

Virgil Thomson

A Gallery of
Portraits for
Piano and Other
Piano Works

Craig Rutenberg, piano



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Disc 1

1	Madame Dubost chez elle	0:58
2	Russell Hitchcock, Reading	1:04
3	A Portrait of R. Kirk Askew, Jr.	2:01
4	Sea Coast: A Portrait of Constance Askew	1:10
5	Souvenir: A Portrait of Paul Bowles	1:01
6	Meditation: A Portrait of Jere Abbott	2:30
7	Helen Austin at Home and Abroad	2:11
8	Connecticut Waltz: Harold Lewis Cook	1:41
9	A Day Dream: A Portrait of Herbert Whiting (orig. version)	1:13
10	A Day Dream: A Portrait of Herbert Whiting (printed version)	1:14
11	Prelude and Fugue: A Portrait of Miss Agnes Rindge	2:11
12	Travelling in Spain: Alice Woodfin Branlière	2:07
13	Catalan Waltz: A Portrait of Ramon Senabre	1:43

14	Clair Leonard's Profile	1:14
15	Pastorale: A Portrait of Tristan Tzara	4:05

Selections from "Filling Station" -

16	I. Introduction	1:03
17	II. Mac's Dance (Pas Seul)	3:24
18	III. Scene (Mac and Motorist)	1:24
19	IV. Acrobatics (Mac and Truck-drivers)	1:56
20	V. Scene (State-Trooper & Truck-drivers)	1:13
21	A French Boy of Ten: Louis Lange	1:10
22	Maurice Bavoux: Young and Alone	1:51
23	Florine Stettheimer: Parades	2:33
24	Ettie Stettheimer	1:10
25	An Old Song: A Portrait of Carrie Stettheimer	1:55
26	Homage to Marya Freund and to the Harp	1:40
27	Duet: Clarita, Comtesse de Forceville	2:49
28	Peter Monro Jack: Scottish Memories	2:28
29	Toccata: A Portrait of Mary Widney	2:03
30	Fanfare for France: A Portrait of Max Kahn	2:41
31	Aria: A Portrait of Germaine Hugnet	2:49
32	With Trumpet and Horn: A Portrait of Louise Ardant	2:48

33	Cantabile: A Portrait of Nicolas de Chatelain	3:59
34	Awake or Asleep: Pierre Mabilille	1:44
35	Dora Maar, or The Presence of Pablo Picasso	2:40
36	Bugles and Birds: A Portrait of Pablo Picasso	3:13
37	Tango Lullaby: A Portrait of Mlle. (Flavie) Alvarez de Toledo	2:17

Total disc: 75:33

Disc 2

1	Solitude: A Portrait of Lou Harrison	1:42
2	Persistently Pastorale: Aaron Copland	3:54
3	With Fife and Drums: A Portrait of Mina Curtiss	2:41
Suite from "The Plow that Broke the Plains"		
4	I. Prelude	1:35
5	II. Cowboy Songs	2:11
6	III. Blues	3:02
7	IV. Finale	5:21
8	Insistences: A Portrait of Louise Crane	2:23

