

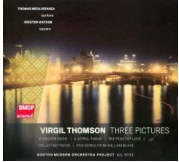
## Virgil Thomson - Three Pictures (2010)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 25 July 2019 13:08 -

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1 *A Solemn Music* 6:47 2 *A Joyful Fugue* 4:54 3 *The Feast Of Love* 7:43 4 *Collected Poems* 4:55  
Five Songs From William Blake (14:35) 5 *The Divine Image* 2:25 6 *Tiger! Tiger!* 2:26  
7 *The Land Of Dreams* 2:54 8 *The Little Black Boy* 3:46 9 *And Did Those Feet* 3:02  
Three Pictures For Orchestra (19:39) 10 *The Seine At Night* 8:57  
11 *Wheat Field At Noon* 6:20 12 *Sea Piece With Birds* 4:22  
Baritone – Thomas MeglIORanza Soprano – Kristen Watson Boston Modern Orchestra Project  
Conductor – Gil Rose

BMOP/sound's latest release, Virgil Thomson: Three Pictures, pays homage to one of the finest American composers of the 20th Century. The orchestral works on this disc include the frequently paired *A Solemn Music* and *A Joyful Fugue*, as well as the "photographic" *Three Pictures* for Orchestra. In *Collected Poems*, Thomas MeglIORanza (baritone) and Kristen Watson (soprano) offer a witty rendition of Kenneth Koch's poetry, and Mr. MeglIORanza is again featured in breathtaking performances in *Feast of Love* and *Five Songs from William Blake*. Without a doubt, BMOP/sound's recording has captured the originality and sophistication of Virgil Thomson's music. ---hbdirect.com

Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) is an American composer often talked about and referred to, but infrequently performed. The major record labels have pretty much ignored him, though smaller labels have done a reasonable job in representing his music. This disc, from the label of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, is a significant addition to the Thomson discography.

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Thomson was a figure of immense importance in American music. He wrote extensively, both with some important books and as a critic for the New York Herald Tribune from 1937 to 1951 and he helped mentor many musical figures, chief among them Leonard Bernstein and Ned Rorem. Being of importance doesn't give you the right to expect your music to be performed – but Thomson's music deserves better than it has received by virtue of its quality. Sadly, many of America's major orchestras have adopted a more Eurocentric approach to the early and middle 20th century, saving much of their American "quota" for commissions and recent works. I do not wish to discourage the performance of new American music, but it would be valuable and meaningful if those orchestras explored the music of Thomson, Piston, Schuman, Antheil, Harris, and others.

Gil Rose founded the Boston Modern Orchestra Project in 1996, to perform music of the 20th century (and now, of course, the 21st). Consisting of some of Boston's finest freelance musicians, this orchestra has done work of extraordinary value and quality for many years now. Three Pictures for Orchestra was unknown to me before this release, and no other recording is listed at ArkivMusic. I don't claim sufficient knowledge to be certain that this is a premiere recording, but if it is one can only say that it is about time. The three pieces ("The Seine at Night," "Wheat Field at Noon," and "Sea Piece with Birds") were written separately by Thomson, and it isn't clear whether Thomson himself ever assembled them into a single suite. Charles Russell's excellent notes state, "It was only recently that all three pieces were issued as a set," which implies that it was the publisher or perhaps the Thomson Foundation that made that decision. I don't hear a unity among them, and will continue to think of them as three separate and distinct works. But they are among the composer's most inventive and adventurous scores – evoking at times Debussy and Ravel, at other times Stravinsky and perhaps Britten, but never leaving Thomson's own sound world. "Sea Piece with Birds" is almost violent at moments – quite different from the image most of us have of the composer. These three pieces were a major discovery for me, filling out the image of Thomson as a kin of folksy, purely diatonic or tonal composer. The musical language here is more dissonant than we associate with this composer.

A Solemn Music and A Joyful Fugue are two of Thomson's more frequently played works – the second was composed as a happy antidote to the funereal first one. The notes claim that this is the first recorded version of Thomson's orchestral scoring of both works – a wind band edition being more frequently performed. A Solemn Music was in fact originally written for band, then orchestrated by the composer; A Joyful Fugue was composed for orchestra, the band version being by Charles Russell. James Bolle's recording on an essential Albany disc of Thomson's music (TROY 17-1) is of the band version.

Thomson's songs cover a wide stylistic range. The Blake cycle is perhaps the finest of his songs – lyrical and inspired throughout. The fourth of them, "The Little Black Boy," will have you

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thinking "Danny Boy." The Feast of Love is a setting for baritone and chamber orchestra of poetry from the second to fourth centuries, celebrating love and drink. Collected Poems is a brief, witty set of dialogues for baritone and soprano. The poetry is by Kenneth Koch, and it consists of one-line titles and one-line poems.

Baritone Thomas MeglIORanza has a light, almost tenor-like voice. It is pleasant, with an attractive rapid (but controlled) vibrato, and he inflects the music with intelligence and meaning. Soprano Kristen Watson's contribution is briefer, but satisfying. The performances overall are deeply committed, with orchestral playing of the right blend of lyricism and incisiveness, as well as a high level of execution. Recorded sound is well balanced, rich but always clear. As indicated, the notes are knowledgeable and very informative, as is an essay by Thomson that is included. And three cheers for providing written texts, even through the singers' diction is fine. There is a Centaur release with some of the same songs, which I have not heard. The duplication with the Albany CD is brief, and mitigated by the difference in versions of the two pieces. For anyone interested in American music, this is an essential disc. ---Fanfare, Henry Vogel, bmop.org

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