



A SUCCESS THIS WEEK: VIRGIL THOMSON IN TIME

Excerpts from a Journal

by Brian Murphy

SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 1988. Very hot. We had promised Virgil Thomson great weather. Too much of a good thing. What would this week be like? Too much of a good thing? More likely, too little of a good thing.

The great man was (as he put it) 91 and $\frac{1}{2}$ years old. Very hard of hearing. The infirmities of age generally had come hard upon him: for two years we had been planning this coming of Virgil Thomson, two years of anxious phone calls, of painful disappointments, a whole year's planned visit scrapped when Mr. Thomson fell, then fell ill, was "forbidden" by his doctors to travel, and the whole enterprise seemed to collapse.

But we fought back—all of us. I turned into Captain Ahab, hunting (though with the most benign of intentions) my musical white whale. Mr. Thomson's secretaries became my accomplices—though always caught in a love-honor tangle: Mr. Thomson's traveling to Michigan, for a weeklong VIRGIL THOMSON IN TIME festival: would this stimulate him? Or would it kill him?

We were an hour early at the airport, Dave and I. My friend David Daniels, a conductor, and Chair of the University's Music, Theater and Dance Department, was in charge of the purely musical side of the fete.

We checked the gate, reminded them we had a VIP who required a wheelchair, and noted the plane was on time.

Everything we could do had been done. So we had a beer. Something about a beer on a Sunday morning. We talked about music—my Beethovenian conversion to classical music when I was in college, my subsequent dislike of Fifties dryly intellectual jazz, my love of a Friday night beer and rock & roll.

We talked about William Alwyn, the English romantic composer about whom I am writing a book, and a composer whose delicate harp concerto, the "Lyra Angelica," Dave had fallen in love with and has conducted.

And, of course, we talked about Mr. Thomson—his notorious wit, the brilliant clarity of his writing and mind. Dave recalled being at another airport and waiting for a plane while he was reading something from Mr. Thomson's autobiography: he read a particularly succulent passage aloud to his wife and when he stopped heard a stranger, sitting next to his wife, say, "No, don't stop: go on!"

We talked about our interested but somewhat tentative response to his music: we were looking forward to the week partly because we wanted this unique chance to know, to know really, this man and his music. Here was a composer who not only collaborated with Gertrude Stein on the quirky modern masterpiece *Four Saints in Three Acts* and knew the whole Paris-in-the-Twenties set, he was a *contemporary* of Hemingway—and, naturally, to someone like myself, a still fanatical English major (who'd even had the great luck to have a novel brought forth by Hemingway's own publisher), the chance to talk to

someone who actually knew Hemingway was tantalizing . . . and rather scary.

I checked my watch. Ten minutes to Virgil Thomson.



—So begins a journal I wrote almost immediately after the week Virgil Thomson spent in residence at Oakland University in June of 1988. As he was unarguably America’s greatest music critic and certainly one of its most important composers, this was a week that carried some historical punch. I titled the Journal *A Success This Week* because of a remark Mr. Thomson made in our first conversation. As soon as we had him safely stowed in my car, and were driving to the Northfield Hilton, I asked, “Was the flight OK?”

“Oh, first class service is terrible these days. But I don’t mind. I have just had a ballet, based on some of my *Portraits*, open in New York. And my book of letters is just being published and reviewed.”

“Yes,” I said. “I read that wonderful review in *The New Republic*. I loved the title—‘The Dada of Us All’.”

“Yes, very good, very good. Well, with that damned ballet—there’s *far* too much ballet in the world; people like bodies with their music instead of just the music—and the book, and this week here in Detroit, I guess I’m a success this week.”

—I found that a thoughtful, even a somewhat provocative, sentence.

Officially, he was the “McGregor Professor in the Humanities,” a visiting professor program (now defunct) housed in the Honors College. Thus, as then-Director of the Honors College

(and a classical music fanatic) it became my happy assignment to oversee, with David Daniels, then Chair of Music, Theatre, and Dance, the creation, planning, and actual execution of this week.

Some of the journal was used by Anthony Tommasini, now chief music critic of *The New York Times*, as part of his official biography *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*. The week's events at Oakland University became, it so happened, Mr. Thomson's last major appearances anywhere, as he died the following year.

Below, I offer the journal's record of one day, the Friday, from this exciting week. The complete journal, together with programs, notes, video tapes, and audio recordings of the rehearsals, recitals, and concerts, reposes in the archives of Kresge Library.



These were the scheduled highlights of the week:

SUNDAY: an evening concert of music by Mr. Thomson, Darius Milhaud, and Paul Bowles, through most of which Mr. Thomson peacefully dozed in a seat at the rear of the hall.

MONDAY: an orchestral and vocal rehearsal at which Mr. Thomson sat in the center of the *front* row, from which position he bellowed complaints, suggestions, and praise.

TUESDAY: the first of two lectures, "Words and Music," this one at Meadow Brook Hall, after which he complained that he didn't get enough questions from the (I thought good-sized) audience.

