime good showmanship; musically it is 'less of same'" he charges:

> In the last years of Edward Johnson's direction, the quality of the repertory ran high. One could sometimes hear in one week as many as six of the grander and more difficult production pieces like 'Goetterdaemmerung,' 'Salome,' 'Khovanshchina,' 'Louise,' 'Fidelio,' 'Alceste'

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[100]Ibid., 209-210.

> and 'Falstaff.' These are works that only the Metropolitan and a very few other establishments in the world can produce properly. They are what the house was built for (the Wagner works especially) and what its musical and backstage organization is geared to. They are also what the musical public looks to the Metropolitan for. But read the Metropolitan program listings almost any week, and what do you find? For one 'Elektra,' 'Parsifal' or 'Rosenkavalier' you find six operas like 'Carmen,' 'Madame Butterfly,' 'La Bohème,' 'Rigoletto,' 'La Traviata,' 'Cav' and 'Pag,' not to speak of 'Fledermaus.'[101]
>
> Unless the Metropolitan Opera operates predominantly on a level of repertory comparable to that of the haute couture and the grande cuisine, it throws away its only major reason for continuing to exist.[102]

What Thomson is suggesting here is that works which were not common in the repertory of other opera houses should be performed at the Met. This includes not only the large-scale and weighty works, but also the modern ones. The standard operas could be produced by the smaller New York opera companies such as the City Center Opera.

Throughout the Sunday articles, Thomson exposes his belief in the importance of fulfilling the cultural obligation. For him, this refers to the necessity of performance institutions such as the Philharmonic and the Met to ensure that their audiences are offered as wide a range of listening experiences

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[101]Thomson, "Bing's Regime Good Showmanship; Musically It Is 'Less of Same'," New York Herald Tribune, 25 January, 1953, IV/6.

[102]Ibid.

as is possible from the vast available repertory, especially contemporary works. Thomson's vehemence about this issue results from the fear that the longer the administrators responsible for programming wait to alter their policies regarding repertory, the more difficult their task will become.

CHAPTER THREE

ON MUSIC CRITICISM

> Criticism is not just a whirling windmill,
> but truly an exercise of the mind.
>
> Virgil Thomson, Virgil Thomson

In addition to providing observations on the state of the musical world in the 1940s and early 1950s, the Sunday articles present Thomson's personal thoughts on the nature of music criticism. While some of his comments are simply extensions of those presented in earlier writings, particularly The State of Music, others are new tenets which emerged as he put his critical theories into practice on a daily basis. Furthermore, the writings in question illuminate the evaluative criteria that are incorporated into his performance reviews.

The Nature of Music Criticism

Thomson's approach to the field of music criticism is a prescriptive one. He suggests not only that an act of criticism must aspire to fulfil specific goals, but also emphasizes that the critic must satisfy certain requirements in order to pursue these goals in a responsible manner. Although he is not the

only reviewer to have developed a personal critical theory, Thomson is more vocal than most about his beliefs and the importance of their application. Throughout, these writings make apparent a belief in criticism as the dissemination of information. With vehement conviction, Thomson claims that the main business of critics, "really their only business, is explaining the creative or executant artist to the public."[1] In addition, if the critic

> adds a paragraph of personal opinion, that is his privilege as a musician. It is also his duty as a reporter, since the confessing of his personal prejudice and predilections helps the reader to discount them.[2]

Moreover, he suggests that by fulfilling this role, criticism will enable its readers to develop opinions and pronounce judgements on their own. The importance of this point lies in his repeated claims that the judgements expressed by the collective public are more significant and reliable than those pronounced by a singular critic.[3] In "Composer and Critic" he remarks:

> consuming [music] is the public's business and, to this end judging it. We all judge it. That is a human right granted even to the reviewer. But if the reviewer is not to be mistaken by artists and managements for just a cog

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[1]Virgil Thomson "Composer and Critic," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 397.

[2]Ibid.

[3]See Thomson, "Spokesman for the Met," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 337-340; and "Composer and Critic," 396-399.

> in their publicity machine, neither should he set himself up as a Bureau of Standards.[4]

One may question Thomson's assertion that the public is expected to disregard a critic's statements of opinion as inconsequential. His emphasis on the value of objective rather than self-revealing criticism recalls Ernest Newman's statement: "I want a form of criticism that will tell me more about the object criticised and less about the critic."[5] But like Newman's expostulations, Thomson's words — both description and opinion — were read diligently and taken seriously. In addition to his judgemental epigrams that appear on record jackets and book covers, the substantial amount of reader correspondence challenging his views attests to this. For example, early in his career he began the answer to one letter of protest with the following sentence: "I am sorry that my approach to musical criticism in general and to the Sibelius symphony in particular is distasteful to you."[6] In another,

> I am sorry to have disappointed you in my review of The Rake's Progress. Perhaps, if you hear it often, you may find some of the enchantment in it that I did. Perhaps,

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[4]Thomson, "Composer and Critic," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 398.

[5]Ernest Newman, From the World of Music, ed. Felix Aprahamian (London: John Calder, 1956), 13.

[6]Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page, eds., Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 151.

> too, on further hearing, I may find it 'frustrating,' as you did. One can never tell.[7]

Of the many requirements Thomson claims are necessary for the pursuit of responsible criticism, two are given special emphasis. First, all artists, regardless of their experience or abilities, need to be provided with a fair climate for receptivity. He admits that while it is often difficult to approach, with enthusiasm and without negative preconceptions, the multitude of third-rate performances that occur every season, the rights of the composers and performers must be respected.

> When an artist has devoted large sums of money and years of his life to acquiring a skill, however imperfect the result may be, the reviewer owes him the courtesy, the proof of integrity, of exercising a comparable care in his report to the public about the artist's work. He does not have to be right; nobody does. But if he wishes the public to believe him and musicians to respect him, he must arrive at his opinion by fair methods; and he must state it in clear English.[8]

Second, those interested in reviewing music, particularly modern music, need to possess a solid knowledge of music's historical past, in order to be able to comment on the ways that a new work conforms to or breaks with tradition. Most frequently, general remarks about Thomson's writings focus

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[7]Ibid., 266.

[8]Thomson, "Critic and Performer," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 401.

on his practice of reviewing modern music.[9] Although his passionate advocacy of new music cannot be denied, it is important to remember that he never claims that "dead music" (his term) is without value.[10] "Dead" here does not imply something valueless. Rather, it refers to music written by composers who are no longer living. Thomson's motive for continually focusing his efforts on modern music results from the belief that this is the music most in need of an advocate. Although the musical canon has been, and always will be, capable of thriving without assistance, he feels that contemporary music will not.

Thomson's ideal critic emerges as one who is fair, has a command of the musical language and the English language, a knowledge of past and present, and an interest in the future; essentially, an intellectual with a musical background. Consequently, he maintains that those who profess the title of critic should not be presumed infallible, nor should their opinions be accepted as indisputable.[11] Like some of his critical predecessors, Thomson's

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[9]See, for example, Kathleen Hoover's comments in Kathleen Hoover and John Cage, Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 92.

[10]Thomson, "Conducting Modern Music," in The Musical Scene (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 292.

[11]Thomson's own comments in the Introduction to The Musical Scene (ix-x) serve to emphasize this point.

description of the ideal critic consists essentially of qualities that he himself possessed.[12]

The degree of importance allotted to the element of "opinion" is a Gordian knot of criticism that Thomson attempts to unravel. Not surprisingly, he is not entirely successful. In a letter of response to a younger member of the profession puzzled by this issue, he cautions that independent criticism, defined as criticism consisting of not only a descriptive report but also an implication of value judgement, is only possible if the critic has full editorial support — such as he himself had at the Herald Tribune. In his autobiography he states that "during the fourteen years I worked there I was never told to do or not do anything."[13]

> Neither Ogden Reid nor Geoffrey Parsons, his chief aide in matters cultural, could be shocked by radical opinions on art, nor by the reactionary. Their attitude was that any informed statement could be published if it observed the amenities and was expressed in clear English.[14]

The following advice is offered to those not in a comparable situation:

> I think you are ill-advised to attempt [independent criticism]. If you feel that you must attempt it, then my

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[12]This refers to Ernest Newman in particular. See: Siobhan McDonnell, "Ernest Newman's Philosophy of Music Criticism" (M.A. Thesis, McMaster University, 1989).

[13]Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1977), 322.

[14]Thomson, Preface to Music Reviewed 1940-1954, v.

> advice is that you describe the music precisely and avoid all words implying 'good' or 'bad.' Just let the facts speak for themselves.[15]

Thomson might have suggested that his correspondent avoid using the actual words "good" or "bad" in his reviews simply because the descriptive vocabulary — the "facts" — employed by most critics function intentionally as tools of evaluation. The association of their descriptive comments with judgements of "good" or "bad" is usually immediately perceptible. Reasons for these associations will be discussed in Chapter Four.

While the fact that Thomson had strong editorial support cannot be denied, it should be pointed out that his remark about "never being told to do or not do anything" is not wholly accurate, especially in regard to his first three years as critic on the Herald Tribune. During this time, his writings were monitored closely by the paper's chief editorial writer, Geoffrey Parsons. When Thomson's articles and reviews were considered especially satisfactory he received praise. When they were unsatisfactory, in regard to either content or approach, he was informed of his mistakes and offered gentle advice on

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[15]Thomson to a correspondent, 22 July, 1954, in Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, 277.

how to avoid similar "blunders" later. Between 1940 and 1943 he received nine memos from Parsons, involving a total of fourteen articles and reviews.[16]

While most of the editor's memos offer general comments and suggestions, a few advise, quite assertively, that Thomson do, or not do, something specific. For example, the use of slang was not tolerated. In one memo Parsons wrote:

> I suspect that if I had been Managing Editor I would have fired you out of hand for putting that word 'beaut' in that otherwise excellent review of the Boston concert. At least I would have notified you that if ever again a word of slang appeared in any of your reviews, you need not report for work the next day.[17]

Furthermore, "if I see the word "amateurish" in your columns again, I shall scream."[18]

Thomson was advised as well not to criticize his audience. In a review of Sibelius' second symphony, he had remarked, among other things, that the audience was "undistinguished." The word was edited out prior to

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[16]Both Parsons' memos and the reviews by Thomson to which they pertain are reprinted in: John Vinton, Essays after a Dictionary: Music and Culture at the Close of Western Civilization (London: Associated University Presses, 1977), 29-77.

[17]Geoffrey Parsons to Virgil Thomson, 25 November, 1942. Jay Rozen and Benjamin J. Outen, compilers, "The Virgil Thomson Papers" TMs [photocopy]. Special Collections, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Connecticut, December 1985.

[18]Ibid.

the article's publication.[19] Other comments were left in, including the following statement: "I realize that there are sincere Sibelius lovers in the world, though I must say I've never met one among educated professional musicians."[20]

While Parsons criticized specific words chosen by Thomson, he also attempted to pull the critic off his "high horse" in regard to his aesthetic attitudes. While Thomson's previous experience as a critic for Modern Music had involved writing for a readership consisting predominantly of composer colleagues, his new position on the Herald Tribune called for a subtle change of approach, a realization that his audience was now a more varied one in regard to both its musical knowledge and experience.

Although Thomson is always willing to present his views on the practice of responsible criticism, only rarely does he offer his views on the work of his contemporary critical colleagues. One indicator of his opinion of them in the 1950s can be found in a letter of 1953, written to Nicolas Nabokov.[21] Arranging a concert series in Rome, Nabokov had requested that Thomson supply him with a list of music critics whom he felt merited the title

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[19]Vinton, 36.

[20]Rozen and Outen, 11 October, 1940.

[21]Thomson to Nicolas Nabokov, 12 May, 1953, in Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, 268.

"distinguished." Those whose names appeared included Olin Downes of the New York Times, Alfred Frankenstein of the San Francisco Chronicle, John Rosenfield of the Dallas Morning News and Manuel Salazar in Mexico City. Also included were Gerald Abraham and William Glock, both active in London. To the end of his reply Thomson added that "the least distinguished intellectually are Olin Downes, John Rosenfield, and Gerald Abraham; but all three are influential."[22]

Thomson and Downes, said to have been "in healthy rivalry,"[23] appear also to have fostered a mutual respect for one another's work. Downes' admiration of Thomson is best illustrated by the following letter, presumably written in the early 1940s.

> I'm simply forced to write you a letter of homage. Your review this morning hits off to utter perfection the exact character of the performance and of the music. I've read it half a dozen times and realize that in spite of the ease with which it was evidently thrown off, one wouldn't change a word or add or subtract a sentence... What a blessing that you have come to town! The whole bumbling business of music criticism as it is written today has been perked up by your arrival. Life is the better for it, less stupid, less logy, less bumptious. You will do everybody in our line a world of good, provided none of us is fool enough to try to imitate you.[24]

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[22]Thomson to Nicolas Nabokov, 12 May, 1953, Ibid.

[23]Winton Dean, s.v. "Criticism," in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie. 1980 edition, 5.

[24]Hoover and Cage, 92-93.

Although Thomson remarked continually on the conservatism of his colleague at the Times,[25] he seems also to have respected him as a critic. No letters of homage exist from Thomson to Downes, but the former did remark in 1955 that "since the death of Olin Downes and my own resignation, the profession has lost some of its brilliance."[26] Despite the flippant tone of his statement, it appears to have been sincere.

Other critical relationships are difficult to confirm, since Thomson does not openly admit his influences. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that with the expansion of the press, the developments of radio and television, and with effective communication between continents, Thomson's generation could access the writings, both past and present, of nearly any critic it wanted to read.

On the topic of critical affinities, Thomson's biographer Kathleen Hoover states:

> Like his predecessors in the shining era when the confrérie included a Weber, a Berlioz, and a Schumann, [Thomson] is a musician-composer and as such brings to bear on his appraisal of a composition an absolutely professional knowledge of all its elements... His viewpoint, by virtue of his personal creative experience,

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[25]Virgil Thomson to a correspondent, 30 January, 1942, Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, 176.

[26]Virgil Thomson to Jorge D'Urbano, 20 September, 1955, Ibid., 289.

> has therefore little in common with those of Hanslick, Newman or Shaw...[27]

While one cannot deny that, due to their common vocation, Thomson resembles the composer-critics of the nineteenth century, it is important to note as well that he exhibits a striking similarity to the renowned critical triumvirate of Hanslick, Shaw, and Newman; the writings of all three have not only survived the test of time, but have been celebrated continually for their readability. Not only have many of Thomson's comments been quoted and referred to in books and articles by others, but writers such as Nicolas Nabokov have suggested that his success is due largely to his "stylistic mastery of great force and great simplicity."[28] Similarly, Alfred Frankenstein claims that Thomson is "always a master of the exact word and line with which to make vivid the special characteristics of the experience he is attempting to describe."[29]

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[27]Hoover and Cage, 93.

[28]Nicolas Nabokov, "Virgil Thomson, Learned and Literate," review of Music Right and Left, by Virgil Thomson, New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review, 11 March 1951, 6.

[29]Alfred Frankenstein, "A Literate Music Maker," review of The Art of Judging Music, by Virgil Thomson, New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review, 11 April 1948, 6.

