



# Text Messenger

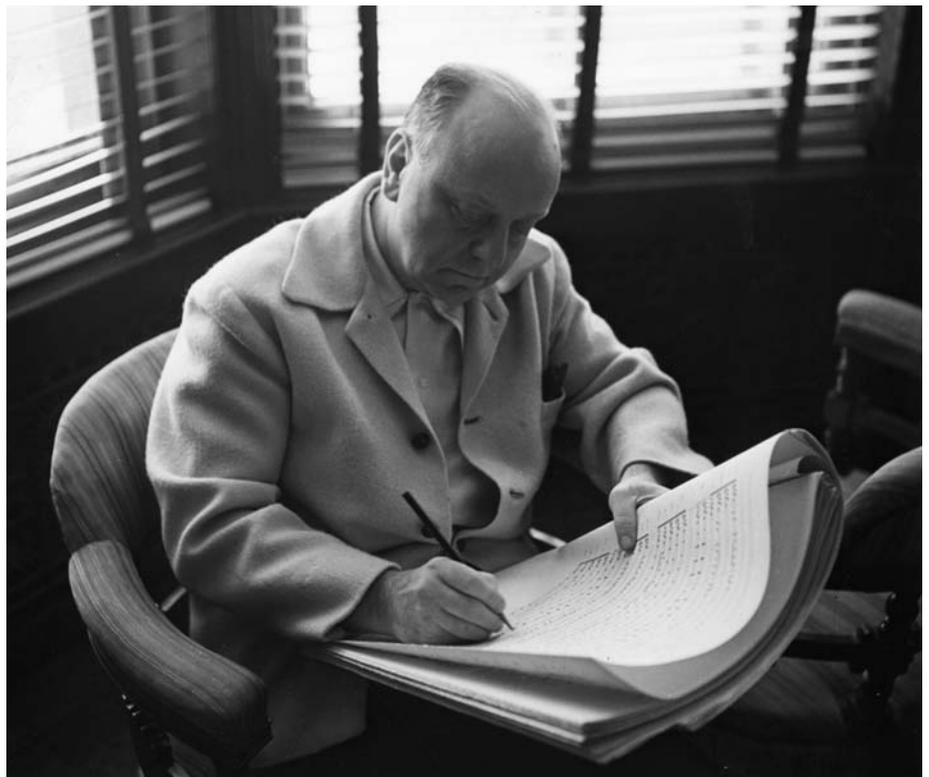
Norfolk's Virgil Thomson Project examines  
the late American composer and his  
intimate relationship with the English language.

by Fred Cohn

*Fifth in an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's*

AMERICAN MASTERPIECES:  
CHAMBER MUSIC *initiative*

*The July-August calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 12. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.*



Virgil Thomson had a thing about words: he wanted them to be *understood*. This concern might not seem surprising from a man who, aside from being a notable composer of operas and songs, was also one of the most eloquent critics ever to write about classical music. But his feelings about the matter were urgent: he felt too many composers ignored the need to make text intelligible. In vocal music, he wrote, “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.” He set about to implant sensible rules for making sung texts emerge with the clarity of human speech.

This summer, the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, in Norfolk, Connecticut, will stage the Virgil Thomson Project, focusing on Thomson’s work and especially on his teachings. Each year the festival holds a New Music Workshop for young composers; this year the workshop, held June 21–July 3, will address the art of writing songs, using

Thomson's precepts as a guideline. Composer Martin Bresnick and soprano Susan Narucki will lead the conference, with seminars and lectures led by composers and writers like Ned Rorem, Anthony Tommasini and Scott Wheeler, some of whom were Thomson's friends or students. Public performances of Thomson's works will follow throughout the summer. The project has been funded through the Virgil Thomson Foundation and the NEA's *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* initiative.

