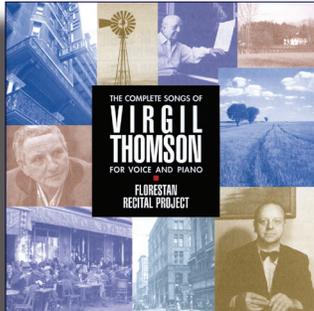


“This is a major release, a gift that fills in a serious gap of recorded American music history.”

CD Review by Robert Carl

THOMSON Complete Songs • Sarah Pelletier (sop);
Lynne McMurtry (alt); William Hite (ten); Aaron
Engbreth (bar); Alison D'Amato & Linda Osborn (pn);
John McDonald (perc) • NEW WORLD 80775-2
(3 CDs: 208:21)



This is a major release, a gift that fills in a serious gap of recorded American music history. Virgil Thomson (1896–1989) is often grouped with Copland as an “American nationalist” composer, but that does him a disservice (as it actually does Copland as well). Thomson is a true original. In some ways you could call his eccentric art “revolutionary conservatism.” As Rodney Lister quotes in his excellent notes, Thomson made it a point in his cosmopolitan career to “explain Kansas City [his birthplace and childhood home] to Paris [his adoptive one].” His music is deeply rooted in tradition, yet at the same time can be seen as a predecessor to such unlikely progeny as Philip Glass and *Einstein on the Beach*. It is deeply rooted in American Protestant hymnody and folksong, yet is at times the purest distillation ever of a homegrown American surrealism. He was perhaps the greatest music critic our culture has ever produced. And he had an unmatched ability to set the English language, and in particular its American variant, in art song.

This collection highlights that last quality. It collects all the songs written for voice and piano from 1920 to 1987, but the overwhelming majority fall into two intensive periods, the 1920s (in Paris) and the 1950s (in New York, where Thomson moved when Paris fell to the Germans, and where he held court in the Chelsea Hotel for the remainder of his life). The former is distinguished above all by a series of collaborations with Gertrude Stein, whose “senseless” poetry was perfect for Thomson’s purpose of marrying the sound of words to that of tones in an equal match. The greatest fruit of this collaboration is *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the landmark opera that takes a language of semi/pseudo naïve American tonality and moves it into a gentle Dada realm. Many of the songs from this period on the collection are “warmups” Thomson wrote on other Stein texts to prepare for the large-scale work of the opera.

He also set a good number of French texts, and he had a natural feel for the language unusual for an Anglophone composer. These songs are far more fluid and limpid than their chiseled English-language counterparts (above all in the *Socrate*-like *Oraison funèbre de Henriette-Marie de France, Reine de Grande-Bretagne*), but I feel they are at their height when they grasp tropes from French popular music in a manner analogous to the way Thomson used American sources (above all, the *Trois Poèmes de la Duchesse de Rohan*).

And then the second wave has a series of magnificent songs, and in particular cycles. Standouts are the *Five Songs from William Blake* (1951), *Praises and Prayers* (1961, from texts of St. Francis of Assisi), and *Mostly About Love* (1959), on poems of Kenneth Koch, perhaps one of the sweetest and most exuberant musical paeans to innocent affection ever penned.

What distinguishes these is an instinctive feel for clarity of expression, where every word is clearly heard and the shape of each line exactly follows the natural inflection and prosody of the text. Of course this wasn’t *all* instinctive. Thomson was one of the most literarily sophisticated composers of the century, and he eventually wrote a defining book on the subject of setting English, *Words and Music*. The upshot is that even those songs not at the pinnacle of Thomson’s game remain gems, giving pleasure from their wit, craft, and imaginative solution to every challenge.

It’s also worth noting the following opinion (I suspect a bit controversial with some of Thomson’s partisans): He quite simply got better with age. He himself admitted to starting composition a bit late (his mid-20s), due in part to lack of opportunities in Kansas City (where he had a practical musical education but not a creative one). As an intellectually precocious youngster, the “wrong” aesthetic of Surrealism and Dada gave him license to distort, and sometimes to cover up technical gaps. But by the 1950s he was firmly in command of his tools, and the elegance of piano accompaniments, the mastery of chromatic harmony that never sounds turgid, and the increasing economy of all elements shines through.

The Florestan Rectial Project, performing here, delivers all this material with style, precision, and obvious love. The only possible competition would seem to be a single disc that has many of the “greatest hits” of this one, on Northeastern 250, but it appears to be out of print (and it’s only one disc, though it does include the Stein cantata *Capital Capitals* for two tenors, baritone, and bass that’s not on the collection under review). The performers are all excellent, though I have to give special praise to alto Lynne McMurtry, whom I think has the most ideal match of color, articulation, and expression for this music. I will admit one thing, though, that made me think the following: All the songs on this recording are performed in a manner of which I am sure Thomson would have approved, with a seriousness of classical vocal delivery that plays in witty tension with the often surreal aspects of text. But we are getting now a whole new generation of singers, and in particular composer-vocalists (mostly women) who engage with text with a timbral purity (think little or no vibrato) and natural delivery that comes from a pop background. Shara Worden, Kate Soper, Lisa Bielawa and Gilda Lyons are all examples, beautiful voices and dead-on intonation. It’s not Broadway but also not *bel canto*. I would love to hear some of this literature taken by some of these singers (when they aren’t doing their own music), and I think it would be a natural fit, or at the very least an experiment worth taking.

But that’s not a criticism, just an observation. This is a great release, and probably will show up on the upcoming Want List.