Towards Criteria for the Evaluation of Music

The nature of "criticism" is difficult to pin down. While some commentators feel that it is primarily evaluative, others do not consider the evaluative component essential. In the Oxford English Dictionary "critic" is defined as "one who pronounces judgement...; a censurer, fault-finder, caviller...; one skilful in judging of the qualities and merits of literary or artistic works."[30] Dissimilarly, the New Harvard Dictionary of Music states that criticism "does not necessarily aim to judge value."[31] Other writers, including the philosopher Karl Aschenbrenner, have proposed that "criticism call not only for explanative but also for appraisive competence."[32]

In addition to, or perhaps due to, his vivid descriptions, Thomson's concert reviews contain a weighty evaluative component. As quoted previously, Kathleen Hoover has observed that he "brings to bear on his appraisal of a composition an absolutely professional knowledge of all its elements."[33] Similarly, Alfred Frankenstein has remarked that the prefatory

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[30]New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, s.v. "Criticism," 5.

[31]Don Randall, ed., New Harvard Dictionary Of Music, 1986 edition, s.v. "Criticism," 212.

[32]Karl Aschenbrenner, "Music Criticism: Practice and Malpractice," in On Criticizing Music: Five Philosophical Perspectives, ed. Kingsley Price (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 103.

[33]Hoover and Cage, 93.

essay in Thomson's book The Art of Judging Music "analyzes in a most incisive and inclusive fashion, the psychological processes whereby judgements about music are arrived at."[34]

Although Thomson combines both descriptive and evaluative procedures in his performance reviews, his articles on critical theory suggests that the descriptive function is of paramount significance.

John Dewey's book Art as Experience (1934) helps to elucidate this position somewhat. Although he asserts that "criticism is judgement, ideally as well as etymologically,"[35] Dewey argues that this judgement does not need to occur in a "legalistic" sense. Rather than revealing a definitive judgement and expecting an audience to accept it without question, Dewey believes that criticism should aim to provide analysis and insight; if it succeeds in doing so, he claims that it may be thought of as an art in itself.[36] This is the approach that Thomson takes in his Herald Tribune writings; by downplaying the evaluative component of his reviews, he is unlikely to be accused of being a practitioner of criticism in a "legalistic" sense.

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[34]Frankenstein, 6.

[35]John Dewey: The Later Works, ed. Jo Ann Boysdton, textual ed. Harriet Furst Simon, vol. 10, 1925-1953 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 302.

[36]Ibid., 317.

Dewey's explanation of the function of criticism also resembles Thomson's.

> The function of criticism is the reeducation of perception of works of art, it is an auxiliary in the process, a difficult process, of learning to see and hear. The conception that its business is to appraise, to judge in the legal and moral sense, arrests the perception of those who are influenced by the criticism that assumes this task.
>
> For critical judgement not only grows out of the critic's experience of objects and matter, and not only depends upon that for validity, but has for its office the deepening of just such experiences in others.[37]

In addition to being convinced that criticism is not meant to function as "a process of acquittal or condemnation on the basis of merits and demerits,"[38] Thomson, like Dewey, believes that there are "nevertheless criteria in judgement, so that criticism does not fall in the field of mere impressionism."[39]

An attempt to establish the criteria used by Thomson, as well as those of three of his colleagues who wrote for Modern Music, appears in the 1984 dissertation "The Rise of the American Composer-Critic: Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Virgil Thomson, and Elliott Carter in the Periodical Modern

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[37]Ibid., 328.

[38]Ibid., 303.

[39]Ibid., 313.

Music, 1924-1946" by Michael Meckna.[40] Meckna explains that the evaluative criteria used by these critics may be divided into four main groups. The first, "Craftsmanship," explores not only the treatment of melody, harmony, and rhythm, "but more especially how these elements were manipulated: instrumentation, texture, continuity of musical ideas, and appropriateness for the medium."[41] He points out that Thomson

> was more apt to focus on one or another more specific aspect of craftsmanship — orchestration, form, continuity, clarity, or idiomatic considerations — than on craftsmanship in general.[42]

In the second category, labelled "Vitality," a composition's melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, timbral and formal interest are investigated. According to Meckna, the four critics used this term to refer to an energetic quality that they found in music, manifested most often in a work's simplicity and clarity.[43] The third grouping is titled "Originality." Here the discussion includes an investigation of how a composer's personal expression is presented in a new work, and the ways in which a composition can be said to break new artistic

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[40]R.M. Meckna, "The Rise of the American Composer-Critic: Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, Virgil Thomson and Elliott Carter in the Periodical Modern Music 1924-46" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984).

[41]Ibid., x.

[42]Ibid., 23.

[43]Ibid., 99.

ground.[44] The fourth and final category, "Style," refers to the consistency, currency and accessibility of a work.[45] In this connection, when Thomson was asked "What is style?," his most succinct reply was: "style is carrying power."[46]

While the contents of these four categories come into play in all of Thomson's performance reviews, those specifically from the Herald Tribune suggest instead a threefold division. The criteria which Thomson employs in his performance reviews from 1940 onward can be grouped under the headings "Expressive Content," "Intellectual Content," and "Ethical Content;" these headings are taken from articles of the same titles published in 1947.[47] In addition, many of Thomson's comments in other writings, as well as his vocabulary in the performance reviews, serve to support these divisions.

Some similarities exist between the categories established by Thomson and Meckna. Closest in correspondence is Meckna's group "Craftsmanship" and Thomson's group "Intellectual Content," since both involve an investigation into the technical aspects of composition. Material

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[44]Ibid., 149.

[45]Ibid., x.

[46]Thomson, quoted in R.M. Meckna, 154.

[47]Thomson, "Expressive Content," 295-298; "Intellectual Content," 298-301; "Ethical Content," 301-304, all in The Art of Judging Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

discussed under Meckna's categories of "Vitality," "Originality," and "Style" all appear under Thomson's heading "Expressive Content." Thomson's final division, "Ethical Content", does not find specific representation in Meckna's study. While similarities between these two critical frameworks do exist, the divisions offered by Thomson in the Herald Tribune writings are separated more distinctly. Since Thomson suggests that the technical aspects of a composition are the first to be perceived by the listener,[48] the present discussion will begin by examining the category of "Intellectual Content."

The words "Intellectual Content" refer to the way in which a composer manipulates and approaches the technical aspects of composition, including not only the basic musical elements of rhythm, melody, and harmony, but also the techniques of counterpoint and orchestration.[49] In order to convey his views in the area of "Intellectual Content," Thomson employs a variety of comments. Many of these are direct, their innate judgements obvious. For example, Bohuslav Martinů's Symphony No.1 is said to exhibit "beautiful workmanship,"[50] Paul Hindemith's Symphonia Serena is

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[48]Thomson, "Reviewing Modern Music," 285.

[49]Thomson, "The Musical Elements," New York Herald Tribune, 4 April, 1954, IV/5.

[50]Thomson, "Smetana's Heir," review of Symphony No.1 by Bohuslav Martinů, in The Musical Scene, 105.

an example of "sound workmanship,"[51] Igor Stravinsky's Symphony in C is "an obviously well-written work" with a "high quality of musical workmanship,"[52] Willem Pijper's Symphony No.3 "is solidly and handsomely built,"[53] and Ferruccio Busoni' Arlecchino is "is skillfully composed."[54]

As well, these general statements are invariably supported with more detailed observations. In the case of the Martinů symphony he adds that it has "vigorous rhythmic animation."[55] Hindemith's work is said to be "distinguished of texture" and "extremely animated,"[56] and the harmony and instrumentation of Stravinsky's Symphony in C are described as "wholly elegant and well bred."[57] Other reviews, chosen virtually at random, supply an infinite number of similar comments.

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[51]Thomson, "Landscape Music," review of Sinfonia Serena, by Paul Hindemith, in The Art of Judging Music, 199.

[52]Thomson, "Stravinsky's Symphony," review of Symphony in C, by Igor Stravinsky, in The Musical Scene, 97.

[53]Thomson, "Luminous," review of Symphony No.3 by William Pijper, in Music Right and Left, 7.

[54]Thomson, "Pretentious and Unclear," review of Arlecchino by Ferruccio Busoni, in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 335.

[55]Thomson, "Smetena's Heir," 106.

[56]Thomson, "Landscape Music," 200.

[57]Thomson, "Stravinsky's Symphony," 99.

While Thomson's specific observations about the workmanship-aspects of each of the three aforementioned works differ slightly in their focus, similarities of a more general nature are present as well. In these reviews, his positive judgement regarding workmanship also implies a conservatism in the manipulation of musical materials, and an objective, and at times reserved, musical approach. For example, in the review of the Martinů work (1942) he states:

> Original is not the word for it, because the thematic material is not quite that. The harmonic underpinning is a little plain too, solid enough but not imaginative.[58]

Of Stravinsky's Symphony in C (1943):

> After all this build-up by avoidance, the Stravinsky symphony turns out to be no wild and woolly he-bear at all.
>
> There is no question that this particular piece like many another of Stravinsky's platform productions, is stiff and a little prim. Its thematic material is impersonal, its syntax formal.[59]

Of the Hindemith work (1947):

> The entire piece is contrapuntally complex in the sense that almost no theme is ever stated without a countertheme in contrasting rhythmic values being presented. This procedure gives objectivity to the expression, impersonality and reserve.[60]

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[58]Thomson, "Smetana's Heir," 106.

[59]Thomson, "Stravinsky's Symphony," 99.

[60]Thomson, "Landscape Music," 200.

> Hindemith's Symphonia Serena is a solid, conservative work from the studio of one of the solidest and most conservative workmen alive.[61]

Throughout Thomson's writings on aspects of critical criteria, many of his preferences emerge. His observations on rhythm divulge a proclivity for vigour over passivity; he offers positive comments on the "vigorous animation" and "singing syncopation"[62] of Martinů's symphony, and praises Gottfried von Einem's Orchestermusik for being "rhythmically alive."[63] In the case of melodic material, he comments positively when descriptions such as "beautiful, expressive, and distinguished" (said of Gershwin's Porgy and Bess),[64] and "deeply marked by grace" (said of both Robert Nagel's Symphonic Essay and Henri Sauguet's Five Songs)[65] are thought to be appropriate.

In the category of "Intellectual Content," Thomson also remarks on the suitability of the musical accompaniment of texted works. Lukas Foss' The

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[61]Ibid.

[62]Thomson, "Smetana's Heir," 106.

[63]Thomson, "Germania Refreshed," review of Orchestermusik by Gottfried von Einem, New York Herald Tribune, 17 April, 1953, 14.

[64]Thomson, "Porgy in Maplewood," review of Porgy and Bess by George Gershwin, in The Musical Scene, 167.

[65]Thomson, "Virtuosity, Musicianship, New Pieces," review of Symphonic Essay by Robert Nagel, New York Herald Tribune, 14 November, 1950, 17; Thomson, "Select and Impressive," review of Five Songs by Henri Sauguet, New York Herald Tribune, 4 April, 1950, 19.

Jumping Frog of Calaveras County is praised for accompaniment that is "imaginative, varied, rich in pictorial value,"[66] as is Henri Sauguet's Five Songs for accompaniment that is "apt, illustrative."[67] Alban Berg's Wozzeck is singled out for comment because the music "gives in detail both the setting of every scene and its full emotional implication."[68] Not surprisingly, accompaniment that is considered "too heavy,"[69] as in both Blitzstein's opera Regina and Meyrowitz's opera The Barrier is found to be unsuccessful.

The second criterion category that emerges is labelled "Expressive Content." In his 1942 article "Reviewing Modern Music," Thomson states that "one demands of any work, new or old, that it hold the attention."[70] In his view, music's method of communication is manifest in its expressive ability.

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[66]Thomson, "New Operas by Bernard Rogers and Lukas Foss are Presented," review of The Jumping Frog by Lucas Foss, New York Herald Tribune, 28 May, 1950, V/6.

[67]Thomson, "Select and Impressive," 19.

[68]Thomson, "Successful Modernism," review of Wozzeck by Alban Berg, in The Musical Scene, 334.

[69]Thomson, "Little Musical Foxes," review of Regina by Marc Blitzstein, in Music Right and Left, 76; Thomson, "Dramatically Forceful," review of The Barrier by Jan Meyrowitz, New York Herald Tribune, 19 January, 1950, 19.

[70]Thomson "Reviewing Modern Music," in The Musical Scene, 284.

He asserts that "all the music that is any good says something. A great deal of music says things that are clear to all."[71]

While the issue of musical communication, in the sense that music is used to convey a social or political message to its audience, was a fervent political issue in the 1930s and early 1940s, Thomson's use of the word "communication" in the Herald Tribune articles refers to something different. As explained in the 1952 article "Meaning in music is nothing more than its power to hold attention," he considers communication to be essentially a work's intrinsic interest.

> In the long run interestingness and communication are the same thing. They are also a miraculous thing. They have nothing to do with learning or with ignorance. They are associated, rather, with talent, with sincerity and with experience, though all these qualities together will not produce the miracle. I do not know what produces it. I only know that the professional skills, if acquired early on, help a composer to sustain the miracle, to write more pieces and longer pieces. For the rest, communication simply takes place or it doesn't. And I assure you that whenever you find your attention held by music, no matter how unemotional you may believe your state to be, you are being communicated to by that music and are in mortal danger of falling in love with it.[72]

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[71]Thomson, "Expressive Content," 295.

[72]Thomson, "Meaning in Music Is Nothing More Than Its Power to Hold Attention," in New York Herald Tribune, 2 November, 1952, IV/5.

Comments by Leonard B. Meyer in Emotion and Meaning in Music are relevant to this topic.[73] Unlike most writers who divide musical thinkers into groups of "formalists" and "expressionists," Meyer chooses to use the titles "absolutists" and "referentialists." His reasons are as follows.

> ...Both the formalist and the expressionist may be absolutists; that is, both may see the meaning of music as being essentially intramusical (non-referential); but the formalist would contend that the meaning of music lies in the perception and understanding of the mutual relationships set forth in the work of art and that meaning in music is primarily intellectual, while the expressionist would argue that these same relationships are in some sense capable of exciting feelings and emotions in the listener.[74]

His catagories are divided further into groups of

> absolute expressionists and referential expressionists. The former group believe that expressive emotional meanings arise in response to music and that these exist without reference to the extramusical world of concepts, action, and human emotional states, while the latter group would assert that emotional expression is dependent upon an understanding of the referential content of music.[75]

In the case of Thomson, the label "referential-expressionist" seems appropriate, since his approach adheres to Meyer's suggestion that

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[73]Leonard B. Meyer, Emotion and Meaning in Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

[74]Ibid., 2-3.

[75]Ibid., 3.

> in addition to [the] abstract, intellectual meanings, music also communicates meanings which in some way refer to the extramusical world of concepts, actions, emotional states, and character.[76]

But Thomson's position in this debate is not a clear-cut one; although he agrees that music is capable of expressing emotion, sometimes even evoking it, he eschews the significance of such reactions, especially as a basis for criticism. For him, an emotional reaction to a composition is a personal and individual experience. In "Reviewing Modern Music" he remarks:

> I put small faith in the 'moving' effect of music as an indication of its quality, because our visceral responses are seldom significant and always capricious. The only rule I observe about my own is to respect their intensity. The force of any spontaneous reaction to music is more interesting than its nature or direction.[77]

He states as well that "the fact that the emotions [are] brought into play at all is of some importance, though not much."[78]

In practice, however, Thomson does rely sometimes on his instinctive reactions as the basis for critical comment. While the remark that Ben Weber's Quartet No.1 "is not a piece likely to attract crowds or to win the

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[76]Ibid., 1.

