

How to Kill a Dead Writer

by Richard Kostelanetz (September 2015)



Virgil Thomson

Some years ago I judged that no American composer ever wrote as well about serious/classic music, whether measuring sentences, paragraphs, reviews, or extended essays, as Virgil Thomson (1896-1989). From 1924 to just before his death, in addition to composing music that is, alas, less memorable than his best prose, Thomson produced reviews and, especially, essays that are worth rereading and thus reprinting decades after their initial appearance. Because he was for fourteen years a newspaper journalist, Thomson became a model for later newspaper reviewers—among them, John Rockwell, Tim Page, and Anthony Tommasini. Nonetheless, few major writers have been so badly served, especially posthumously.

Rockwell had his name appended to an anthology of Virgil Thomson writings (1981) that appeared when the composer was still alive. Apparently chosen by Thomson himself, it displays the first red flag of an under-edited selection—the essays appear in roughly chronological order, by date of initial publication. Chronology would make sense if the book were meant to represent intellectual history, which this isn't. In this case, it indicates that the book's editor simply didn't identify important subjects or themes common to their selections. Such books reflect less editing than thoughtless compiling; the two moves are finally not the same.

This same fault of rote compiling plagues *Thomson: Music Chronicles 1940-1954* that recently appeared from the now familiar brick-like hardback format trademarked by the nouveau august Library of America. Edited by Tim Page, once a staff reviewer for the *Washington Post* among other newspapers, *Music Chronicles* is less an anthology of the best Thomson's writing but a selection of just, you guessed it, his newspaper reviews, none more than 1,000 words in length, nearly all selected from his own books collecting them: *The Musical Scene* (1945), *Music Right and Left* (1951), *The Art of Judging Music* (1959), and *Music Reviews, 1940-1954* (1967).

By portraying Thomson as no more than a 1000-word mind, *Music Chronicles* diminishes Thomson, who also wrote brilliantly, indeed more substantially, at longer lengths. Secondly, because the reviews are printed in chronological order, the editor has shirked such opportunities as identifying the strongest or heightening Thomson's recurring preoccupations, such as, say, American composers in contrast to European or arts other than music. One lesson lost on the Lib of America producers is that Thomson, in his first self-collection, distributed his reviews under eight rubrics: Covering the Orchestras, Chiefly Conductors, Compositions and Composers, Opera, Recitalists, Sacred and Choral, etc.

Because *Music Chronicles* is so under-edited, I found myself unable to read at a single sitting more than twenty reviews in 996 pages of tiny type, coming to think that VT was a windbag but then realizing that any newspaper critic's short reviews reprinted in bulk, as here, would portray him or her as a repetitious blowhard. (Try to think of a better book wholly of newspaper reviews.)

Indeed, a more engaging Thomson text appears as an appendix beginning on page 1025 and continuing for 85 pages. These "Notes on Musicians" are short paragraphs, nearly all less than 100 words in length, about individual musicians, most of them barely remembered now, some worth recalling, especially if they don't yet have a Wikipedia entry:

Ephraim Kurtz (1900-1995) Russian-born conductor. Educated in St. Petersburg, he conducted orchestras in Berlin, Stuttgart, and Monte Carlo before immigrating to the US in 1942. He was music director of the Kansas City Philharmonic (1943-48) and the Houston Symphony (1948-54).

Since I'd met Kurtz on a few occasions, I can remember around 1992 asking the great musical lexicographer Nicolas Slonimsky about his existence, recalling that Slonimsky compiled "a stiff list" of biographical entries who had died recently. Slonimsky replied, "He's not yet a stiff." In fact, the two musicians from St. Pete died in the same year of 1995.

According to the headnote to this section, these entries come not from Thomson's newspaper reviews, which is the ostensible subject of this anthology, but from his book, *American Music Since 1910* (1971). However, this isn't true, not even superficially so, as anyone with both books in hand can check. That earlier Thomson book has only, in a section titled "106 American Composers," entries of

a few hundred words apiece and nothing about performers.