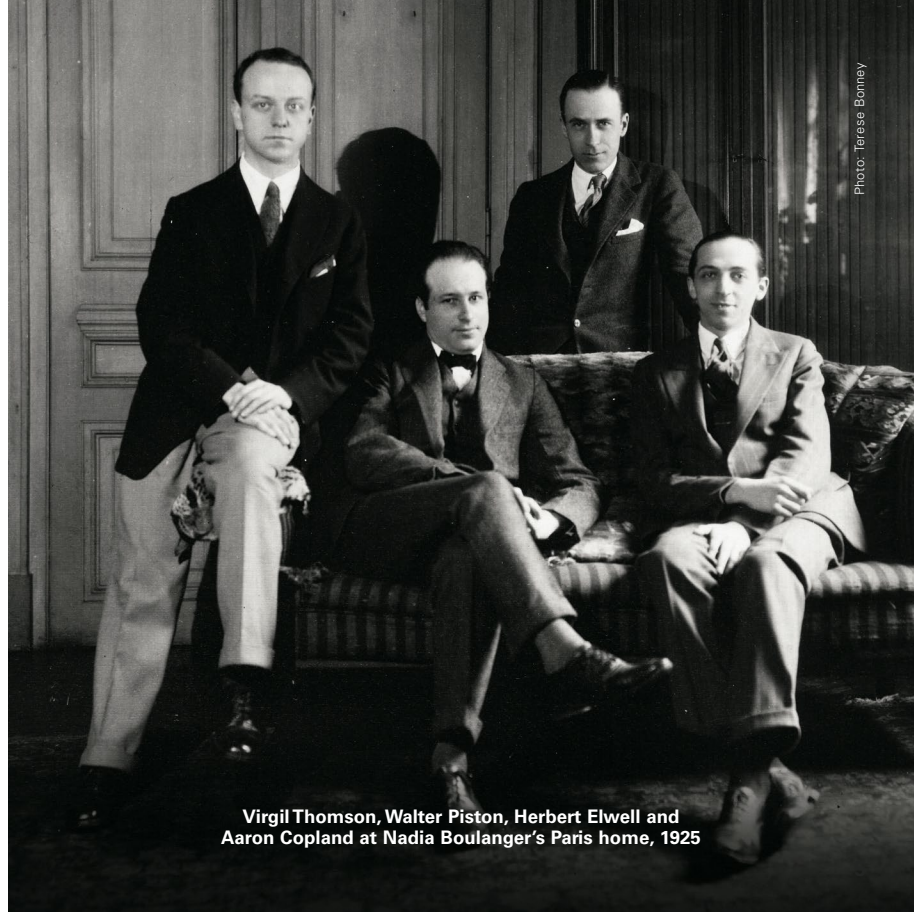
9	Jamie Campbell: Stretching	2:52
10	Prisoner of the Mind: Schuyler Watts	2:47
11	Five-Finger Exercise: Portrait of Briggs Buchanan	3:06
12	Morris Golde: Showing Delight	0:40
13	Wiley Hitchcock: Two Birds	1:46
14	Phillip Ramey: Thinking Hard	0:54
15	Bennett Lerner: Senza Espressione	1:24
16	Power Boothe: With Pencil	1:38
17	Franco Aspetto: Drawing Virgil Thomson	0:47
18	Dead Pan: Mrs. Betty Freeman	1:37
19	Glynn Boyd Harte: Reading	1:21
20	Richard Flender: Solid, Not Stolid	1:20
21	Norma Flender: Thoughts about Waltzing	0:57
22	John Houseman: No Changes	1:47
23	Rodney Lister: Music for a Merry-Go-Round	0:56
24	Dr. Marcel Roche: Making a Decision	1:23
25	Doña Flor: Receiving	1:07
26	Vassilis Voglis: On the March	1:26
27	Malitte Matta: In the Executive Style	1:22
28	Bill Katz: Wide Awake	1:18

- 29 **Man of Iron:** A Portrait of Willy Eisenhart 1:53
- 30 **Barbara Epstein:** Untiring 0:44
- 31 **Louis Rispoli:** In a Boat 1:27
- 32 **Buffie Johnson:** Drawing Virgil Thomson in Charcoal 1:18
- 33 **Christopher Beach Alone** 1:26
- 34 **David Dubal:** In Flight 1:17
- 35 **Dennis Russell Davies:** In a Hammock 1:16
- 36 **Christopher Cox:** Singing a Song 1:09
- 37 **Mark Beard:** Never Alone 1:18
- 38 **Charles Fussell:** In Meditation 1:53
- 39 **Anne-Marie Soullière:** **Something of a Beauty** 0:48
- 40 **Scott Wheeler:** Free-Wheeling 1:12
- 41 **Karen Brown Waltuck:** Intensely Two 1:20
- 42 **Craig Rutenberg:** Swinging **Two Sentimental Tangos** 1:22
- 43 I. Slow and Smooth 1:47
- 44 II. Not Fast 3:27

Total disc: 77:18

This broad selection of Virgil Thomson's portraits for piano, with a few extra smaller arrangements (made by Mr. Thomson) is presented by the Virgil Thomson Foundation as one of its major efforts to preserve Thomson's large and diverse legacy. Craig Rutenberg's performances could not be more authentic. Craig was one of Thomson's oldest friends—for many decades—and an experienced performer of his keyboard works. Thomson himself referred to a few earlier examples of musical portraiture, but his over 150 portraits, not only for piano but also for chamber ensembles and orchestra, do seem to set some sort of record for this musical enterprise. And Rodney Lister's excellent essay relates the history of Thomson's achievements in this genre.