[77]Thomson, "Reviewing Modern Music," 286.

[78]Ibid.

conventional epithet 'moving' (which means box-office)"[79] cannot be overlooked, there are a greater number of examples in which this view is contradicted. In "Ethical Content," Thomson suggests that music, in order to be accepted as "serious," must move more than only one's heart.[80] As well, he comments in a positive review of Igor Stravinsky's L'Histoire du soldat that "it delights all, and it moves people,"[81] and in another review describes the songs of Kurt Weill, again in a positive tone, as "intensely moving."[82]

From this discussion, one can deduce that the aspects of a composition which successfully fulfil the requirements of "Expressive Content" are those which are linked directly to music's ability to communicate, to convey expression, to hold the listener's interest and to do all of this as clearly as possible. But within the boundaries of this content group also falls another component: the "style" criterion.

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[79]Thomson, "New Music String Quartet," review of String Quartet No.2 by Ben Weber, New York Herald Tribune, 28 January, 1952, 10. Note: As discussed in Chapter Two, Thomson used the phrase "box-office" in a pejorative sense; it is intended to characterize those interested in making money, not art.

[80]Thomson, "Ethical Content," 301.

[81]Thomson, "Red-Letter Concert," review of L'Histoire du soldat by Igor Stravinsky in New York Herald Tribune, 22 December, 1952, 17.

[82]Thomson, "Memorial to Weill," review of the songs of Kurt Weill, New York Herald Tribune, 5 February, 1951, 11.

As an evaluative criterion, "style" is really no more problematic than any of the others, but within the context of Thomson's writings its definition is elusive; its use in the Herald Tribune reviews differs greatly from that in his earlier writings. Thomson's most revealing discussion of musical style and its various definitions appears in The State of Music.

In Chapter Seven, "Why Composers Write How, or The Economic Determinism of Musical Style," Thomson discusses four definitions that may apply to musical style. The first is as a reference to technique — style refers to

> the phrases 'fugal style,' 'canonic style,' the 'atonal' style, the 'dissonant tonal' style, even the 'jazz' or 'swing' style.[83]

The second use is defined as "the ensemble of technical procedures plus personal mannerisms that marks the work of any given composer or period of composition."[84] This allows one to comment that a work is, for example, in the style of Debussy, or in the style of Beethoven. The third use is explained as follows:

> pianistic, violinistic, vocal, and similar adjectives when they qualify the word Style, indicate a manner or writing that is convenient to the instruments so referred to, that is

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[83]Thomson, The State of Music (New York: William Morrow, 1939; 2nd ed., rev. With a New Preface and Postlude, New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 82.

[84]Ibid., 83.

> 'grateful to execute upon them, or that suggests their characteristics.[85]

Finally, the term may be used in a "qualitative" sense.

> An artist is said to perform with 'good' or 'bad' style. A piece may not be said to be written in good or bad style, but if it is well written it may be said to have 'style.'[86]

Thomson does not discuss the placement of terms such as "neo-classical" and "neo-romantic" in this explanation; in fact, The State of Music is devoid of such expressions. In the Herald Tribune articles and reviews they do appear occasionally, but not coupled with the word "style." In one review, he remarks that Stravinsky's Symphony in C as written in the "neo-classic manner,"[87] in another, he refers to composers as "neo-classically schooled."[88]

As mentioned in reference to Meckna's dissertation, "style" is used in the Modern Music articles as the heading of the third criterion group, and was in fact the one used most frequently by Thomson in his reviews.[89] But here its use is invariably in the "qualitative" sense. Thomson comments that for a composer, this type of "style" is best achieved by

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[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Thomson, "Stravinsky's Symphony," 98.

[88]Thomson, "How Modern Can You Be?," in New York Herald Tribune, 10 February, 1952, IV/8.

[89]Meckna, 151-152.

> forgetting all about it and concentrating on meaning, by saying only what one really means, and by being perfectly certain one really means everything one has said.[90]

In the Herald Tribune articles, the term appears to be used in quite a different manner. Not only is it employed infrequently, but when it does appear, it is invariably in an historical-descriptive sense, closer to the first two definitions. This does not seem to signal a significant change in Thomson's reviewing procedures, but rather is indicative of an admitted change in the accepted usage of the words "style" and "stylish." The following paragraph is taken from a letter from Thomson to his publisher Helen Reid in 1952. Reid asked Thomson what he had meant when he referred to a composition as "stylish." He replied:

> I guess the word 'stylish' has lost its meaning. It used to mean well-designed, well-executed and in accord with contemporary fashion. A lady's dress, for instance, could be beautiful, or it could be stylish, or it could be both, or it could be neither. Applying the word 'stylish' to a musical composition or performance is not original with me; but if the meaning is not clear, I should certainly either explain it completely or not use it at all. It is possibly Edwardian affectation on my part and not directly communicative anymore.[91]

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[90]Thomson, "Reviewing Modern Music," 286.

[91]Thomson to Helen Reid, 7 April, 1952, in Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, 256.

Throughout the Herald Tribune writings the words "character" and "spirit" replace the outmoded term "style."

As with "Intellectual Content," it is possible to examine the ways in which Thomson's verdictive vocabulary conveys his judgement of successful "Expressive Content."

Some of his assertions are again direct, such as the observation that Howard Swanson's Short Symphony "communicates personal feelings"[92] and Walter Piston's Fourth Symphony simply "communicates."[93] Other comments acknowledge a work's ability to communicate directly. Swanson's Short Symphony is said to "speak clearly, warmly, modestly,"[94] and Antheil's Fourth Symphony "is music that makes sense here and now."[95] Of course, comments regarding music's communicative qualities are not exclusively positive. On Křenek's Symphony No.4 he writes:

> It is troublesome to encounter a work so seemingly serious in thought, so certainly ambitious, and so

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[92]Thomson, "A New American," review of Short Symphony by Howard Swanson, New York Herald Tribune, 24 November, 1950, 21.

[93]Thomson, "Romantic Evening," review of Symphony No. 4 by Walter Piston, New York Herald Tribune, 13 November, 1952, IV/6.

[94]Thomson, "A New American," 21.

[95]Thomson, "Our Musical Tom Sawyer," review of Symphony No.4 by George Antheil, in The Musical Scene, 129.

> thoroughly well composed in a practical sense, and yet to be utterly unable at any point to be convinced by it.[96]

And of Barber's Symphony No.2: "I admit some uncertainty as to what it is all about."[97]

To reiterate briefly, by "communication" Thomson is referring to the composition's ability to hold the attention of its audience. In an article on the operas of Marc Blitzstein, he remarks "I often remember whole scenes from them."[98] Similar praise is extended to Stravinsky's Septet: "it lasts about twenty minutes and gives pleasure all the time."[99] Still other comments of a comparable nature appear in reviews of works such as Manuel Rosenthal's St. Francis of Assisi, on which he remarks "though the work lasts in performance some 50 minutes, at no point did your hardened reporter find his interest in it less than complete."[100] Similarly, Carter's String Quartet No.1 is praised because "it lasted 45 minutes without losing at any point its hold on this

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[96]Thomson, "Musical Throughout," New York Herald Tribune, 30 March, 1951, 14.

[97]Thomson, "More Barber," review of Symphony No.2 by Samuel Barber, in The Musical Scene, 126.

[98]Thomson, "Blitzstein's Operas," review of the operas of Marc Blitzstein, in The Musical Scene, 169.

[99]Thomson, "Circle in the Square," review of Septet by Igor Stravinsky, New York Herald Tribune, 1 February, 1954, 13.

[100]Thomson, "Lively St. Francis," review of St. Francis of Assisi by Manuel Rosenthal, in The Art of Judging Music, 213.

listener's attention,"[101] as is Giannini's The Taming of the Shrew because "it holds the attention by musical means and communicates dramatically."[102] Again, the supply of similar comments is seemingly endless.

As in the discussion of "Intellectual Content," descriptive remarks are again used to support the general assertions. In the case of Rosenthal's work, Thomson remarks that it "is striking and picturesque, straightforward."[103] Britten's Peter Grimes is "varied, interesting."[104] Stravinsky's Septet "has strength, charm,"[105] and Piston's work is "fresh, bold, personal."[106]

Of all of the criteria on which Thomson based his evaluations, those involving musical communication appear to be the most subjectively based; the onus of understanding is dependent greatly on the listener. In a review of Shostakovich's Symphony No.7 he states:

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[101]Thomson, "A Powerful Work," review of String Quartet No.1 by Elliott Carter, in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 370.

[102]Thomson, "Shrew, Rake are Achievements in English-Language Opera Today," review of The Taming of the Shrew by Vittorio Giannini, New York Herald Tribune, 8 February, 1953, IV/6.

[103]Thomson, "Lively St. Francis," 213.

[104]Thomson, "Success Tactics," review of Peter Grimes by Benjamin Britten, in Music Right and Left, 71.

[105]Thomson, "Circle in the Square," 13.

[106]Thomson, "Romantic Evening," 18.

> Whether one is able to listen without mind-wandering to the seventh symphony of Dimitri Shostakovich probably depends on the rapidity of one's musical perception. It seems to have been written for the slowwitted, the not very musical and the distracted.[107]

He remarks as well that "nothing [in the work] seems accidental. The themes are clearly thought out."[108] Similarly, in a review of Křenek's Symphony No.4, he charges that "the depressing thought about Křenek's work is that he has carried out his admitted intention to the letter."[109] In each of these cases, it seems that although Thomson believes the composer's intentions are valid, the works remain unable to hold his interest. Furthermore, he explains that not only must the composer have specific intentions, but "...if he wants anybody to use his creation he has to provide some clues to its meaning."[110] While Thomson's observation regarding the importance of composer-provided "clues" is valid, one may question whether there are times when such "clues" are in fact present, and he, as the listener, is simply not picking them up.

Another aspect of communication singled out for comment is "direction." As with many of the other criteria which evaluated

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[107]Thomson, "Shostakovich's Seventh," review of Symphony No.7 by Dimitri Shostakovich, in The Musical Scene, 101.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Thomson, "Musical Throughout," 14.

[110]Thomson, "Expressive Content," 296.

communicative power, "direction" is dependent largely on the presence of "energy" and "spirit." For example, Dai-Keong Lee's Symphony No.1 is said to "not have much ease, but it does move forward."[111] Of Piston's Fourth Symphony he remarks that: "it vibrates, it sounds, it moves forward, it speaks,"[112] and of Ben Weber's Second Quartet: "it moves forward with ease, it moves on high ground and with confidence."[113] Negative comments in this area include "the piece was never airborne" of Elie Siegmeister's Second Symphony,[114] and "the opera was not quite airborne" of von Einem's The Trial.[115]

It appears thus far that direction, clarity of statement, and the ability to be "convincing" all contribute to successful conveyance of a composer's musical message. While comments referring to a work's ability to "communicate" appear in discussions of both operatic and symphonic genres with equal frequency, comments regarding three particular aspects of "Expressive Content" are more genre-specific. Those regarding "direction"

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[111]Thomson, "Musical Throughout," 14.

[112]Thomson, "Romantic Evening," 18.

[113]Thomson, "New Music String Quartet," 10.

[114]Thomson, "Two Serious Symphonies," review of Symphony No.2 Elie Siegmeister, New York Herald Tribune, 26 February, 1952, 22.

[115]Thomson "Reflected and Penetrating," review of The Trial by Gottfried von Einem, New York Herald Tribune, 23 October, 1953, 18.

appear predominantly in reviews of the symphonic repertory, and those on "intensity" most frequently involve operatic works. More curious is the fact that the word "original" is most often used in reviews of chamber music, particularly string quartets.

The third and final content group employed by Thomson in his Herald Tribune articles is "Ethical Content." He explains that

> ...all the music that our time accepts as noble is endowed by that very acceptance with an ethical content. This means that dealing with it in any way is believed to be good for one.[116]

He admits further that "Ethical Content" is the most difficult of the three content groups to discuss, or at least to explain, because it depends on the listener's ability to distinguish between that which is

> music of a common or vulgar usage and another music, grander of expressive content and more traditional in style, a music worthy of association with the highest celebrations of religion, of patriotism and of culture.[117]

In Thomson's reviews, suggestions of successful "Ethical Content" appear less frequently than those supporting other criterion categories. As well, those that do occur are not as varied. There are instances in which he states simply that a work has "nobility," or, as in the third of Milhaud's

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[116]Thomson, "Ethical Content," 301.

[117]Ibid.

symphonies for small orchestra, Serenade, it has "no vulgarity in it."[118] Similarly, Menotti's The Telephone is said to be "infused with straightforward humanity."[119] The difficult task of imbuing one's music with "Ethical Content" is further obscured by the suggestion that success in the area of "Ethical Content" results possibly from achieving success in the other two content categories.[120]

As illustrated, Thomson's performance reviews not only describe compositions, but also expose the critic's personal preferences and critical appraisals. Although some of the remarks reflect his personal reactions, he is, for the most part, an objective commentator in the sense that his reviewing procedures are based on a systematic framework of evaluative criteria.

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[118]Thomson, "Poetry and Good Spirits," review of Serenade for small orchestra (the third of five symphonies for small orchestra), by Darius Milhaud, New York Herald Tribune, 15 December, 1952, 19. N.B. Thomson refers to this work as the Third Symphony for Seven Instruments.

[119]Thomson, "Farce and Melodrama," review of The Telephone by Carlo Menotti, in The Art of Judging Music, 127.

[120]Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

In addition to the topics discussed in the previous chapters, three questions regarding the Herald Tribune performance reviews merit consideration: 1. What is Thomson's approach to critical discourse? 2. How effectively does a critical method consisting primarily of description convey meaning to its readers? 3. In what ways, and to what degree, are Thomson's evaluative comments affected by his personal preferences?

Approach to Critical Discourse

The question of why Thomson's writings have remained of interest to readers years after their original publication is usually answered with some mention of his critical acumen and engaging writing style. While these are of course key factors, one should also consider his approach to critical discourse: not only "how" and "what" he said in these reviews, but how he approaches review-writing itself.

While responsible journalistic criticism offers much to its readers, especially as descriptive commentary and informed evaluation, it offers something to its writers as well: the challenge of presenting informative

material in a convincing and compelling manner. Ideally, criticism allows one to practice the art of persuasion. Thomson realized the value of this critical faculty and considered it an essential component in his writings.

> ...It is not the yes or no of a judgment that is valuable to other people, though an original yes or no about a certain kind of music may have determined a whole lifetime's activity. What other people get profit from following is that activity itself, the spectacle of a mind at work. That is why, just as an emotional reaction is more significant for its force than for its direction, 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.[1]

While he attempts to uphold this ideal of elaboration, defence, and expression in all of his reviews, his method of doing so, and the success of his results, varies considerably. Throughout, one consistent element appears: in any given review, Thomson introduces to his audience a certain way of perceiving a composition. By presenting both positive and negative remarks about the work, he attempts to convince them to share his views and accept his application of certain descriptive and evaluative terms as legitimate.

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[1]Virgil Thomson, "The Art of Judging Music," in The Art of Judging Music (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 10.