The special focus of the workshop is the setting of English texts—an area of special concern for Thomson, whose most famous works are his two operas to Gertrude Stein librettos, *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All*. ("He wasn't necessarily interested in the words making any particular *sense*," says Bresnick, referring to Stein's famously opaque language, "but he wanted you to know what those words *were*.") The five participating composers will arrive at the conference with their songs already drafted, but the pieces will undergo significant rewriting as the composers work with poets, singers and instructors, exploring ways to enhance the presentation of the words themselves according to the clear but exacting standards that Thomson articulated.

"Virgil Thomson was the consummate pro—he knew how to do this," says Paul Hawkshaw, Norfolk's director. "Genius is one thing, but it's also a matter of technique."

"Virgil had strict ideas about prosody and the setting of words," says Ned Rorem, who got his first job at the age of twenty as Thomson's copyist. Later in life, teaching composition at Yale, he would invoke Thomson's strictures: "When we wrote songs, I would tell the students 'We're all going to set this poem for next Tuesday. The only rules are that A) you don't repeat any words that the composer hasn't repeated and B) the music stays

pretty much at the speed of speech, so you understand the words.'"

Thomson made it his paramount task to adjust compositional technique to the natural stresses of English words and phrases. "The sing-songy ways that melodies work in Italian do *not* work in English," Anthony Tommasini says. "There's a character named Constance Fletcher in *The Mother of Us All*; whenever her name comes up, it's pronounced 'Constance FLETCH-er.' Another composer might write 'CON-stance FLETCH-er'—but that's not American." (Now the music critic for the *New York Times*, Tommasini performed Thomson's work as a pianist and is the author of the biography *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*.)

The myriad *sounds* of English also present challenges that composers can ignore only at their peril. "Certain sounds are capable of melismas—you can't have a melisma on 'it' or 'is,'" says Bresnick. "If you're a native speaker and you want to show some kind of regard, you have to be respectful, or it won't mean anything—you might as well be singing Aramaic. Thomson's prohibitions in this regard mean a lot to me personally: I'm eager to make myself understood."

Then there are the special considerations of writing for the human voice—a discipline often overlooked in conservatory programs. "Young composers study the orchestra and learn the range of the flute and the oboe—but not the difference between a soprano and a mezzo-soprano," notes Hawkshaw. The young composers in the Thomson Project will work intimately with singers to gain an understanding of their capabilities and how to help them project text through singing. "If you give a soprano a note over G, she's not going to get a vowel other than 'ah'—no 'it' or 'street!'" says Bresnick.

Aside from paying tribute to Thomson as a pedagogue and a role model for young composers, the Virgil Thomson Project will also provide an airing for his

compositions. Thomson's works are seldom performed these days; Rorem notes that after Thomson quit his job as critic at the *Herald Tribune*, performances of his work dropped significantly. His music—the operas aside—has never quite regained its foothold in the concert repertory.

"There's been a generation of young students since he passed away; now it's time to look at him," says Hawkshaw. "He wrote in a style that was out of vogue in American avant-garde circles. Now we're looking back and thinking about those people who may not have been at the cutting edge of the avant-garde."

Estimates of Thomson's music vary wildly. "The *Stabat Mater* and the two operas—there's nothing like them in the world," says Rorem. "I think his other works are rather simpleminded."

Even Thomson's strongest advocates admit the unevenness of his output. "When it works, it really works—it's accessible and completely fresh and modern," says Tommasini. "When it *doesn't* work, it doesn't sound modernistically simple; it can sound simplistic."

But Tommasini feels that at his best, Thomson created works of true worth and originality. "He was trying to do something very difficult: to write simply, using simple materials, in a way that makes music sound radical," Tommasini says. He takes as an example the 1926 song 'Susie Asata,' to a Stein text: "The piano part couldn't be simpler or more shocking—triads, open fifths, parallel chords in sevenths. What in 1926 could be more radical than that?"