Furthermore, remarks about them in LoA's *Music Chronicles* do not correspond to those in the earlier 1910 book. For instance, about Milton Babbitt, the new LoFA anthology says: "American composer, mathematician, and music theorist. A student of Roger Sessions, he joined the university's music faculty in 1938 and taught there until 1984. He took a meticulously ordered approach to twelve-tone music and serialism and was one of the first to write concert pieces for synthesizers, tape loops, and other electronics." While certain facts may also appear in *Music Since 1910*, none of the phrasing duplicates.

Whoever wrote not only this about Babbitt but the shorter fresh entries on performing musicians, such as Kurtz among many others, gets no credit. If Thomson's ghost gave Kurtz, say, a death year well after Thomson's own, may I suggest that the Library of America alert newspapers about their monumental discovery? (Can we imagine some LoA flack claiming "channeling"?)

On fourth thought, all would agree that the evident failure to credit these entries' real author reflects sloppy publishing. As the LoA chiefs, purportedly prominent advisers and copyeditors, didn't do their homework here, *Music Chronicles* raises the question of how many other LoA bricks are, in spite of their austere packaging and highfalutin "protection," similarly deficient editorially. May I venture a safe bet on more than one?

Another problem with this book, likewise reflecting peculiar publishing, is that it lacks any introduction or even a preface. Instead, what might serve that purpose begins as "Note on the Texts" on page 1019 (that's correct, well after page 1000). These thousand words outline succinctly Thomson's career at the *New York Herald-Tribune*, identifying his backers and his helpers that made his tenure there possible. As no writer is credited with this appendix, can we assume these were written by Page, even though TP is acknowledged by name in the third person toward the end of this text! Scholarly odd this Library of America is.

What's missing from this purported homage are Thomson's greater longer essays, such as, among others, "The New Grove... (1981), "Carl Ruggles" (1971), "The Genius Type [Pierre Boulez] (1968)," and "Why Composers Write How" (1939; revised, 1962), a monumental classic that I've anthologized more than once. As

far as I can tell, though these longer essays are more readable and valuable now, they aren't even mentioned in *Music Chronicles*. Nor is an anthology in which all these appear: *Virgil Thomson A Reader: Selected Writings 1924-1984* (Routledge, 2003), which was edited by me. For instance, my selection also reprints in sequence four essays on Aaron Copland (1932, 1949, 1957, 1971), with whom Thomson had a deeply charged changing collegial relationship lasting over decades, as my sequencing reflects an editing made possible in an anthology drawn from various sources. My *Selected Writings 1924-1984* reprints as well the concluding paragraph of the 1971 Babbitt entry that scarcely resembles what is credited to Thomson (or his spook) in the new book.

In sum, while pretending to honor Thomson as a writer, this book *Music Chronicles* diminishes. Since he had no heirs, may I imagine that his estate, represented by The V.T. Foundation, ought to be pissed. One question raised by this weak book is whether Thomson's literary reputation will be strong enough to survive after admirers' repeated attempts to kill it.

II

Given my theme of killing a dead writer, this is an appropriate place to reprint the latest version "Tomm's Thom" (1999), my much revised review of the last Thomson biography. This book is a true killer, even though it received some accolades and even the sort of award that must have "a story" accounting for its winner:

Virgil Thomson became one of the most prominent American composers of his generation less through his music than through his writings and his talking. While the principal music reviewer at the daily *New York Herald Tribune* from 1940 to 1954, he was ranked by common consent the best of this journalistic kind. Thomson also published, along with other books, a classic essay on the sociology of musical composition, *The State of Music* (1938), whose remarkably acute perceptions have never been surpassed; recently a colleague and I gladly reprinted the chapter entitled "Why Composers Write How" in our anthology of *Classic Essays on 20th Century Music* (Schirmer, 1996).