Sometimes the reviews offer comments of a predominantly objective or technical nature. A review of Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson by Aaron Copland is typical.[2]

> These songs are Copland at his most characteristic and most reflective. The broken rhythms, the pandiatonic harmony, the subtle spacing of notes in a chord, the open piano writing, the melodic lines that seek wide skips — all color the work with this composer's personality. So do the seriousness and the poetic penetration with which the texts have been studied, and the frank search for charm (equally characteristic of Emily Dickinson) with which their thought has been expressed.[3]

In this opening paragraph Thomson deals with the three content categories. He mentions representative aspects of Copland's approach to workmanship (intellectual content), comments on the "seriousness" of his work (ethical content), and acknowledges an ability to convey expression (expressive content). By providing a brief and general introduction to Copland's compositional style, he also presents himself as an informed, able, and objective listener.

After establishing his critical credibility, he offers comments of a more technical nature.

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[2]Thomson, "Copland Songs," review of Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson by Aaron Copland, New York Herald Tribune, November 2, 1952, 17; Music Reviewed 1940-1954 (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 354-355.

[3]Ibid.

If this admirer of Copland has a reserve about the present song cycle, otherwise so appealing, that reserve comes from a certain ineptitude in the vocal writing. The range is extreme (a half-tone over two octaves) and the tessitura, or 'lie' of the vocal line, is cruel. For a light voice the cruelty would come in the low notes, the Bs, B flats and the A.

This cruelty is less a result of the wide melodic skips, which are in themselves highly effective in a declamatory sense and strikingly expressive, [than of] the vowel sounds to which the high and the low-lying notes are set. Certain extensions of the short vowels also oblige the singer to deform these. And occasionally a lengthening out, syllable by syllable, of a word group that for comprehensibility requires being pronounced as if it were a single word ('the breaking of the day,' for instance) makes it hard for the singer to communicate the sense of the poem.

These poems, more than a little arch sometimes in sentiment (Dear March, come in!), are nevertheless compact in phraseology and require time to understand. Spacing their ideas would have helped them more than stretching out their syllables does. Actually their sense is more picturesquely illustrated in the piano part (birds twittering, horses trotting, an organist improvising) than it is projected through their vocal declamation. The accompaniments are perfect, and they 'sound.' The vocal line, though full of expressive intent, really comes off only part of the time. In three cases — 'Nature, the gentlest mother,' 'Heart, we will forget him' and 'I've heard an organ talk sometimes' — the songs seem to me completely successful. In the rest, for all their tenderness and vibrancy, something experimental in the vocal writings, something not quite mastered in Copland's technique of handling words and singers, tones down their power to touch the heart, though this clearly is what they aim to do.[4]

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[4]Ibid.

Throughout, this review demonstrates Thomson's ability to express, defend, and elaborate. Not only does he offer a personal evaluation of Copland as a vocal composer, but he supports his appraisal with verifiable observations. For example, comments regarding the extremity of the vocal range can be confirmed immediately by examining the score, as can observations about Copland's awkwardness in setting the text.

In this review, as in many by Thomson, the reader is guided through a series of observations which make the critic's final evaluation appear logical. By continually balancing negative comments with positive ones, his criticisms of the work seem even more convincing.

A second approach employed is also intended to convince the reader that the critic's judgement is valid, but here the writing style is more free-wheeling and the remarks more subjective. For example:

> Mr. Bernard Wagenaar's Third Symphony is elegant, eloquent, eclectic. It is not extremely personal; and yet it could not have been written by anybody else, because there simply aren't any others among the eclectic group who write so competently and so stylishly. I cannot say he writes with any great degree of personal style, though a succeeding generation may well find his music worthily representative of the dominant stylization of this epoch. Personality peeks through a little also in this work, especially in the middle movement, with a trace of impish diabolism from the Netherlands. But mostly the symphony is exteriorly conceived and executed. It is authoritative, cultured, worldly, incisive without profundity, brilliant without ostentation. Throughout it is

> both gracious and firstly convincing, a manly as well as a gentlemanly work.[5]

While Thomson's prose style is more animated here than in the Copland review, this example does not offer any specific observations about either Wagenaar or his third symphony. Nevertheless, the critic's positive opinion of the work is conveyed.

The point of illustrating the contrasting approaches employed in the Copland and Wagenaar reviews is not to suggest that Thomson's approach to music criticism involves either technical discussion or capricious remarks. Anyone who has read even a few of his articles will know that this is not the case. The intention is, rather, to point out that he is capable of writing in either style, as well as to illustrate that he often employs a style that falls somewhere in between. Although this observation resembles one made earlier, in regard to the Modern Music writings (see Chapter One), it demands emphasis, since Thomson's writing style appears to oscillate between extremes more than that of his colleagues. His approach to review writing could even be said to resemble that of Robert Schumann insofar as it appears to offer disparate sides of his writing personality. Of course, Thomson never calls upon the likes of Florestan, Eusebius, or Master Raro in making his remarks.

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[5]Thomson "Lots of Americans," review of Symphony no.3 by Bernard Wagenaar, New York Herald Tribune, 9 March, 1941, I/26.

This point notwithstanding, Thomson's most successful reviews are those in which he managed to take an intermediary stylistic approach. One example is a review titled "Select and Impressive" in which he offers comments on Henri Sauguet's work Les Pénitents en maillots roses.

> The important novelty of the evening, in this reporter's opinion, was a set of five songs by Henri Sauguet to poems of Max Jacob, entitled collectively (and somewhat unfortunately) 'Les Pénitents en maillots roses' (or 'Penitents in Pink Tights'). These religious poems of some length, and far from frivolous in sentiment, have been set by Sauguet as landscape pieces at once broad in conception and delicate in detail. Their vocal line is gracious, melodious, in prosody both apt and daring. Their accompaniments are imaginative, varied, rich in pictorial values and harmonically subtle. Their literary themes are ambitious and masterfully handled in music. In the first [song] the Devil himself speaks. In the last the gates of Hell open before the poet at an outdoor hunt breakfast replete with 'shining bottles' and lobster mayonnaise.
>
> This final section is a voice and piano composition of great originality and power. The whole is a set of songs meriting attention by our best artists. It also reinforces the impression made last season by the same composer and poet in a similar set called 'Visions infernales.' Sauguet is a master of that form, and it's a pleasure to note that little by little they are becoming available for recognition here. Their interpretation last night (in real French) by Bethany Beardsley, soprano, and Ben Jenkins, who accompanied her, was impeccable.[6]

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[6]Thomson, "Select and Impressive," review of Les Pénitents en maillots roses by Henri Sauguet, New York Herald Tribune, 4 April, 1950, 19.

At the beginning of this review Thomson makes the direction of his evaluation known by referring to the work as "the most important novelty" on the programme. In keeping with his usual practice, he then offers descriptive comments and supporting observations. Like in the Copland review, many of these convey his views on the composer's success in the three content categories. He comments on the melodic material, text-setting, and accompaniment (intellectual content), the masterful handling of the "far from frivolous" literary material (ethical content), and the originality and power of the final section (expressive content). By referring to Sauguet as a "master" of the vocal form, Thomson further makes his positive evaluation of the work concrete. This review typifies those on which Thomson's reputation has been established: it describes, informs, offers opinions, and does all of this convincingly, engagingly, and sincerely.

One other observation may be made in respect to Thomson's reviewing procedures in the Herald Tribune, not in regard to rhetoric, but repertory. If a concert programme includes both new and old works, Thomson centres his reviewing energies on the new work(s), providing only brief mention of the older ones. If the programme includes only new works, he takes one of two approaches: either the review space is shared equally among the compositions, or, like in the case of the Sauguet review, the one considered most successful is highlighted.

When writing about standard works, Thomson's focus is usually an extra-musical one — sometimes the conductor or the approach of the conductor is discussed, other times the orchestra or soloist is featured. Other times still he offers generalizations about the style and approach of one composer, mentioning several of his or her works.

This practice of promoting new compositions is defended in the following comments taken from the preface to his review collection Music Right and Left (1950):

> Earlier volumes of my collected reviews give a broader view, show more of the whole musical scene. This one, which includes reviews and Sunday articles published between October 1947, and June 1950, falls short, I realize, of being a full panorama of music at the half-century. It is rather a peep into certain forces at work, in my opinion, toward the realization of our century's identity. Those forces are abundantly present in our concert halls and opera houses these days; listening to and for them is a delight. They are not the only delight of musical attendance, but they are the chief source of that 'strangeness in the proportion' that is ever the foretaste of beauty. The rest appears more and more to me, after ten years' press service, as not quite news.[7]

By this, Thomson simply means that in Music Right and Left the majority of articles reprinted are ones on contemporary compositions. For him, they were the most important works for discussion. In his reviews of older works, he

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[7]Thomson, Music Right and Left (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1951), x.

attempts to offer a fresh approach in order to keep his writings interesting for himself as well as his readers.

In the Herald Tribune reviews, Thomson employs a variety of approaches to critical discourse. Sometimes he offers technical observations, other times subjective descriptions, and other times still, a combination of both. In his autobiography he claims that his "literary method... was to seek out the precise adjective."[8]

> Nouns are names and can be libelous. The verbs, though sometimes picturesque, are few in number and tend toward alleging motivations. It is the specific adjectives that really describe and that do so neither in sorrow nor in anger.[9]

Although most of the Herald Tribune writings can be considered outstanding examples of contemporary criticism, Thomson is willing to admit that their success is not universal. "Sometimes I would write smoothly, sometimes with a nervous rhythm, darting in short sentences from thought to thought and failing to carry my readers with me."[10] He also admits though, that "...on the whole I interested them."[11]

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[8]Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1977), 327.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., 324.

[11]Ibid.

The Effectiveness of Descriptive Criticism

The second question that arises in regard to the Herald Tribune writings emerges in light of the previous discussion. Why, when Thomson's critical comments such as those found in the Wagenaar review, lack verifiable meaning, do they still seem appropriate?

In The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression, philosopher Peter Kivy explores this issue.[12] Kivy points out that the most visible difference between journalistic and academic criticism is that while the former involves descriptive, and sometimes subjective remarks, the latter involves more objective ones. Consequently, descriptive criticism is considered by some to be a less valid form. Arguing against this view, Kivy suggests that descriptions about music do not need to be

> intelligible at the cost of being inaccessible to all but the musically expert; or accessible to the layman, at the cost, at least according to the expert, of being either nonsense, or subjective reverie.[13]

In Thomson's case, reviews such as that of the Copland songs illustrate that he is capable of providing commentary of a predominantly

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[12]Peter Kivy, The Corded Shell: Reflections on Musical Expression (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[13]Ibid. 132.

verifiable nature. But more often than not, his aim is accessibility, his method description.

Consider, for example, the following comments in a review of Howard Swanson's Short Symphony.

> Its communication is personal feelings. Its linear texture is suave, graceful, subtly modal. Its melodic material is highly curvaceous. Its dissonance content is high but lower than saturation.[14]

Further along in the review Thomson remarked that the work "...speaks clearly, warmly, modestly, and at the same time with authority."[15]

Observations about modality and dissonance are audibly verifiable, but what about "personal feelings" or "suave linear texture"? Curiously, if one listens to the work and then reads the review, the subjective observations seem to be equal in validity to the more objective ones.

Kivy suggests (not with this specific review in mind), that such descriptive terms, or "emotive epithets," are not the result of "personal quirks" of the critic. Rather, "...our descriptions, and perceptions of music are redolent with animistic, anthropomorphic implications."[16] By this he means that

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[14]Thomson, "A New American," review of Short Symphony by Howard Swanson, New York Herald Tribune, 24 November, 1950, 21.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Kivy, 58.

> ...there are intersubjective criteria for the application of emotive terms to music, parasitic on the criteria involved in human expression — the criteria, that is, that warrant our conclusions about the emotions expressed by human beings. I have suggested, too, that musical expressiveness is in part a "convention" matter.[17]

"Conventions" refers to association-governed relationships of terms and musical sounds that are

> universally understood. For example, the 'martial'quality of the trumpet (so ominously exploited by Beethoven in the 'Agnus Dei' of the Missa Solemnis, and by Mahler in the Knaben Wunderhorn) for reasons of association too obvious to need point out; the religious quality of the organ, again for readily apparent reasons of association; the solemn, funereal quality of the measured beat of the kettle drum (as in the Dead March from Saul, or the second movement of the Brahms Requiem).[18]

Kivy asserts that many of these conventions are a result of the common cultural background of critic and reader; when this common background is present, descriptive terms should be considered both objective and defensible,[19] because what the critic claims to hear is simply "...what, by association, one's musical culture conditions one to hear..."[20]

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[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., 134.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., 136.

Kivy's "convention" theory offers an interesting, and in many ways plausible, explanation of the reader-comprehensibility of descriptive terminology that critics such as Thomson use. In Thomson's case specifically, though, additional factors affect the degree of comprehensibility that his reviews achieve.

Thomson's descriptive vocabulary, as used in the Herald Tribune writings, is a very personal one. Certain comments and phrases make the authorship of his reviews immediately apparent to anyone who has read even a few of them. Consequently, one could say that in his case, familiarity enhances comprehensibility. In addition to the social conventions which are present, critic-specific conventions exist as well. As one becomes acquainted with more of Thomson's writings, certain audible aspects of the compositions he reviews become associated with the terms that he uses to describe them. As a result, the greater number of his reviews that one reads, the more "objective" his personal descriptive vocabulary seems to become. Of course other factors — an awareness of his evaluative criteria (illustrated by the content categories) and a knowledge of his approach to composition (combined with his preferences and dislikes) — seem further to infuse his descriptive comments with tangible meaning.

The Thomsonian Bias

I. The Question of Objectivity

The above subtitle refers to the question: in what ways, and to what degree, are Thomson's evaluative comments visibly affected by his personal preferences? Various writers have remarked on the role of the critic's personal preferences. John Dewey suggests that there is nothing wrong with admitting that "every critic, like every artist, has a bias, a predilection, that is bound up with the very existence of individuality,"[21] if one keeps in mind that

> it is [the critic's] task to convert [his or her preferences] into an organ of sensitive perception and of intelligent inquiry, and to do so without surrendering the instinctive preference from which are derived direction and sincerity.[22]

A critic as opinionated and outspoken as Thomson could not help but expose his prejudices in his writings. For example, an obsession with contemporary music and a belief in the necessity of its promotion are apparent in his reviews simply by the amount of coverage that new music, and issues regarding its performance, receive.

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[21]John Dewey: The Later Works, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, textual ed. Harriet Furst Simon, vol. 10, 1925-1953 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 327.

[22]Ibid.

But there is another bias that emerges in the Herald Tribune writings as well: a preference for music written by French and American composers, and a neglect of things Germanic.

Thomson's reputation for national favouritism is extremely visible in his writings. Joseph Kerman refers to him as a critic "hepped on French music,"[23] Herbert Weinstock observes that he stepped "onto a musical scene traditionally and preponderantly pro-German-Italian-Slavic... with his French-American predispositions...,"[24] and Paul Henry Lang comments in a review of Thomson's book The Musical Scene that "happily Mr. Thomson did not catch the Wagnerian distemper that afflicts practically all of his colleagues."[25] Essentially, four factors appear to have contributed to Thomson's French-American bias in contemporary music: his war-time attitudes, his interest in broadening the performance repertory, his personal style preference, and his penchant for modernism.

Since the second world war coincided with Thomson's first few years as critic for the Herald Tribune, his bias against German compositions

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[23]Joseph Kerman, "Music Criticism in America," Hudson review, i (1949): 558.