Charles Fussell
President,
Virgil Thomson Foundation



Virgil Thomson, Walter Piston, Herbert Elwell and Aaron Copland at Nadia Boulanger's Paris home, 1925

Notes

In the beginning of September of 1928, **Virgil Thomson** returned to his (second) hometown, Paris, from a summer of travel and work. As he wrote in his autobiography, “When I returned to Paris around the first of September after a two-month absence, I had been in the Basque lands, in Spain, in Brittany, in Normandy; and I had brought home a completed opera [*Four Saints in Three Acts*], a symphony finally finished and mostly orchestrated, and two essays in what was for me a new genre, that of the portrait in music.”¹ This marked the beginning of his life-long preoccupation with the genre. Through music history there have been a number of composers, including Couperin, Schumann, Rubenstein, and Elgar most noticeably, who wrote works that they represented as being portraits of friends and acquaintances, but Thomson’s intention was more serious and possibly more radical: to depict in notes the interior state of his subjects, “drawn” from life. His model for this project was not a composer but his friend and collaborator Gertrude Stein.

Stein had been writing portraits in words for a long while before the two of them met. She was concerned not with *describing* the subject or his or her surroundings, but in presenting the subject’s interior qualities. (“I wrote portraits knowing that each one is themselves inside them and something about them perhaps everything about them will tell some one all about that thing all about what is themselves inside them.”²) Thomson wrote that “She herself, considering the painter Cézanne her chief master, believed that under his silent tutelage a major message had jumped like an electric arc from painting to poetry. And she also suspected that its high tension was in process of short-circuiting again, from her through me, this time to music.”³ Just as texts of Stein’s provided Thomson with the basic material which enabled him to realize his theories about setting words to music, her portraits suggested to him methods of structure and procedure, as well as of compositional technique, which he could employ in music. (Incidentally, the first text of Stein’s that Thomson set was a portrait: *Susie Asado*.) A further realization of his own made it possible for him to follow Stein’s lead.

“...an enlightenment had come to me that made portrait writing possible. This was the very simple discovery that the classic masters, in terms of logic and syntax, did not always quite make sense. My sudden awareness of their liberties in this regard so firmly forced me to take up my own freedom that never again was I to feel that I must necessarily ‘know what I was doing.’ This meant that I could write almost automatically, cultivate the discipline of spontaneity, let it flow.

“Now the value of spontaneous work is often zero, especially when it merely follows reflexes, as in pianoforte improvisation. But spontaneity can be original also, if it wells up from a state of self-containment. And it was through practicing my spontaneities, at first in a primitive way, and through questioning Gertrude Stein about this method of work, which was her own, that I grew expert at tapping my resources. Making portraits of people was just beginning to serve me, as it had long served Gertrude, as an exercise not only in objectivity but also in avoiding the premeditated.”⁴

In an interview with Anthony Tommasini, Thomson said, “The practice of portraiture has two advantages for me. One of them is that it is an exercise in what I call the discipline of spontaneity, which is a very tough discipline. You know, let your mind alone, that’s the whole problem. Of course being bound up in the university circumstance it becomes impossible. Once you get through all this damned business you’ve got to get rid of it. But the other advantage is that the spontaneity serves as an exercise in characterization, which you are always needing in the opera.”⁵ In an article in *Antaeus* called “Of Portraits and Opera,” Thomson explained his ideas about musical resemblance: “As to what a likeness is in music, resemblance there, like characterization in opera writing, can come from diverse directions. Music can imitate a gesture or typical way of moving, render a complexity or simplicity of feeling, evoke a style of period, recall the sound of a voice, or of birds or trumpets or hunting horns or marching armies.”⁶

Thomson’s first six portraits were for unaccompanied violin and were “drawn

from memory.” “Then I did Sauguet from Life,” he wrote, “after which I never again made a musical portrait...except in the subject’s presence.”⁷ In an interview with Anthony Tommasini on January 25, 1982, Thomson explained particulars of his procedure: “...a painter’s portrait is best made with a distance [between the painter and the sitter] of six to ten feet. The musical portrait I find to be the most comfortable about four to six. Too close, you’re mixing. But at four you’re separate persons. From four to six you are close enough to communicate. ...you can’t talk while you’re writing music. Painters talk all the time with their sitters. They keep the sitter amused, keep them from going to sleep. Now, I don’t mind if they go to sleep because the eye is not involved. I look a little bit to start with, but as soon as the music starts coming I practically don’t look at them any more. I look at my paper.”⁸ Thomson confided to Tommasini that there were, on occasion, problems: “If you have no contact you can’t do the portrait. And if the sitter doesn’t give, you can’t receive. But that happened to me several times...There’s a frame of presentation there so old and so ingrained that they can’t get through it, even if they tried.”⁹ Craig Rutenberg

recalled that “VT refused to write my portrait for ten years. He kept telling me that he would some day but that I had much protective emotional armor around me to get anywhere. I guess I dropped that armor someplace along the line and I am so glad that I did.”¹⁰