Anthony Tommasini was in many ways an ideal choice to write the first Thomson biography, *Composer on the Aisle* (Norton). While teaching at

Emerson College in the late 1970s and then contributing to the *Boston Globe*, he befriended Thomson, even becoming the subject of a Thomson musical portrait—a short composition that the older composer customarily wrote for (or bestowed upon) favorite people. As an openly gay man, Tommasini is also predisposed to discuss the homosexuality of Thomson and many of his closest colleagues, which was one subject not acknowledged in Thomson's otherwise courageous writings. Indeed, it is hard for us sophisticates in the 1990s to believe that the composer successfully kept word of his homosexuality out of print, though not out of gossip, for nearly his entire lifetime.

Tommasini traces this fear of "coming out" not only to general attitudes of pre-Stonewall America but to a specific incident that had been generally forgotten. Back in 1942, just after Thomson had assumed his position at the *Tribune*, he was arrested in a police raid on a Brooklyn gay bordello. Among the regular patrons absent at the time of the bust was a U.S. Senator from Massachusetts named Daniel Ignatius Walsh, perhaps because, Tommasini surmises, the senator had been tipped off in advance by the FBI whose long-time director had comparable anxieties. Since journalists elsewhere were more interested in the prominent politician (who publicly denied visiting Brooklyn), Thomson's name didn't appear in the New York papers. Once Senator Walsh's alibi was accepted, the subject of the bordello raid disappeared from the press, and Thomson kept his newspaper job. So completely was this story suppressed that the composer/writer Eric Salzman, who worked in the music department at the *Tribune* two decades later, recently told me that he hadn't heard it before.

For reasons mysterious to me, Tommasini minimizes the richest professional passion of Thomson's life—his love-hate relationship with his fellow composer Aaron Copland (1900-90). Both had studied with Nadia Boulanger, the Parisian pedagogue who over four decades taught a pantheon of American composers. The two men were essentially tonal composers, who didn't initially accept the serial revolution initiated by Arnold Schoenberg; they were both closeted homosexuals (though apparently not competitive in love). If Copland was Brooklyn Jewish, Thomson, however, was a midwesterner with mild anti-Semitic prejudices. Thomson graduated from Harvard, while Copland didn't go to college. Copland wrote music commonly considered masterpieces

along with books that were dismissed as evasive popularizations. Less successful as a composer, Thomson wrote essays and books commonly considered masterly. I remember seeing the two men on a stage together, at the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1966, when one presented the other with an award; and even out in the audience, fresh to this world, I could feel sparks flying between them.

Publicly they supported each other, perhaps because they knew what had to be done to keep alive their shared ambitions for serious musical composition in America; but, privately, each deprecated the other. Tommasini reports only one side—curiously, the other side: “To his intimate friends Copland would confide that he never really felt personally comfortable with Virgil, what with his airs, his cigarette holder, and his effeminate mannerisms. Thomson was too flamboyant for the self-contained, scrupulously closeted Copland.” However, Thomson published four essays wholly about Copland over four decades—the first in 1926, the last in 1969; and to read them in sequence is to get a sense of the complex feelings they must have had toward each other. Perhaps because of Thomson’s predisposition to putting prose into print, this biography appears before any comparable book devoted to Copland, though it will surely come, perhaps with a fuller accounting of their legendarily heightened relationship.

Though this biography is fat and heavy in the current mode, what is also lacking—surprisingly, since Tommasini is a professional writer as well as a musician—is an appreciation and analysis of Thomson’s prose. In my own judgment, aside from whether one accepts particular Thomson critical opinions (and I often don’t), no one in America before or since wrote so well about music—sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, essay by essay. How did Thomson develop such strong prose, who were his literary models, what were his characteristic stylistic strategies, where were his words strongest and where weak, did his writing style change over the decades? These are the questions that warrant detailed critical explanations. The only hint about a source for Thomson’s style comes in Tommasini’s discussion of the composer’s reading of Oscar Wilde. In one of those strokes that marks more distinguished research, the biographer notes which passages Thomson marked in his reading of Wilde’s *De Profundis*. However, Tommasini uses Thomson’s copy of Wilde less to reveal his literary

intelligence than to document his preoccupation with his homosexuality! Another apparent major influence on Thomson's prose, the British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, isn't mentioned at all.