[24]Herbert Weinstock "V.T. of the H.T.," Saturday Review, 28 August, 1954, 64.

[25]Paul Henry Lang, "Review of the Musical World," review of The Musical Scene by Virgil Thomson, New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review, April 15, 1945, 4/IV.

appeared at first to be nothing more than a symptom of the times. This is not to imply that he denigrated German works recklessly — he did not; if both German and American works were included on a programme, both would receive mention.

Evidence of war-time attitudes arises in a variety of ways. In Thomson's first review for the Herald Tribune, "Age without Honor," he remarks that the rendition of the Star Spangled Banner played before the performance "had the somber and spiritless sonority of the German military bands one hears in France these days."[26] In other reviews, composers are mentioned by rank — including "Private" Samuel Barber[27] and "Sergeant" Andrew Imbrie.[28]

In his reviews written after the war, it becomes obvious that Thomson's bias against German music was more than simply an act of war-time patriotism. His reviews from 1946 to 1954 focus on French and American works to an even greater extent than before.

The second contributing factor is a concern with the long-standing German hegemony of the musical world. In his autobiography Thomson states:

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[26]Thomson, "Age without Honor," in The Musical Scene, 3.

[27]Thomson "Superficially Warlike," in The Musical Scene, 125.

[28]Thomson, "A Wealth of Dissonance," in The Musical Scene, 117.

> I made war on [the Germans] in the colleges, in the concert halls, and in their offices. I did not hesitate to use the columns of my paper for exposing their pretensions; and I refused to be put off by sneers from praising the artists of my choice, many of them foreign to the Italo-German axis.[29]

Thomson objected to what he described as the "German arrogance" "based on self-interest."[30] He accused the Germans of believing, wrongly, that they had the right

> to judge everything without appeal, as well as to control the traffic — as if past miracles (from Bach to Schubert) were an excuse for greed. And all those lovely refugees — so sweet, so grateful, and so willing to work — they were to be a Trojan horse! For today the Germanics are in control everywhere — in the orchestras, the universities, the critical posts, the publishing houses, wherever music makes money or is a power.[31]

As discussed in Chapter Two, Thomson fought throughout his career for a broadening, even an abandonment, of the "standard repertory," dominated by the works of German composers.

The third factor contributing to the pro-French and pro-American views evident in Thomson's writings is, of course, his personal preferences for the musical styles indigenous to each of these locations. He once described the French orchestral style as "one of equilibration, of clear balances and clean

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[29]Thomson, Virgil Thomson, 327.

[30]Ibid., 326.

[31]Ibid., 326-327.

colors, of poetic luminosity rather than of animal warmth."[32] He remarked that "the whole repertory of French music composed since Berlioz has been designed to profit by this delicate performing style."[33]

Dissimilarly, he asserts that in the case of American music, no one style is found. Or, as he states, "citizens in the United States write music in every known style."[34] He does admit that "although there is no dominant style in American music, there is, viewed from afar (say from Europe), an American school."[35] Specifically, he makes two minor observations, namely that

> two devices typical of American practice... are the nonaccelerating crescendo and a steady ground-rhythm of equalized eighth notes (expressed or not). Neither of these devices is known to Europeans, though practically all Americans take them for granted.[36]

Most conspicuously, Thomson's national preferences correspond to his constant interest in novelty. As the twentieth century progressed, the hub of musical development shifted from Germany to other countries, including

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[32]Thomson, "French Loveliness," in Music Reviewed 1940-54, 256.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Thomson, "On Being American," in Music Reviewed 1940-54, 231.

[35]Ibid., 232.

[36]Ibid., 232.

France and the United States. Thomson's interest in musical modernism followed accordingly.

Leonard B. Meyer's comments on the nature of originality in Music, the Arts and Ideas, have some relevance here.

> Though originality has probably always been considered an important attribute of art, the cult of the new, arising out of nineteenth-century notions of personal expression, has come to dominate our thinking about art...[37]

He suggests that a distinction exists between "novelty" and "originality," offering as support Arnold Schoenberg's remark that novelty "is not difficult to come by — it is everywhere about us."[38] Meyer adds that "true originality" on the other hand, "is rare indeed."[39] He also offers art historian Max Friedlander's comment that:

> Something original is strange when first seen, shocking and unpleasant; something bizarre is striking and entertaining. The former is something enduring and permanent and only gains in impressiveness; the latter is a thing of fashion, is ephemeral, causes satiety and vanishes before long...[40]

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[37]Leonard B. Meyer, Music, the Arts, and Ideas (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 61.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

Thomson employs the terms "novelty" and "originality" in a variety of ways in his writings. Although used most often interchangeably, "novelty" is sometimes chosen to refer to a work that is being premiered, and "originality" to one that exhibits innovative qualities. While Thomson does appear to be interested in the pursuit of novelty in the "striking" and "entertaining" sense described by Friedlander, he does not, as does the art historian, consider this a negative trait. For Thomson, something novel is not necessarily ephemeral, but it is different. In his view, "the best work of our time, like the best work of any time, is that which least resembles the work of other times."[41]

In his ongoing quest of the latest musical innovations, his comments indicate that his views changed frequently. In 1944 he wrote the following remarks about the works of Schoenberg:

> ...his music[,] for all its author's love of traditional sonorous materials and all the charm of late nineteenth-century Vienna that envelops its expression, is still the modernest modern music that exists. No other Western music sounds so strange, so consistently different from the music of the immediately preceding centuries.[42]

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[41]Thomson to a reader, 30 September, 1948. In Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson, Tim and Vanessa Weeks Page, eds. (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 227.

[42]Virgil Thomson, "Schönberg's Music," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 123-124.

In 1947 he suggested that the most viable route towards innovation in music was by way of atonality, explaining that

> not all the young, I grant you, are atonalists. There are neo-Classicists and neo-Romantics and even a few retarded impressionists among them. But a generation takes its tone from those who branch out, not from those who follow in footsteps. And today's adventurous young, believe me, are mostly atonal.[43]

John Cage is mentioned as the current leader of the atonal pack. Thomson points out as well that "...the young of England, France, Italy, and the Americas have recognized that fact [that atonality is the most likely precept for progress]."[44] On the other hand, "Germany and Russia... are slower in taking up the new manner. There are still too many older ones that have not been accepted there yet."[45] And in 1950, he commented that although the twelve-tone

> practice is common to most of the mature music of the atonality's Big Three — Schönberg, Berg, and Webern[,]... there is every reason to consider the epoch of advance that they represent to be a closed one.[46]

His reasons were that

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[43]Thomson, "Modernism Today," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 196.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Thomson, "Atonality Today," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 302.

> now two of these three are dead, and the other is seventy-five years old. Their favourite syntactical device, moreover, now available to all, is widely employed.[47]

The epoch of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern is considered to be a closed one because the approach to composition employed by each of these is no longer advancing. When Thomson comments that their methods are "available to all" and "widely employed," he means, again, that they can no longer be considered innovative or different. They have become standard, and hence conservative, techniques.

During the 1950s Thomson states that the only option remaining to those interested in pursuing modernism is the route forged by Boulez and Cage — experimentation with rhythm. Again, the developments he discusses are occurring in France and the United States, not Germany. In 1952 he states that "Cage and his school, by composition chiefly with noises (both accidental and made up), have separated the rhythmic problem from tonal influences."[48] As well,

> ...musical advance, real technical advance, is taking place today only in the region of rhythmic research. If you are not one of the rhythmic research boys, you are no more 'modern' than your neighbor, or any less so. All the schools of contemporary writing that base their bid for

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[47]Ibid.

[48]Thomson, "How Modern Can You Be?," New York Herald Tribune, 10 February, 1952, IV/8.

> fame on the exploitation of yesterday's technical advance are conservative.[49]

In light of this it appears that the post-war interest in French and American music espoused in Thomson's Herald Tribune writings is due at least in part to his interest in modernism and his belief that the newest music is deserved, and in many cases in need, of the most prominent press.

But Thomson's voracious addiction to the new did traverse national boundaries — if contemporary German composers did anything novel, he was willing to discuss it. The prime example is his adulation of works by Schoenberg, those composed both before and after his move to North America. Thomson commented on other German composers as well, offering positive reviews of the works of Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill, Carl Orff,[50] Alban Berg, and Gottfried von Einem. In 1953 he wrote the following comments on von Einem's Orchestermusik:

> Von Einem, along with his teacher Boris Blacher, represents the most advanced position now held by any composing wing in Austro-German music. There is no flavor of chromaticism in it or of pathos, no note-heavy orchestration, no mysticism, oratory or depiction of neurotic states. It is diatonic, cleanly scored and

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[49]Ibid.

[50]Thomson mistakenly referred to him as Hans Orff in the article "German Composers" which appeared in the New York Herald Tribune on October 13, 1946. The mistake appeared also in the reprint of this article in The Art of Judging Music. His name is correctly given as Carl in reprints in the later collections Music Reviewed 1940-1954 and A Virgil Thomson Reader.

> rhythmically alive. Its structure is motivic rather than thematic, and its development is free. It has shape too, a simple shape of three movements joined into one; and this shape is arrive at spontaneously, not by any superposition of a classic lay-out of contemporary material. The classical preoccupation in the work seems to be a certain balance between spontaneity and objectivity, between sentiment and drama. This is its real strength and, for modern German music, its novelty.[51]

This last comment brings up another point regarding Thomson's views on novelty. In many cases, including his own compositions, he condones what may be referred to as "contextual originality" — of either time or place. Von Einem's work is praised not because it differs from all preceding music, in all locations, but because it is different from the German musical tradition. Similarly, Thomson writes that Kurt Weill "was probably the most original single workman in the whole musical theater, internationally considered, during the last quarter century,"[52] and that his works

> have transformed the German opera. Their simplicity of style and flexibility of form have given, indeed, to present-day Germany its only progressive moment in music.[53]

In Thomson's own works the issue of "contextual originality" arises as well, but in regard to time rather than place. Aaron Copland states:

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[51]Thomson, "Germania Refreshed," review of Orchestermusik by Gottfried von Einem, New York Herald Tribune, 17 April, 1953, 14.

[52]Thomson, "Kurt Weill," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 311.

[53]Ibid., 312.

> ...ever since the middle twenties, Thomson has maintained that so-called modern music was much too involved and pretentious in every way. While most composers of the musical left were busily engaged in inventing all sorts of new rhythmic and harmonic devices — intent upon becoming as original and different as possible — Thomson went to the opposite extreme and deliberately wrote a music as ordinary as possible...[54]

Similarly, Ned Rorem has pointed out that the originality of Thomson's Four Saints in Three Acts "lies in its willfull diatonicism at a time when dissonance was the rage."[55]

Both the pro-American attitude of the war years, and his own personal preferences for the French and American musical styles, undoubtedly contributed to Thomson's promotion of non-German music. In articles written after the war he continues this practice, but his encouragement focuses on the newest music available, regardless of its author's nation of origin. In an article titled "On being American," he explores the following question:

> What is an American composer? The Music Critics' Circle of New York City says it is any musical author of American citizenship. This group, however, and also the Pulitzer Prize Committee, finds itself troubled about people like Stravinsky, Schönberg, and Hindemith. Can these composers be called American, whose styles were formed in Europe and whose most recent work, if it shows any influence of American ways, shows this

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[54]Aaron Copland, Our New Music (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1941), 190.

[55]Ned Rorem, Settling the Score: Essays on Music (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 51.

> certainly in no direction that could possibility be called nationalistic? Any award committee would think a second time before handing these men a certificate, as Americans, for musical excellence.[56]

In keeping with his view that the best new music should be supported, and in this case rewarded, Thomson suggests that the committees compromise and honour the best new works, regardless of their author's past nationalities.

II. The Question of Music with Words

In addition to his personal preference for music by French and American composers, and an enthusiasm for all types of modern music, another bias surfaces in the Herald Tribune writings as well. Michael Meckna's observation that composer-critics (in Modern Music) tended to write most effectively about, and give the most positive reactions to, music that had affinities with their own,[57] applies in some cases to Thomson's writings in the Herald Tribune as well.

While Thomson manages, in most cases, to convert his prejudices into agents of perception, there is one topic on which the vehemence of his views sometimes progress beyond simple opinion and his personal beliefs affect his critical impartiality: the relationship between words and music.

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[56]Thomson, "On Being American," in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 230-231.

[57]Ibid., 229.

Often when criticizing texted works he does so by comparing the approach taken to that of his own. Since he believes that his method is "correct," those which differ greatly are seen to fall short.

Thomson's fascination with the problems and techniques of text setting, in particular English text setting, began early in his career as a composer. His initial interest was sparked by Gertrude Stein's work Tender Buttons, which he first encountered in 1919. He found Stein's words charged with potential.

> ...With meanings jumbled and syntax violated, but with the words themselves all the more shockingly present, I could put these texts to music with a minimum of temptation towards the emotional conventions, spend my whole effort on the rhythm of the language, and its specific Anglo-American sound, adding shape, where that seemed to be needed, and it usually was, from the music's own devices.[58]

The following "object" is the first described in Tender Buttons, and typifies its author's style.

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[58]Thomson, Music with Words: A Composer's View (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 52.

A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass[59]

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.

Thomson began setting portions of Tender Buttons as early as 1923. His first published setting of a Stein text, Susie Asado, appeared in 1926. In 1934 they presented the opera Four Saints in Three Acts, and in 1946 they collaborated on another, The Mother of Us All.

Thomson's book Music with Words is a valuable source of his views on prosody, as the remarks contained in that brief essay collection are ones that he formulated throughout his career.[60] Consequently, the comments contained in this collection help to illuminate the views offered in the Herald Tribune.

Thomson's interest in the relationship between words and music stems from a belief that communication, which he considers the aim of all

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[59]Gertrude Stein, "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass," from "Tender Buttons," quoted in Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein, Carl van Vechten, ed. (New York: The Modern Library, 1963; reprint, Vintage Books, 1990), 461.

[60]In the preface Thomson mentions that "Chapter 1 is a lecture that I have been giving in clubs and colleges for over fifty years. I have not previously allowed its publication..." ix. Chapter Eleven, "The Nature of Opera", is reprinted from the journal Parnassus.

composition, is, in vocal works, a direct result of correct prosody. In the opening chapter of Music with Words he asserts:

> ...It is pleasanter to understand what music is saying than merely to enjoy the sound that it makes. So if songs really need words (as indeed they mostly do, since the human voice without them is just another wind instrument) then there has to be in the marriage of words and music a basic compatibility in which the text's exact shape and purpose dominate the union, or seem to.[61]

Thomson laments the fact that many English-speaking composers neglect to consider the problems inherent in English words — particularly the stresses and natural cadences — when they compose, attempting instead to set the English text as though it were "...Italian or German or French or Russian or Yiddish..."[62] He charges that this problem will only be alleviated when composers admit that "English really exists" and that "...its nature is its nature, and that its behavior under stress is no less individual than that of any other language..."[63]

When setting text, a variety of factors must be taken into consideration. According to Thomson,

> The art of putting English to music is largely a matter of not disturbing the fixed elements, let me repeat that the attributes of speech-sound are: stresses, or accentuation,

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[61]Thomson, Music with Words: A Composer's View, 1.

[62]Ibid., 15.