As part of a program of American song on June 27, given with pianist JJ Penna, Susan Narucki will offer a favorite Thomson cycle: *Mostly About Love* (1959), to poems by Kenneth Koch. "He has such a beautiful sense of the *weight* of the language," Narucki says. "You very rarely find people setting English text with the sense of the way the language is constantly morphing and changing. He

keeps it simple enough so that you can experience that sense of play.”

She points to one of the cycle’s four songs, “Down at the Docks,” as exemplifying Thomson’s gift for turning verse into song: “The text setting technically is really perfect. The duration and range makes the words clear. There’s never a sense that you’re fighting with the accompaniment.”

Thomson’s achievement here, in Narucki’s view, isn’t just in letting the text speak, but in the subtle way he illuminates it. “He’s extremely sophisticated with language, but also with the emotional reality of life,” she says. ““Down at the Docks” starts with a very lyrical, regular rhythm in 3/4, against a repeated pattern in the accompaniment. It all seems ordinary, but the imagery is getting more and more fantastic. It’s a very simple, sweeping line, but he’s playing with the sense of the words and your expectation of what words will be with such a light hand.

“In this little three-minute song, the proportions are constantly shifting,” Narucki continues. “He starts setting lines a little differently; they become a little longer. He’s spinning through moments of greater climax in stepwise motion, rather than in a big arc through the whole thing. It’s an interplay between moments of extreme clarity, then more emotional heat through lengthening a particular word and the setting it in a higher register.”

Narucki has performed Thomson’s songs in the past, but the Thomson project has given her a new opportunity to explore his work in depth. “These are the kinds of pieces I carry with me when I walk around during the day,” she says. “Even when I talk about them—I’m smiling.”

*Fred Cohn is Chamber Music’s consulting editor. He is also a frequent contributor to Opera News.*

## American Masterpieces Chamber Music

## Performances in July and August

### JULY 1 Burlington, VT

PRESENTER: **Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival**  
PROGRAM: W. Bolcom, Second Sonata; J. Harbison, *Abu Ghraib*; G. W. Chadwick, Piano Quintet in E-flat Major  
PERFORMERS: Kevin Lawrence, violin; Brian Suits, piano; Paul Orgel, piano; Elizabeth Chang, violin; Sophie Arbuckle, violin; Lemby Veskimets, viola, Robert Jesselson, cello. [www.uvm.org/gmcmf](http://www.uvm.org/gmcmf)

### JULY 8 Burlington, VT

PRESENTER: **Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival**  
PROGRAM: John Knowles Paine, Piano Trio, Opus 32  
PERFORMERS: Arik Braude, violin; Brooks Whitehouse, cello; David Feurzeig, piano. [www.uvm.org/gmcmf](http://www.uvm.org/gmcmf)

### JULY 15 Kalamazoo, MI

PRESENTER: **Fontana Chamber Arts** PROGRAM: Works by Charles Ives  
PERFORMERS: Thomas Meglioranza, baritone; Reiko Uchida, piano [www.fontanachamberarts.org](http://www.fontanachamberarts.org)

### JULY 17 Burlington, VT

PRESENTER: **Green Mountain Chamber Music Festival**  
PROGRAM: H. Cowell, *Homage to Iran*; P. Schoenfield, *Carolina Reveille*  
PERFORMERS: Kevin Lawrence, violin; Dmitri Shteinberg, piano; Stephanie Ezerman, violin; Matthew Daline, viola; Steven Pologe, cello. [www.uvm.org/gmcmf](http://www.uvm.org/gmcmf)

### JULY 24 Kalamazoo, MI

PRESENTER: **Fontana Chamber Arts** PROGRAM: Jazz standards and originals  
PERFORMERS: Helen Sung Trio  
[www.fontanachamberarts.org](http://www.fontanachamberarts.org)