In a later interview, Thomson spoke more about his process: “Any music has to have continuity. If your continuity is a thematic or harmonic structure in an eighteenth-century vein, then you can do anything you want to on top of it. But if it’s the modern non-repetitive system, you have to make a kind of occult continuity by psychological means. That’s why when I’m doing these in front of somebody, every time I come to a breath in a phrase I read back from the beginning and attach the next one on to that so the whole thing will have a kind of curve. But that is almost never thematic. Sometimes it’s a kind of motivic unity and sometimes it’s a jerky continuity. It isn’t put together statically. It’s more like film cutting, except that it is not done with already existing material. But in film cutting no two shots are alike. You make one follow the other to tell the story or give the situation.

“There are other technical things involved [in film editing], such as when the light goes out of any character’s eyes, you end that section. If I’m writing and I come to the end of a phrase, or a period, or something that has said what it has to say, but the piece isn’t finished, I do the thing that I think of next and attach it right on. But I read back from the beginning to see if it does attach.”¹¹

In his autobiography, Thomson wrote about explaining his process to Pablo Picasso: “The idea of musical portraits was new to him; how did I do them? I answered that I drew them just as he would; I took paper, looked at my sitter, then let my pencil move—not doodling, of course, but writing down as fast as possible what came to me. ‘Ah yes,’ he said, ‘I understand. If you are in a room while I am working, whatever I do is automatically your portrait.’” He further added, “The portrait I made of the man Picasso, called *Bugles and Birds*, was not at all a portrait of his work, though some suppose that to have been my aim. I do not try evoking visual art; in all my portraits only the sitter’s presence is portrayed, not his appearance or his profession. Picasso’s presence is also

in my portrait of Dora Maar. When she came to pose, he came along, curious, as he said, to see my flat and to watch me at work again. I suspected a bit of Spanish punctilio, as if he felt it not quite right for her to come to my place unaccompanied. But I was honored, of course, and said so. And just as might have been predicted, he came into the portrait; he could not not do so, being in the room. I did not identify the intruder then, but only later came to realize that an assertive bass which makes its entry half way through the piece could only be Picasso, for Dora Maar herself was not like that.”¹²

On this recording, 69 portraits are joined by the suite from the celebrated music for the film *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, selections from the score of the ballet *Filling Station*, and the *Two Sentimental Tangos*, the more traditional “premeditated” quality of which offers contrast to the more spontaneous procedures and continuity of the portraits. Two versions of the portrait of Herbert Whiting are included on Disc 1 of this recording: the first version, as it appears in the unpublished manuscript written in Mr. Whiting’s presence (track

9), and the published version (track 10). Mr. Rutenberg has explained that often Thomson would compose a portrait with the subject present and then come back to it later to make a few minor changes. In contrast, the Whiting portrait was a case in which the edits were more extensive and Mr. Rutenberg, finding the differences between the original and final versions fascinating, chose to include both in this album. (Editor's note: it should be noted that Mr. Rutenberg recorded Two Sentimental Tangos using Thomson's manuscript instead of the score that was published in the 1980's, which was out of print and unavailable.)

Thomson's portraits divide chronologically into three groups. From 1928 to 1945 portraits of his friends and associates in Paris and, after his leaving France at the beginning of the Second World War, in New York, were written occasionally but with a certain regularity (81). Between 1951 and 1972 there are very few portraits, in two pockets, from 1951 to 1958 (4, but including his most extensive portrait, the Flute Concerto of 1954) and from 1966 to 1975 (7), respectively. Starting in 1981 portraits came in a veritable torrent (approximately

67) until the end of his life, representing the majority of his compositional output during those years, and even more than the first group, a depiction of Thomson's circle of friends and associates, and, to a certain extent, a documentation of his daily life at this time. As Craig Rutenberg wrote to this writer, "And then all of us who came out in the volume published in '82 or '83 seem to make up a collection of VT's extended domestic arrangements, since we all cooked, cleaned, shopped and talked daily with him in those last years."¹³ The first 140 portraits, those written up until 1985, are cataloged in great detail by Anthony Tommasini, Thomson's official biographer, in his excellent and very engaging book, *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits*, which originated as his doctoral dissertation. Tommasini thinks that by the end of his life Thomson had written at least 160. ("The final tally was around 160, though it's hard to pin down since some were left in sketch form."¹⁴)

On encountering Thomson's portraits one is struck by those that certainly bear witness to the strong personality of certain of the subjects: the Stettheimer sisters, for instance, or Picasso or Mlle.