[63]Ibid.

> which in English is invariable; cadence, which is extremely variable — but only within the limits of the third attribute, quantity, since certain sounds are considered tensible and others not. Accents in English cannot be changed without changing the meaning. Cadence can be widely varied to illustrate meanings or to intensify them, but only where the phonemes, or units of speech-sound, are in themselves extensible.[64]

For example, the meaning of the phrase "I am home" may be altered simply by changing the placement of the stress. The line could be expressed "I am home", "I am home" or "I am home."[65]

Thomson's approach can be illustrated more clearly by examining his setting of Stein's Susie Asado. When he discusses the necessity of making the "meaning" of the text understood, he is referring to the intelligibility of words and word groups. In the case of Stein's work, he does not attempt to make the words comprehensible as sentences. The poem is as follows:

Susie Asado[66]

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Susie Asado which is a told tray sure.

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[64]Ibid., 9.

[65]Ibid., 8.

[66]Stein, "Susie Asado" in Geography and Plays (New York: Something Else Press, Inc., 1922; reissue, 1968), 13.

A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers.
When the ancient light grey is clean it is yellow, it is a silver seller.
This is a please, this is a please these are the saids to jelly. These are the wets these say the sets to leave a crown to Incy.
Incy is short for incubus.
A pot. A pot is a beginning of a rare bit of trees. Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles, bobbles which shade and shove and render clean, render clean must.
Drink pups.
Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see it shine and a bobolink has pins. It shows a nail.
What is a nail. A nail is unison.
Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.

Thomson suggests the following word groups for the first four lines of the poem:[67]

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Susie Asado which is a told tray sure.

As John Cage has remarked in Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music, "in putting Susie Asado to music [Thomson] had, so to speak, held a microscope over the text, emphasizing by parallel musical means the

[67]Thomson, Music with Words: A Composer's View, 20.

discontinuity of the words."[68] The cadence of the words, their rhythm and length are all taken into consideration (see Example 1, page 146).

In light of these points, Thomson's contention with Copland's setting of Twelve poems of Emily Dickinson becomes more understandable. Whereas Thomson takes into consideration the natural lengths of words and syllables — setting the word "sweet" as an eighth note, the climactic word with an open syllable "tea" as two half notes — Copland does not. The example that Thomson singles out as particularly awkward, "the breaking of the day" from the poem entitled "Sleep is supposed to be," demonstrates this (see Example 2, page 147).

As Thomson points out in his review, one can see that although set syllabically, the words are broken up in a manner that ignores some of their natural rhythms and stresses. Both syllables of the word "breaking" are the same length, and on the second half of the word, "ing," the singer must intone the highest pitch of the bar on the awkward "ing" sound.

While he is attempting to offer a candid review, and while many of his criticisms are valid, Thomson seems intent on pointing out minuscule miscalculations in Copland's work as if further to empower his own critical competence. Furthermore, although he is considered a consummate setter of

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[68]Kathleen Hoover and John Cage, Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 144.

text, Thomson himself is not infallible. For example, while he underscores the importance of adhering to a text's natural word groups, his own divisions of Stein's line "Susie Asado which is a told tray sure" do not correspond exactly to his musical setting. Although Thomson's method is effective, surely he does not expect every composer to adhere to it slavishly, as this would leave no room for variety or experimentation. He neglects to consider that Copland may have been breaking rules intentionally in order to achieve a specific effect.

In addition to his concern with correct prosody, Thomson's interest in the relationship between words and music also leads him to comment on the combination of spoken text with music.

In an otherwise positive review of Darius Milhaud's Cantata of the Child and the Mother he states:

> The sound of the speaking voice and the sound of string quartet and pianoforte are so different in kind that it is impossible to lend full attention at once to both the music and the words. One of them is always distracting the listener's mind from the other.[69]

For slightly different reasons, and to a greater degree, he denigrates Arthur Honegger's Nicolas de Flue and Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher. Of the former he remarks:

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[69]Virgil Thomson, "New Friends of Music," review of Cantata of the Mother and the Child by Darius Milhaud, New York Herald Tribune, 15 December, 1952, 23.

> Speech with instrumental accompaniment ('melodrama' is the musical word for this) is, heaven knows, corny enough most of the time. Speech with choral accompaniment is not even corny: it is just unfortunate, since no listener can possibly follow one set of sung words and another set of spoken ones at the same time.[70]

Thomson reviewed Jeanne d'Arc twice while at the Herald Tribune: once in 1948 and again 1952. Of the 1948 performance he remarks:

> Joan at the Stake aims to please all, save possibly the Marxian Left, by exploiting religious and patriotic sentiments without doctrinal precision. It appeals to the theater instinct in all by the realistic evocation of horror scenes. It appeases the lover of modern music with bits of polytonal composition. It impresses all by its elaborate mobilization of musical effectiveness. It offers, in whole, virtually everything a concert can offer but bets on nothing.
>
> The weakness of the work lies exactly in its failure to bet, to make clear whether we are listening to a musical work on a literary text or to a literary work with musical commentary.[71]

His review of the 1952 performance offers comments even harsher in tone. Beginning with the admittance that: "Arthur Honegger's 'Joan of Arc

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[70]Virgil Thomson, "Swiss Festival," review of Nicolas de Flue by Arthur Honegger, text by Denis de Rougemont, New York Herald Tribune, 9 May, 1941, 15; reprint in The Art of Judging Music, 166-168.

[71]Thomson, "Joan of Arch Close Up," review of Joan d'Arc au bûcher by Arthur Honegger, in Music Reviewed 1940-1954, 229.

at the Stake' has never meant much to this colleague,"[72] he summarizes the work as follows:

> ...It chatters along like a radio announcer, gets a laugh here and there, catches your throat with a moment of poignancy, manoeuvres many a weak continuity situation by keeping very, very busy all the time...[73]

Three reasons are offered for this harsh condemnation: 1. The work leaves one with: "the memory of an hour-and-a-half's music making in which nothing has been kept up long enough to make its point...,"[74] 2. That the work is "...loosely conceived and casually composed...,"[75] and 3. Its sound "...has been further made ugly by the buzzing and crackling sound of the speaking voice."[76] This last point, his most adamant one, is underscored at two other places in the review. In the first instance he claims that the work is marred by "...the utterly trivial sound of he human speaking voice when contrasted with music."[77] Later he remarks that the "unpleasant" sound of the

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[72]Thomson, "Anniversary Show," review of Jeanne d'Arc au bucher by Arthur Honegger, poem by Paul Claudel, New York Herald Tribune, 19 November, 1952, 26.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Ibid.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid.

"speaking voice against a tonal background" is present during approximately half of the work (by "tonal" it would appear that Thomson means simply a background of tones. It is unlikely that he would respond positively to a spoken voice against a non-tonal background, in a harmonic sense).[78] In contrast to Thomson's reports, Jeanne d'Arc received favourable press by others writing in both Europe and North America. The following review, by Maurice Montabé, appeared in the Figaro Littéraire:

> ...dans la salle, il y avait une foule enthousiasmée, qui n'en finissait pas d'applaudir. Non pas parce qu'elle avait payé le fauteuil quinze mille lires au guichet ou vingt-cinq mille lires au marché noir, mais parce que c'était très beau.[79]

Similarly, Thomson's rival critic at the New York Times, Olin Downes, offered accolades for the New York performance of 1952 (the same performance Thomson attended when he wrote his second review).

> The culminating tribute to [Ormandy] must be in the fact that last night's reading of the work, in the perspective of its first performance in this city four seasons ago, caused a new valuation on this listener's part of the entire work. His reaction then is clearly remembered. He thought Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher a piece of accomplished,

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[78]Ibid.

[79]Arthur Honegger, Giovanna d'arco al rogo, poem by Paul Claudel, Orchestra e coro del Teatro San Carlo, Gianandrea Gavazzeni, conductor. Arkadia M15504, 1983. "In the concert hall there was a very enthusiastic crowd who would not finish applauding. Not because they had paid 15,000 lire a seat at the box-office or 25,000 lire on the black market, but because [the work] was very beautiful."

> sophisticated musical theater, effective but superficial and without profound conviction or much communication of actual feeling. Last night every line of it struck home.
>
> The net effect of it all was a work of profound feeling as well as dramatic power. Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher remains essentially a music drama in concert form. Its spirit is not only dramatic but theatrical in the highest sense of the word. It is invisible theater and French theater. It is also music and text, strongly felt and fused together with an effect almost of visual realization of the dramatic value of Paul Claudel's poem.[80]

Although Thomson's observation of "looseness" in the dramatic organization of the work and his remark that many of the scenes are not "drawn in depth" are both valid, some defence of this practice can be found in Claudel's notes on the work.[81] Here he explains that Jeanne was written as if seen from the "summit" of the stake in Rouen. Throughout, the main character reflects on the events which led her to this final point; the eleven scenes were devised intentionally to vacillate between the most recent and most distant events, to enhance the dramatic effect.

Similarly, Claudel had a reason for combining spoken and sung vocal parts:

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[80]Olin Downes, "A Frank Change of Mind about Honegger's Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher," review of Jeannne d'Arc au bûcher by Arthur Honegger, in Olin Downes on Music, ed. Irene Downes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 408.

[81]Oeuvres complètes de Paul Claudel, vol. 14, Théâtre (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1958), 275-76.

> Tout le monde est conscient du discord douloureux entre l'aire du chant et celle de la parole. C'est de ce discord même qu'Honegger et moi avons essayé de tirer un elément de drame et par là d'émotion.[82]

In addition to the criticisms that Thomson advances, there are other remarks about the work that could be made. Recall for a moment his assertion in the Nicolas review that "...no listener can possibly follow one set of sung words and another set of spoken ones at the same time."[83] In Jeanne too, there are places where audibility is difficult. For example, in the final scene, "Jeanne en flamme," the score is so active with chorus, winds, percussion, soloists, Ondes Martenot, and two pianos, that it is difficult to distinguish anything other than a wall of sound. Similarly, in Scene IX, "L'Épée de Jeanne," it is difficult to concentrate on both the music and the spoken words simultaneously (see Example 3, pages 148-149). Of course, it seems unlikely that replacing the spoken text with sung text would make the words more comprehensible in either of these situations.

Contrary to Thomson's remarks, there are sections of the work in which the spoken parts are perfectly audible, and dramatically effective. For example, in Scene III, "La Voix de la terre," the spoken voice is very effective

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[82]Ibid., 278. "Everyone is aware of the sorrowful dissonance between the nature of song and that of the word. It is from this same dissonance that Honegger and I have tried to draw an element of drama, and by extension, of emotion."

[83]Thomson, "Swiss Festival," 15.

above the choral background (see Example 4, pages 150-151). Also, in Scene X, "Trimazo," Joan's part in quasi-pitched speech is not only audible against the musical accompaniment, but adds to the dramatic setting of the scene (see Example 5, pages 152-153).

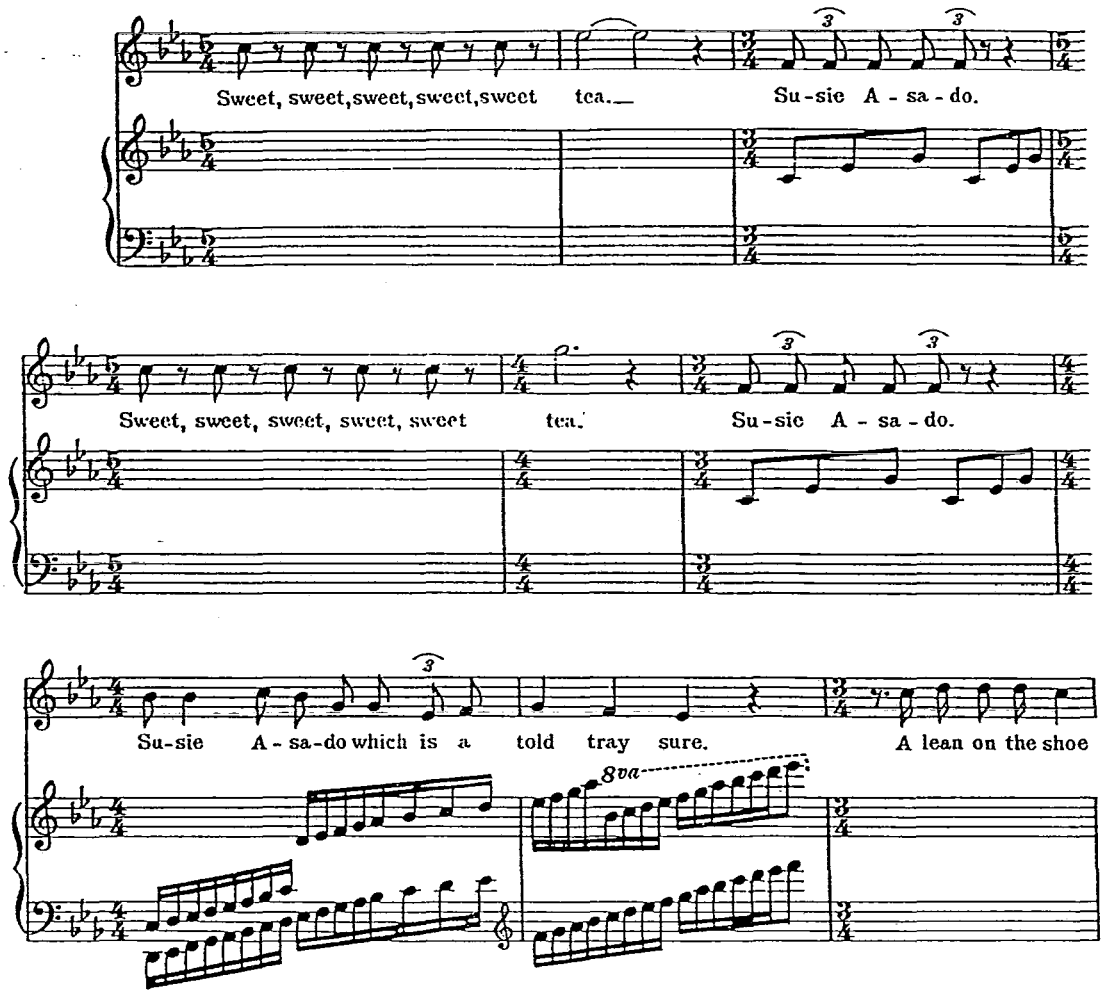
While Thomson's views on prosody were in some ways advantageous to his critical duties, allowing him to be an able commentator, his aversion to melodrama appears to have been a detriment, causing him to "put on blinders," so to speak, and overlook commendable features of certain works.

Thomson's performance reviews offer an abundance of material for discussion. From them, one can learn not only of his opinions regarding different types of musical works and composers, but also witness his evaluative methods in action. In addition to an examination of the content catagories, as discussed in Chapter Three, an investigation of Thomson's approach to the task of review writing helps to provide a more complete profile of him as critic.