### JULY 25 Mt. Monadnock region, NH

PRESENTER: **Monadnock Music** PROGRAM: Melinda Wagner, *Four Settings*  
PERFORMERS: Haleh Abghari and Ilana Davidson, sopranos; Elizabeth Shammash, mezzo-soprano; Adela Pena and Joel Pitchon, violins; Jonathan Bagg, viola; Donald Berman, piano; Laura Gilbert, flute; Steven Jackson, clarinet; Rafael Popper-Keizer, cello; Daniel Lippel, guitar; Douglas Perkins, percussion. [www.monadnockmusic.org](http://www.monadnockmusic.org)

### JULY 26 Mt. Monadnock region, NH

PRESENTER: **Monadnock Music** PROGRAM: Settings of Richard Wilbur poems by James Bolle, Jonathan Elliott, Stephen Jaffe, Mark Kuss, Eric Moe, and Caroline Mallonée  
PERFORMERS: Ilana Davidson, soprano; Elizabeth Shammash, mezzo-soprano; Adela Pena and Joel Pitchon, violins; Jonathan Bagg, viola; Rafael Popper-Keizer, cello; Donald Berman, piano; Laura Gilbert, flute; Steven Jackson, clarinet; Daniel Lippel, guitar [www.monadnockmusic.org](http://www.monadnockmusic.org)

### JULY 26 & 27 Santa Fe, NM

PRESENTER: **Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival** PROGRAM: G. Schuller, Quintet for Horn and Strings  
PERFORMERS: Julie Landsman, horn; and the Miró Quartet. [www.sfcmf.org](http://www.sfcmf.org)

### JULY 30, AUGUST 1 & 2 Brunswick, ME

PRESENTER: **Bowdoin International Music Festival** PROGRAM: G. Crumb, *Eine Kleine Mitternacht Musik* (7/31 & 8/1), *Night of Four Moons* (8/1), *Macrocosmos* (8/2)  
PERFORMERS: Peter Basquian and Emma Yahmizian, pianos. OTHER PERFORMERS: see website in July. [www.summermusic.org/gamper\\_festival.php](http://www.summermusic.org/gamper_festival.php)

### AUGUST 8 Mt. Monadnock region, NH

PRESENTER: **Monadnock Music** PROGRAM: Nathan Michel, *Little Piece in Two Parts*, Songs I-X, Madrigals, Bk. II; G. Crumb, *Song and Dance*; F. Rzewski, *Simple Songs of Birth & Return*; Nathan Davis, Madrigals.  
PERFORMERS: Tony Arnold and Emma Tahmizian, sopranos; Nathan Davis, Douglas Perkins, David Schotzko, percussion; Laura Gilbert, flute; Steve Jackson, clarinet; Robert Black, bass; Daniel Lippel, guitar; Stacey Shames, harp. [www.monadnockmusic.org](http://www.monadnockmusic.org)

### AUGUST 9 Santa Fe, NM

PRESENTER: **Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival** PROGRAM: M. Neikrug, *Green Torso Too*  
PERFORMERS: Ida Kavafian, violin; Steven Tenenbom, viola; Peter Wiley, cello; Anne-Marie McDermott, piano. [www.sfcmf.org](http://www.sfcmf.org)

### AUGUST 9 Cortlandt Manor, NY

PRESENTER/PERFORMERS: **Music from Copland House**  
PROGRAM: Works by W.G. Still, S. Barber, Pierre Jalbert, and J. Higdon

### AUGUST 16 Santa Fe, NM

PRESENTER: **Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival** PROGRAM: G. Tsontakis, *Stimulus Package* (co-commission with La Jolla Music Society)  
PERFORMERS: Real Quiet (Felix Fan, cello; Andrew Russo, piano; David Cossin, percussion). [www.sfcmf.org](http://www.sfcmf.org)

### AUGUST 20 Santa Fe, NM

PRESENTER: **Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival** PROGRAM: Jerod I. Tate, *À Bec Quintet*.  
PERFORMERS: R. Carlos Nakai, Northern Plains flute; Tara Helen O’Connor, flute. [www.sfcmf.org](http://www.sfcmf.org)