Alvarez de Toledo, or Marya Freund, or Morris Golde, or Richard Flender, or conversely, the ingenuousness of the nineteen-year-old Maurice Bavoux. Other portraits, most noticeably those of Louis Rispoli, Thomson's long time secretary, Karen Brown Waltuck, the restaurateur and owner of Chanterelle, one of Thomson's favorite restaurants, Helen Austin, and Germaine Hugnet, demonstrate the great affection that Thomson had for their subjects. The wide range of his acquaintances and the happy world that they go together to make are matched by the cheerful profusion of language, procedures, moods, concerns, and forms of the pieces themselves. Some are very straightforward in music language, others wildly complex harmonically and very curiously put together. Some are very 'learned' (canons and fugues and such), and others highly episodic. Thomson saw the fact that the portraits "come out so differently from one another" to be circumstantial proof of the validity of his methods. In their range and variety they are certainly his most personal, and as a group, his most lovable works.

Rodney Lister

*Composer and pianist Rodney Lister studied composition with Virgil Thomson and was, before and after that, a friend and admirer. He is on the faculties of The Boston University School of Music, the Preparatory School of The New England Conservatory, and Greenwood Music Camp, and has written articles and reviews for Tempo and Sequenza*²¹.

Bibliography

- ¹ Thomson, Virgil, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1966), p. 123.
- ² Stein, Gertrude, *Lectures in America* (New York, Random House, Inc., 1935), p. 172.
- ³ Thomson, p. 176.
- ⁴ Thomson, p. 123.
- ⁵ Thomson, interview with Tommasini, January 25, 1982, New York. Quoted in Tommasini, Anthony, *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits* (New York, Pendragon Press, 1986), p. 15.
- ⁶ Thomson, Virgil, "Of Portraits and Operas," *Antaeus* 21/22 (Spring/Summer, 1976), 208-210.
- ⁷ Thomson, p. 123.
- ⁸ Tommasini, p. 18.
- ⁹ Tommasini, p. 18.
- ¹⁰ email to this writer, March 30, 2017.
- ¹¹ Thomson interview March 16, 1982, quoted in Tommasini, p. 30.
- ¹² Thomson, p. 310.
- ¹³ email to this writer, February 5, 2017.
- ¹⁴ email to this writer, January 17, 2017.

Craig Rutenberg

Pianist and Vocal Coach Craig Rutenberg was born in New Haven, Connecticut. After studies in German, Italian and Linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, he attended the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana for studies in accompanying with John Westman and opera preparation with David Lloyd. Further studies took place in Paris with Pierre Bernac and Miriam Solovieff and in London with Martin Isepp and Geoffrey Parsons.

Head of Music at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City (1990–1992 and 2006–2015), Craig Rutenberg has also worked at the Opéra-Comique in Paris, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, IRCAM, the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, the San Francisco Opera and the Houston Grand Opera. He has also given classes at the training programs at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne (Jerwood Artists), the Paris Opera at the Bastille, the Chicago Lyric Opera, the Santa Fe Opera and the Royal Operas of Stockholm and Gothenburg.

Craig Rutenberg has also taught on the faculties of Yale University, the Eastman School of Music, Boston University and the Manhattan School of Music. In recent seasons, he's coached and given classes at the Atkins Program at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, the University of Kansas in Lawrence and the Palm Beach Opera.

Craig Rutenberg has appeared in recital, recorded and performed on television and radio with Diana Damrau, Christine Brewer, Dawn Upshaw, Harolyn Blackwell, Susanne Mentzer, Frederica von Stade, Dolora Zajick, Jerry Hadley, Ben Heppner, Thomas Hampson, Simon Keenlyside, René Pape, Willard White and Maria Guleghina.

In addition to this recording, Craig Rutenberg's association with Thomson includes translations, done in tandem with the composer, of the Gertrude Stein text of *Four Saints in Three Acts*.



Credits

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Virgil Thomson, Walter Piston, Herbert Elwell and Aaron Copland at Nadia Boulanger's Paris home, 1925 by Terese Bonney © The Regents of the University of California, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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Craig Rutenberg: portrait by Jonathan Tichler