Musical Examples

Example 1

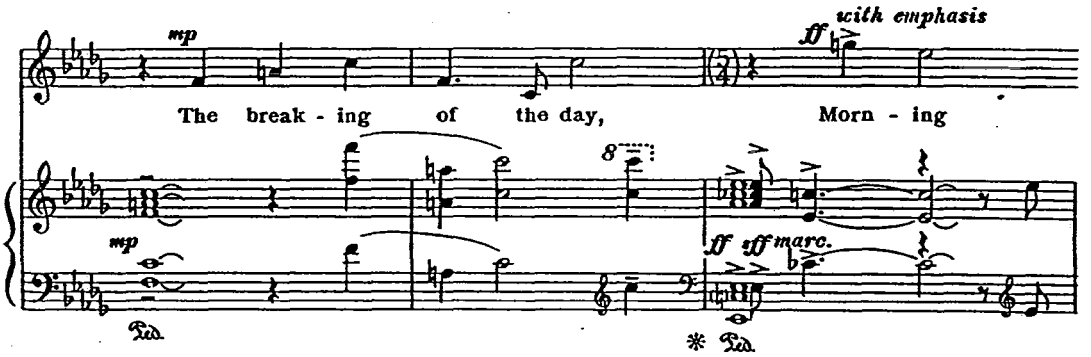
Virgil Thomson: Susie Asado[84]



[84]Thomson, Susie Asado, text by Gertrude Stein (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, Inc., 1936, renewed 1962); in Cos Cob Song Volume, (New York: Boosey and Hawkes), 13.

Example 2

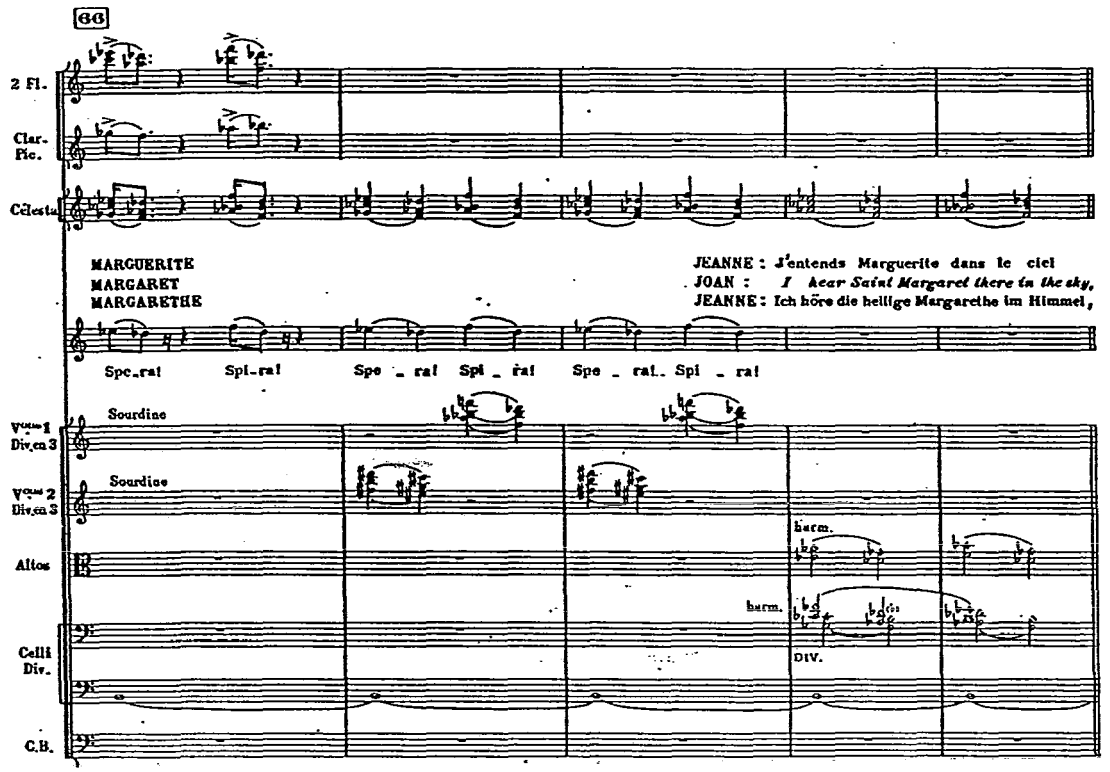
Aaron Copland: Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson[85]
"Sleep Is Supposed To Be"



[85]Copland, Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson for voice and piano, text by Emily Dickinson (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1951), 7.

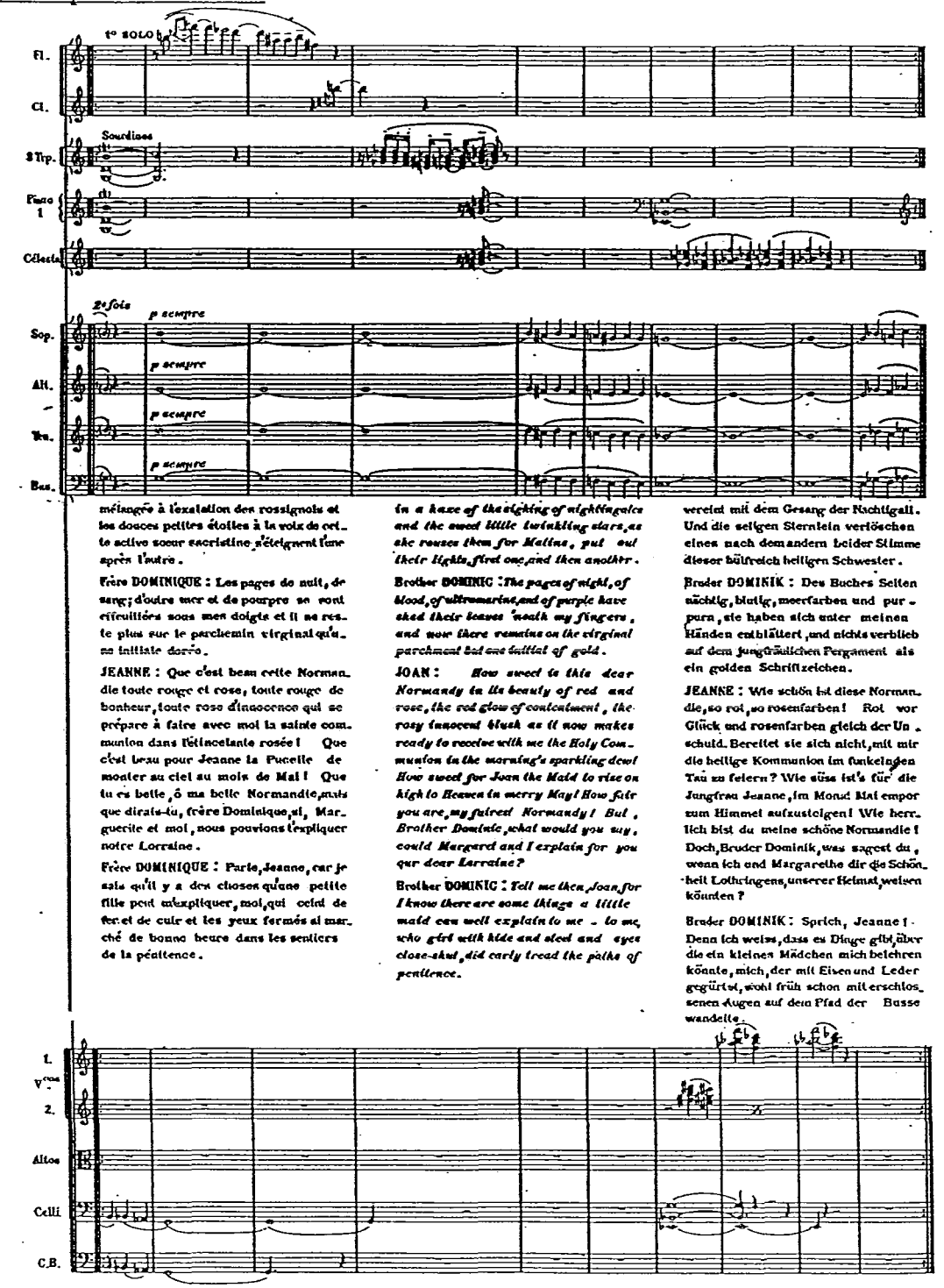
Example 3

Arthur Honegger: Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher[86]
"L'Épée de Jeanne"



[86]Arthur Honegger, Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher, poem by Paul Claudel (Paris: Éditions Maurice Senart, 1939; new copyright with prologue, Paris: Éditions Salabert, 1947), 163.

Example 3 continued[87]



mélangée à l'exaltation des rossignols et les douces petites étoiles à la voix de cette active sœur sacristine s'éteignent l'une après l'autre.

Frère DOMINIQUE : Les pages de nuit, de sang; d'outre mer et de pourpre se sont effeuillées sous mes doigts et il ne reste plus sur le parchemin virginal qu'une initiale dorée.

JEANNE : Que c'est beau cette Normandie toute rouge et rose, toute rouge de bonheur, toute rose d'innocence qui se prépare à faire avec moi la sainte communion dans l'étincelante rosée! Que c'est beau pour Jeanne la Pucelle de monter au ciel au mois de Mai! Que tu es belle, ô ma belle Normandie, mais que dirais-tu, frère Dominique, si, Marguerite et moi, nous pouvions t'expliquer notre Lorraine.

Frère DOMINIQUE : Parle, Jeanne, car je sais qu'il y a des choses qu'une petite fille peut m'expliquer, moi, qui ceint de fer et de cuir et les yeux fermés ai marché de bonne heure dans les sentiers de la pénitence.

in a haze of the alighting of nightingales and the sweet little twinkling stars, as she rouses them for Matins, put out their lights, first one, and then another.

Brother DOMINIC : *The pages of night, of blood, of ultramarine, and of purple have shed their leaves 'neath my fingers, and now there remains on the virginal parchment but one initial of gold.*

JOAN : *How sweet is this dear Normandy in its beauty of red and rose, the red glow of contentment, the rosy innocent blush as it now makes ready to receive with me the Holy Communion in the morning's sparkling dew! How sweet for Joan the Maid to rise on high to Heaven in merry May! How fair you are, my fairest Normandy! But, Brother Dominic, what would you say, could Margaret and I explain for you our dear Lorraine?*

Brother DOMINIC : *Tell me then, Joan, for I know there are some things a little maid can well explain to me - to me, who girt with hide and steel and eyes close-shut, did early tread the paths of penitence.*

vereint mit dem Gesang der Nachtigall. Und die seligen Sternlein verlöschen eines nach dem andern leider Stimme dieser hülfreich heiligen Schwester.

Bruder DOMINIK : Des Buches Seiten nächtig, blutig, meerfarben und purpurn, sie haben sich unter meinen Händen entblättert, und nichts verblieb auf dem jungfräulichen Pergament als ein golden Schriftzeichen.

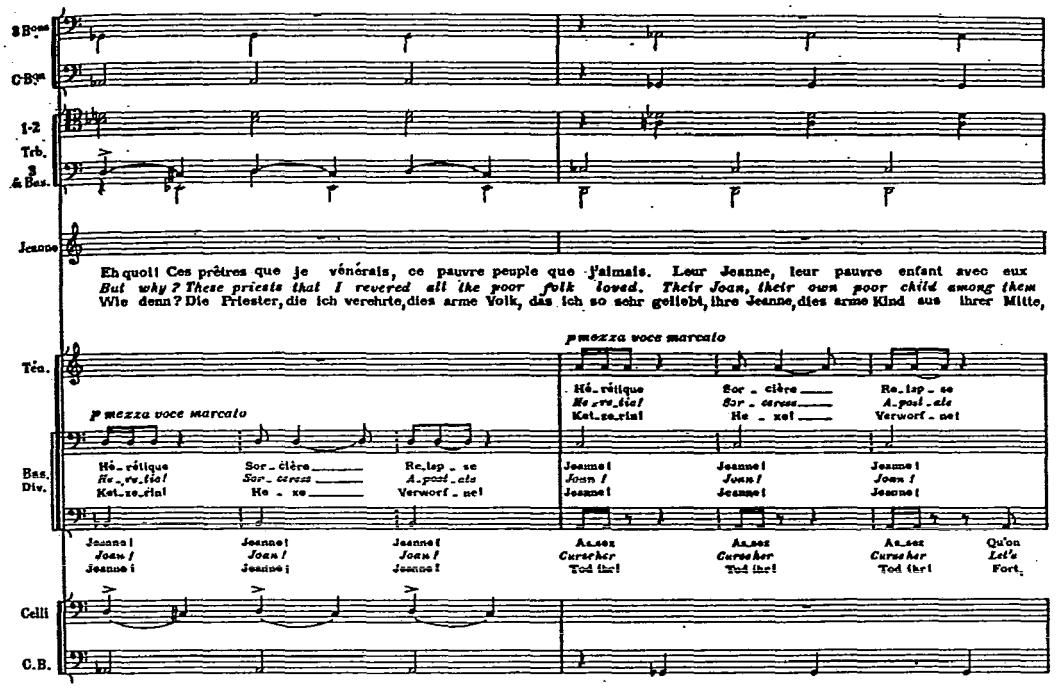
JEANNE : Wie schön ist diese Normandie, so rot, so rosenfarben! Rot vor Glück und rosenfarben gleich der Unschuld. Bereitet sie sich nicht, mit mir die heilige Kommunion im funkelnden Tau zu feiern? Wie süss ist's für die Jungfrau Jeanne, im Monat Mai empor zum Himmel aufzusteigen! Wie herrlich bist du meine schöne Normandie! Doch, Bruder Dominik, was sagest du, wenn ich und Margarethe dir die Schönheit Lothringens, unserer Heimat, weisen könnten?

Bruder DOMINIK : Sprich, Jeanne! Denn ich weiss, dass es Dinge gibt, über die ein kleines Mädchen mich belehren könnte, mich, der mit Eisen und Leder gegürtet, wohl früh schon mit erschlossenen Augen auf dem Pfad der Busse wandelte.

[87]Ibid., 164.

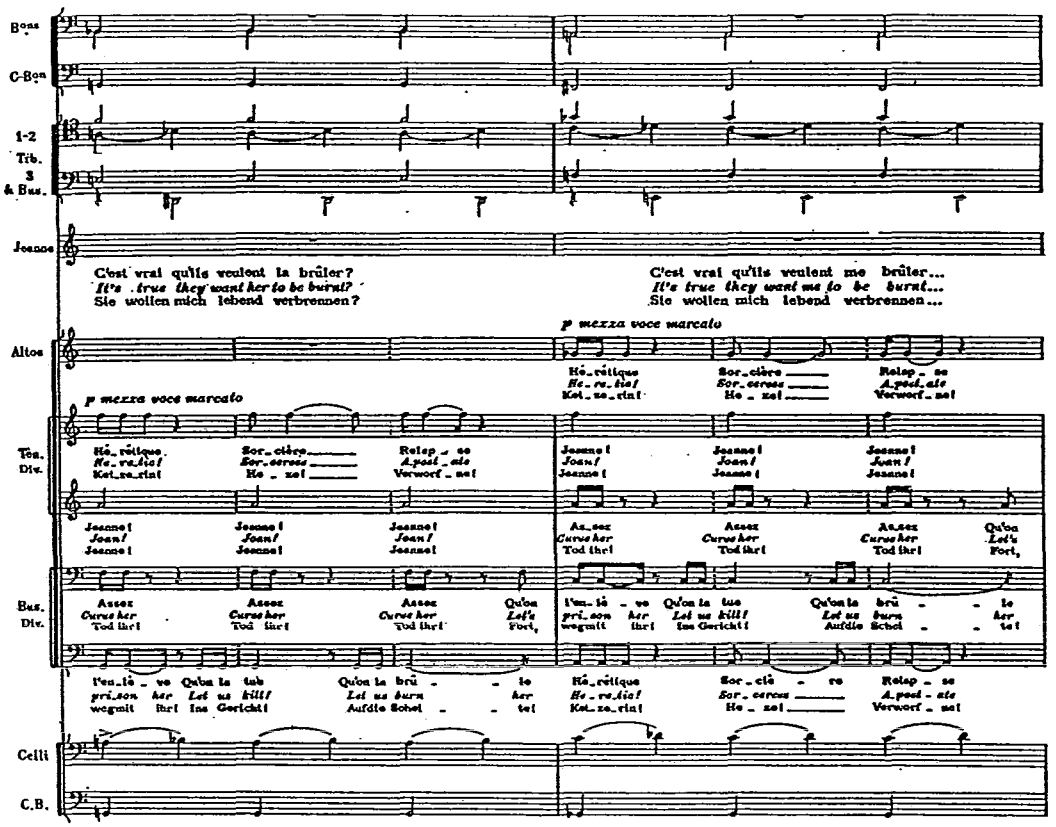
Example 4

Arthur Honegger: Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher[88]
"La Voix de la terre"



[88]Ibid., 35.