What is also missing from Tomm's biography are those monumental wisecracks for which Thomson was notorious in his time—classic remarks that nowadays appear not in his own writings but in books by or about his friends. At the beginning of *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (1993), a popular and promiscuous homosexual, the biographer Brad Gooch writes: "There had indeed been much discussion over who was to speak at the grave. According to the composer Virgil Thomson, 'After his death a dozen of his lovers turned up looking for the glory of being the chief widow.'" Ned Rorem recalls another example in *Other Entertainments* (1996). Thomson in his late eighties emerged from a hospital operation asking the doctor, "Will I live?" Assured that he would survive, he replied, "In that case I'll need my glasses." If only because he befriended his biographical subject, Tommasini could have done better as James Boswell did for Samuel Johnson—at least memorialize his classic conversation. Whereas Tommasini claims that homosex common to them both gives him a certain authority, it seems not to have occurred to him that a sense of humor would help as well.

Though now a staff music critic at the *New York Times*, Tommasini has some recurring troubles with New York City geography. On page 224 he has Harlem beginning "just past [north] at 110th Street" in the 1920s. If only because my middle-class Caucasian parents met around 118th Street and Manhattan Avenue late in that decade, I know that fact is wrong. All of Tommasini's examples of African-American night clubs two paragraphs later were north of 125th Street, which was in fact the southern boundary of Harlem at the time. Similarly, Tommasini describes the bordello on 329 Pacific Street as being "within walking distance of the Brooklyn Navy Yard" and its sailors, while a map of Brooklyn would have told him the places were well over a mile apart. Odder still is the use of only lower-case letters for the name of E. E. Cummings, whose *Complete Poems* (1991), with his name spelled correctly (as I've done), comes from another division of his publisher!

Tomm's Thom opens not with details about its subject's early life but with an example from his 90th year of Thomson's unnecessary cruelty toward the black woman who had been the star fifty years before of Thomson's single

most famous composition, the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934). As Tommasini tells it, Thomson's principal secretary had considerately invited the woman, then in her 80s and residing in a nursing home, to attend the opening of a semi-professional revival of the work. Hearing about this kindness, Thomson hysterically insisted that the woman be disinvited, because she might steal attention otherwise destined for him. Beginning so critically the initial biography of someone so revered was unusual and courageous, to be sure, and I wondered if Tommasini would continue in this way. However, perhaps because Tommasini had not published a biography before, his tone turns mostly sympathetic until the book's end.

What appears in this nasty incident and throughout the book is another, related quality of Thomson's character—his need to control, if not bully, those around him. As Tommasini has it, this trait was formed while young, even before Thomson got to Harvard. It influenced, among other decisions, his choice of collaborators, his taste in lovers, and his acceptance of the *Tribune* position, which became a bully's pulpit. I can recall the composer Milton Babbitt in conversation with me disparaging Thomson as, simply, "a shit."

Indeed, one theme implicit in the book is that a certain kind of artistic personality seeks the power offered by a prominent position, not only to publicize his or her work but to assuage other emotional needs. What seems apparent to me, though not to Tommasini, was that Thomson's work declined, not only as a composer but as a writer, once he left the *Tribune* in 1954. Though he lived thirty-five more years, everything he did afterwards as both a composer and a writer lacked something that his work had before.