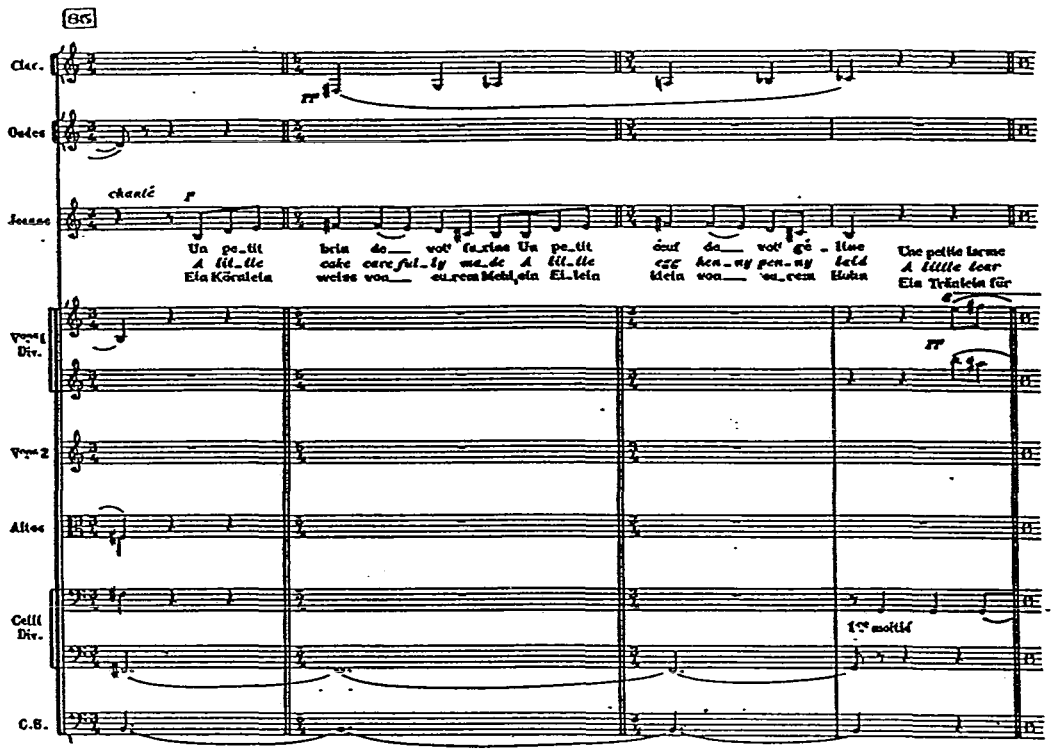
Example 4 continued[89]



[89]Ibid.

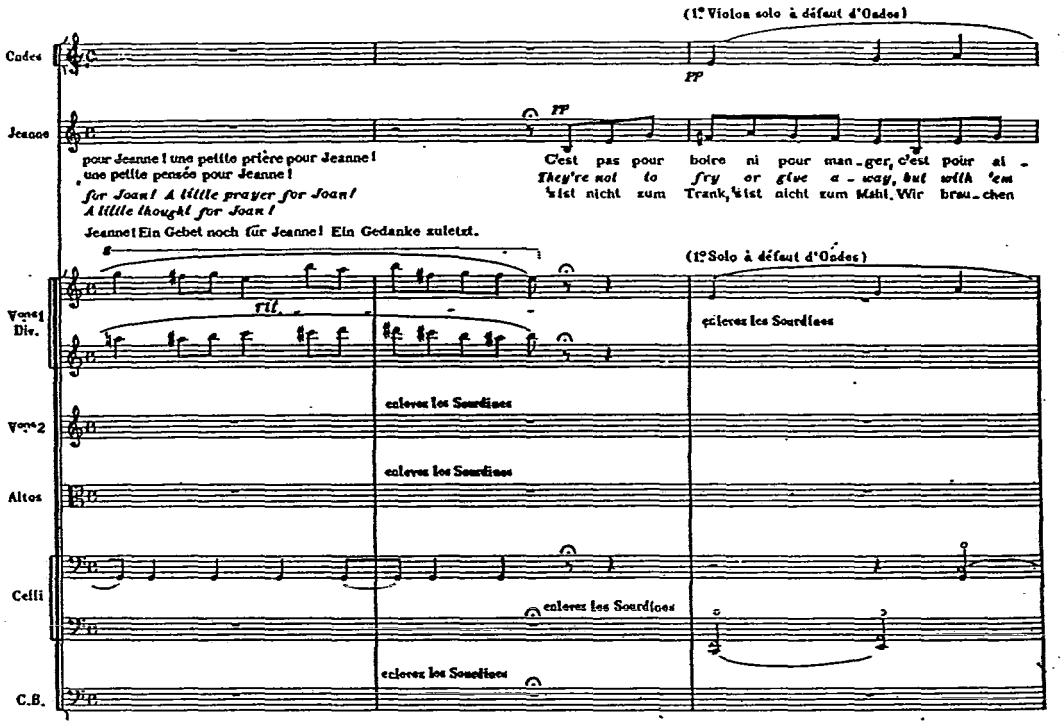
Example 5

Arthur Honegger: Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher[90]
"Trimazo"



[90]Ibid., 208.

Example 5 continued[91]



[91]Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS

After fourteen years of informing and entertaining readers of the New York Herald Tribune, Virgil Thomson resigned from his critical post in order to spend more time composing, conducting, and lecturing.[1] A cursory note in the paper on July 28 announced that he would depart at the end of September, and be succeeded by musicologist Paul Henry Lang. Thomson's final article, "Novelties in Venice," appeared on September 26.[2]

When he came to the Herald Tribune on October 10, 1940, Thomson had already acquired a wide range of experience. He had been active as a composer on two continents, been involved with musical organizations concerned with the state of new-music composition and performance, written music criticism, and travelled in artistic circles that included the likes of Gertrude Stein, Jean Cocteau, and Christian Bérard. To his position as critic he brought not only a vast musical knowledge and an interest in contemporary culture, but also an engaging writing style, sharp critical faculties, and vehement opinions.

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[1]Time, "Tired of Listening," 64 (2 August 1954): 43.

[2]Thomson, "Novelties in Venice," New York Herald Tribune, 26 September, 1954, IV/8.

In the majority of articles and reviews for the Herald Tribune, Thomson's objective was to be an advocate for "modern music." At the beginning of his Herald Tribune career he claimed that this term referred not necessarily to "'modernistic' music, much of which is a pale afterglow of the great and original modernism of yesteryear,"[3] but rather, "all the music that is being written today or that has been written in our lifetime."[4] In his performance reviews written after 1950, he modified his definition. Whereas he originally voiced an interest in all music of the twentieth century, Thomson later found his enthusiasm had shifted to a pursuit of the newest of the new. Those who had, by mid century, come to be considered contemporary "giants" (including Bartók, Schoenberg, and Webern), were, in Thomson's view, now well known and standard. Consequently, he no longer considered their music as news- worthy as that written by lesser known innovators whose works were less frequently performed.

Thomson's goal of explaining and encouraging modern music, in its various guises, manifested itself in a variety of ways in the Herald Tribune writings. In the Sunday articles he challenged the managerial policies of performing institutions, particularly those which promoted a constricted

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[3]Thomson, "Getting Used to Modern Music," in The Musical Scene (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 289.

[4]Ibid.

performance repertory. By intentionally stirring up the issues and striving to heighten the degree of controversy he attempted to convince his readers of the urgency of these matters. In the performance reviews, Thomson promoted the cause of the contemporary composer by focusing his reviewing energies and devoting the most substantial amount of his reviewing space to performances of new music.

In all of the Herald Tribune writings, Thomson believed that it was imperative to keep his readers well informed. For him, an audience aware of the latest trends in contemporary composition would be more likely to have an interest in hearing new works. Similarly, an audience notified of the financial state of its local performance institution would be more likely to help if and when problems developed.

Although outstanding overall, the Herald Tribune writings are not without faults. Inevitably, though infrequently, Thomson had off-days. Some of his reviews, particularly during his first four years on the paper "when [he] was learning [his] trade by working in it,"[5] consist of lengthy whimsical descriptions; although entertaining, they are not very informative. Others are informative, but lack the style and wit that readers have come to associate with his name. Furthermore, although his adept knowledge of musical composition

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[5]Thomson, Virgil Thomson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press Inc., 1977), 336.

made him in many ways an ideal commentator, the vehemency of his views and personal predilections sometimes clouded his critical judgement. Specifically, this is evident in his writings on texted works, and in his views regarding French, American, and German music.

Thomson never denied that the quality of his work was not consistent. Consequently, the contents of each of his four Herald Tribune reprint collections were chosen very carefully. In addition to the fact that not every performance review could be reprinted, simply because of the large number that were written, the ones that were omitted are those which fall short of his usual standard. In the case of the Sunday articles, those not reprinted tend to be ones that, because of their detailed discussions of then current issues, would not likely be of interest to general readers in later years.

On the whole, Thomson's Herald Tribune writings represent one of the most significant collections of contemporary American musical criticism. Not only are they for the most part well written, entertaining, and well argued, but the judgements offered in them are usually sound. Many of the remarks offered remain apt and appropriate today, 40 to 50 years after their initial publication.

Perhaps the reason that these writings have retained their value for so long stems from the fact that they not only paint a vivid picture of musical composition in the 1940s and early 1950s, but also, to borrow the title of

Thomson's second reprint collection, they bring to life the entire "musical scene."

APPENDIX

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF SELECTED ARTICLES AND REVIEWS FROM THE NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE 1940 TO 1954

This appendix provides a chronological list of all articles and reviews discussed in this thesis which were written by Virgil Thomson and published in the New York Herald Tribune.

The letters "HT" designate an article that has not been reprinted in any of Thomson's collections. The numbers 1 to 5 correspond to the following locations of reprints.

1 The Musical Scene
2 The Art Of Judging Music
3 Music Right And Left
4 Music Reviewed 1940-1954
5 A Virgil Thomson Reader

1940

11 October	"Age Without Honor"	1, 4, 5

1941

12 January	"Blitzstein's Operas"	1
2 February	"Democratizing The Metropolitan"	HT
16 February	"To The Metropolitan"	HT
9 March	"Lots Of Americans"	HT
9 May	"Swiss Festival"	2
18 May	"Philharmonic I"	HT
25 May	"Philharmonic II"	HT
19 October	"Porgy In Maplewood"	1

1942

11 January	"Reviewing Modern Music"	1
18 January	"Getting Used To Modern Music"	1
25 January	"Conducting Modern Music"	1, 4, 5
18 October	"Shostakovich's Seventh"	1
22 November	"Smetana's Heir"	1

1943

28 February	"Stravinsky's Symphony"	1
4 April	"Superficially Warlike"	1, 4
23 May	"The Cultural Obligation"	1

1944

14 February	"Our Musical Tom Sawyer"	1
10 March	"More Barber"	1
9 April	"What's Wrong With The Met?"	1
11 April	"A Wealth Of Dissonance"	1, 4
10 September	"Schönberg's Music"	2, 4, 5

1945

16 September	"Lively St. Francis"	2
9 December	"Reconverting Opera"	2

1946

1947

12 January	"A War's End"	2, 4, 5
2 February	"Landscape Music"	2, 4, 5
2 February	"Modernism Today"	2, 4
9 February	"Philharmonic Crisis"	2, 4
19 February	"Farce And Melodrama"	2, 4

13 April	"Expressive Content"	2
20 April	"Intellectual Content"	2, 4
27 April	"Ethical Content"	2
29 October	"Luminous"	3

1948

2 January	"Joan Of Arc Close-Up"	3, 4
25 January	"On Being American"	3, 4, 5
13 February	"Success Tactics"	3, 4, 5
18 October	"French Loveliness"	4

1949

20 February	"Five Symphonies"	3
1 November	"Little Musical Foxes"	3

1950

19 January	"Dramatically Forceful"	HT
24 January	"Atonality Today (I)"	3
5 February	"Atonality Today (II)"	3, 4, 5
4 April	"Select And Impressive"	HT
9 April	"Kurt Weill"	3, 4, 5
30 April	"How Mitropoulos's Program Policy Can Either Be Supported — Or Killed"	HT
28 May	"New Operas By Bernard Rogers And Lukas Foss Are Presented"	HT
3 September	"Protests About Programs"	HT
17 September	"Taste Survey"	4, 5
22 October	"The Question Of Municipal Help For Our Symphonies And Operas"	HT
14 November	"Virtuosity, Musicianship, New Pieces"	HT
19 November	"Philharmonic Finances"	HT

24 November	"A New American"	HT
31 December	"The Outlook"	HT

1951

14 January	"Seattle Survives"	HT
21 January	"Wholesalers And Jobbers"	HT
5 February	"Memorial To Weill"	HT
11 March	"Getting Around The Middleman"	HT
18 March	"What Bing Has Done"	HT
30 March	"Musical Throughout"	HT
13 April	"Successful Modernism"	4
12 October	"Pretentious And Unclear"	4, 5
30 December	"Spokesman For The Met"	4, 5

1952

28 January	"New Music String Quartet"	HT
10 February	"How Modern Can You Be"	HT
26 February	"Two Serious Symphonies"	HT
2 November	"Meaning In Music Is Nothing More Than Its Power To Hold Attention"	HT
3 November	"Copland Songs"	4
13 November	"Romantic Evening"	HT
19 November	"Anniversary Show"	HT
15 December	"Poetry And Good Spirits"	HT
15 December	"New Friends Of Music"	HT
22 December	"Red-Letter Concert"	HT

1953

25 January	"Bing's Regime Good Showmanship; Musically 'Less of Same'"	HT
8 February	"Shrew, Rake Are Achievements In English-Language Opera Today"	HT

17 April	"Germania Refreshed"	HT
5 May	"A Powerful Work"	4, 5
23 October	"Reflected And Penetrating"	HT
25 October	"Bigger Than Baseball"	4

1954

1 February	"Circle In The Square"	HT
14 February	"Composer And Critic"	4, 5
21 February	"Critic And Performer"	4, 5
4 April	"The Musical Elements"	HT
26 September	"Novelties In Venice"	HT

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