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Soon after an earlier version of this review appeared in the *Boston Globe* Tommasini complained to its publisher about the selection of me as a reviewer, characterizing me as the victim of a conspiracy I'd not known about before, in which he may have participated. (I told my editor there to forget about it.) He also wrote a quarrelsome letter to the editor of *The New York Times Book Review* protesting Nicholas Fox Weber's review there. (Can I be alone in thinking it unseemly for a fulltime reviewer to be so picky, if not vindictive, in protesting reviews of himself?) Only much later did I discover that Tommasini

had, in addition to harassing my editor, contributed to the *Globe's* pages a letter to the editor that has two themes—discrediting me and aggrandizing himself. It is an outrageous document that must be quoted at length to be believed.

First of all, I can scarcely be alone in wondering why the *Globe* didn't submit it to me for an accompanying reply, which is standard procedure, or even sent me a copy after it appeared, I assume because Tommasini must have twisted some administrative arms above the *Globe's* book-review editor (who never gave another assignment either to me or to the previous contributor kindly recommending me).

Consider first Tomm's dismissal of me: "Richard Kostelanetz has what could be considered a conflict of interest regarding my work; he is editing for publication a selection of Thomson's writings with his own commentary." However, since Tomm wrote a biography, an anthology of Thomson criticism is scarcely a competitive book, Tomm's own convoluted phrasing indicating that he knows as well as everyone else that his charge is tenuous. (Here as elsewhere, linguistic deception often reveals fakery.) Furthermore, consider that anyone unable to perceive the difference between those kinds of books, between a biography and an anthology, lacks the literacy necessary to be a librarian, not to mention a professional critic.

Recalling what he considers "the dismissive tone of his [my] review," which seems more paranoid invention than fact, Tomm is apparently mistaking standard professional objectivity for contempt, he then quotes three extended favorable phrases (aka blurbs) from reviews elsewhere. (Since Tomm cites only phrases, you wonder if some of these reviews might have been more negative than the excerpts suggests. After all, even in my own notice are favorable phrases, such as the reference to him as the "ideal choice to write the first Virgil Thomson biography" or to "strokes that mark distinguished research.") Were his letter written later, he would have no doubt boasted of receiving a Deems Taylor award from ASCAP for his book.

Nonetheless, in the next paragraph of his letter to the editor, Tomm summarizes remarks he said I made in my contribution to a day-long Virgil Thomson celebration at the New School for Social Research in late 1996. Since I still have the prepared text of what I said in praise of Thomson the writer, to an audience so small it didn't prompt extemporizing, I know that Tom's purported

summary is a fabrication. Since he cites me saying that my Thomson anthology will be better than a predecessor, my hunch is that he is, instead, recycling remarks I made privately to someone else, Lord knows who. Working at second hand, if not third, rather than checking directly with me, Tomm the newspaperman is an unreliable reporter, to put it gently.

Riding a self-inflated balloon, Tomm then finds my summary of his credentials as "an ideal choice" to be insufficient, adding less for my benefit than for everyone else's:

That I took 10 years to research and write the book; had full access to the man and his papers; did original archival work; interviewed over 60 people; as a pianist, recorded two CDs of his music (not to mention 11 years honing my nose for news and journalistic writing skills) is not mentioned by Kostelanetz.

What's omitted from this recital, inexplicably and perhaps curiously, is an earlier scholarly book written by Tomm solely on Thom's musical portraits. A further sin attributed to me, apparently disrespectful of Tomm's need for detailed aggrandizing, is "never identifying me as a music critic for *The New York Times*." However, I did, as can be observed above, but that paragraph was cut by the *Globe's* editor and Tommasini apparently didn't do any research into what happened to my text in the office of the paper where he once worked. And the *Globe* factotum apparently didn't tell Tomm or edit his letter to acknowledge that fact. Tomm's research skills are no more developed than his reportorial.

One difference between my original manuscript and the *Globe* text is a severe concluding sentence, since dropped, that was written, in truth, in response to editorial prompting. (I generally resist such requests; but since this was my first review for the *Globe*, while I wanted to respect the colleague recommending me, I went along.) My sense at that time was that the editor didn't much like Tomm, whom he may have known during his days at the *Globe*, whom, incidentally, I've not consciously met, though I too have come to dislike Tomm the more I've known (or not known) him.

Even so, how the *Times* affiliation or the writing of reviews bestows any aura on a whopping biography misses me, though Tomm's boast prompts me to recall a remark made directly to me by the art critic Hilton Kramer, when he was employed

there, that no one ever wrote a good book while working at the *New York Times*. Having followed Tom's complaint so far, you sense that he evidently wanted from the *Globe* (and perhaps elsewhere) not a reviewer but a flack and that, distastefully, he is exploiting me as a platform for his self-publicity. Would he accept my invoice for services implicitly rendered?

What apparently irks Tomm most, even more than "what could be considered a conflict of interest," is that I fault his biography for lacking, to quote him quoting me, "appreciation and analysis of Thomson's prose." Tomm's rejoinder on this particular issue is so appallingly insufficient it must, forgive me, be quoted in its entirety to be believed:

In fact, my discussion of Thomson's evolution as a writer and critic begins with the letters of his great-grandfather which, I point out, have the same plain-spoken style that his own conversation and writing always had. I also discuss his grade school teacher English teacher[sic], Miss Fox, who taught him rhetoric (the book she used, Crabb's *English Synonymes*, Thomson kept in his library and eventually passed onto me [more self-aggrandizement!]); the authors he devoured at Harvard, including Stein, Nietzsche, and Wilde; the important guidance of Minna Lederman, editor of *Modern Music*, during his early days as a critic; the demanding tutelage of Geoffrey Parsons, his editor at *The New York Herald Tribune* who was determined to teach this fully-formed brilliant, but brash, critic the 'art of gentlemanly discourse.'

The truth apparent to the critical reader is that nothing in this litany of names and facts approaches critical insight into Thom's prose, let alone his humor, though blustering Tomm appears to think otherwise. Knowing only what he tells, you could conclude that Tommasini as a daily journalist with degrees in musicology has no idea, not a clue, of what might constitute genuine literary criticism. Reconsidering my review along with his reply, a reader could also wonder why humorless Tomm didn't deal with my caveat about the absence of Virgil Thom's "monumental wisecracks." May I suggest that a future Thomson biographer, if there is one, might claim for himself a sense of humor as a more important qualification than, say, newspaper reviewing or homosexuality.

Not yet done with self-advertising, Tommasini can't resist another opportunity to remind readers of his own importance: "Toward the end of my book I even

report on Thomson's demanding tutelage of me, which began when I started writing for the *Globe*. His red-penciling of my early reviews revealed much about how he thought as a writer. Few people have had such an inside look as his writerly processes and this has been mentioned by many reviewers, among them poet Richard Howard in the *Los Angeles Times* [with, you guessed it, another blurb]." How the receipt of a red-penciled manuscript, even from a celebrated author, can provide much insight into his copyeditor's own writing is an uncommon conceit available only to certain privileged mentalities. (I'd never seen anyone claim it before, at least in print.) Consider that comparable annotations from a successful composer on an aspiring student's score would not much of a young musician make. In his chronic self-inflation while oblivious to humor, Tomm reminds me of Vladimir Nabokov's Kinbote, a classic portrayal in his greatest novel *Pale Fire* (1962). Reading each can be inadvertently funny.

Institutions with reputations to protect usually have policemen to curb such displays of self-promotion on their premises. You rightly wonder how Tomm's inflations slipped through the venerable *Boston Globe* or what Tomm is doing nowadays in the music department at *The New York Times*? Some might sense that among Tomm's motives here are embarrassing his former employer along with his current one, all under the guise of free advertising in their pages.

Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz's work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.com, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked. His many books are [here](#).

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