WEDNESDAY: after a morning technical rehearsal for the complicated Friday evening program, we took Mr. Thomson

to the great Detroit Institute of Art; he insisted that we be accompanied by an Art History professor “because,” he said, “they always know what’s what.” The composer of *Four Saints in Three Acts* was especially interested in two of the greatest of the DIA’s paintings—Correggio’s *The Marriage of St. Catherine* and Carravaggio’s *The Conversion of the Magdalene*.

THURSDAY: in the afternoon, while I picked up Anthony Tommasini from Metro Airport, Mr. Thomson presided, for an incredible, uninterrupted three-and-a-half hours, over a Composers’ Forum.

A very unscheduled highlight occurred after the Composers’ Forum when the university car, driven by his assistant Jay Sullivan, with Tony Tommasini as a passenger, was smashed (and later pronounced totaled) by another car in front of his hotel. This led to my meeting them at Crittenton Hospital’s Emergency Room, where Mr. Thomson’s badly bruised hand was examined and pronounced OK. Then Mr. Thomson insisted upon taking all of us—the party, and it became a real party, swollen by Dean Brian and Kathy Copenhaver—to dinner at the hotel’s excellent restaurant. There, highlights included the strong difference of opinion held by the Dean and Mr. Thomson as to the quality of the crab cakes, and Mr. Thomson’s, after bellowing at a passing waiter, commenting sadly, “Ah, waiters never wait.”

FRIDAY: the day is given below.

SATURDAY: an afternoon lecture, at Sunset Terrace, on “The Music Critic and His Assignment” followed by an elaborate and well-attended music critics’ symposium. In the evening, the final concert—the highlights of which were Satie’s brilliant *Parade* and Act III of *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

SUNDAY: a morning departure from Metro Airport.



FRIDAY, JUNE 17, 1988. I awake with performer's nerves. As if I were in a play, and it's the morning of Opening Night. Taking an exam. Promising to do something, something requiring concentration and talent: and now it's time to do it.

I'm certainly not complaining. Once in a way, it is rather thrilling to have your nerves keyed up, your sinews stiffened. You are asked to entertain a bunch of people who are coming out on a Friday night because you've had the gall to say to them: Here, I've devised this perfectly wonderful program, and I'm sure that you'll all love it (and me). What colossal nerve. It's possible to be humbled by one's own egotism.

To a university community, this ought to be a small corner of paradise: to re-create Mr. Thomson's "time"—the 1920's—metonymically and bring together George Antheil's frequently noted but almost never played music and Fernand Leger's *avant-garde* film *Ballet mecanique* and let the fusion represent the zip, zaniness and low seriousness of that exciting decade.

After an intermission, Tony Tommasini plays and discusses Virgil's *Portraits*. And the finale: our own piano virtuoso Flavio Varani plays the brilliant *Sports et divertissements* of Erik Satie while Mr. Thomson himself reads the words. We add the original pictures on a screen during the reading and even flash Satie's manuscript score during Flavio's playing. It will be magnificent.

I wish I were going to it.

I like Bernard Shaw's advice to all performers: just stay in bed all day. I can't quite manage that, but I do try to stay as quiet as possible.

I meet Tony at 10:30 to give him a chance to practice the piano. Fortunately, an organist is just finishing as we go into the Varner Recital Hall. Tony plays while I talk to the technicians setting up the complex equipment required for the evening. Podiums, pianos, reading tables, chairs, reading lamps, small screen video, large screen video, slide projectors in two places, 16 mm film projector: it takes all day, even after a whole morning's technical rehearsal on Wednesday.

I go to my office, toss some mail aside to deal with after I get off the island of this week. Right now, anything not on this island doesn't seem very important; it doesn't seem very real.

Some yogurt for lunch. Home to follow Shaw's advice. A beer, a buzz, and a book to bed; the alarm; and one of life's laziest, most luxurious pleasures—dozing off in the early afternoon. I feel wonderfully happy. A success this week? Actually, I reflect, I feel free from the burdens of too much success: I suppose if I were an Associate Professor of English at Harvard, I'd be pronounced more "successful." But then I'd likely have to stay carefully in my specialized doctoral tracks and go on writing about Disraeli and Trollope and be a thoroughly successful pro. Oakland may be, thank God, merely "the Harvard of the Midwest" or even, to the cynic, "Podunk." As long as one is not riddled with insecurity, "Podunk" offers one great thing—more freedom. Happiness vs. success? I yawn my way through this happy train of thought. Like the Shakers, I have turned and turned and come round right—right here in the valley of love and delight. Why can't I communicate this more clearly? A deeper yawn. Yes, yes, it's true: there's nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so . . . and blissful oblivion.

I awake. I kiss my wife. We take tea together. I dandle my enchantress of an almost-three-year-old daughter. I take a shower. I go on feeling wonderful until I suddenly feel extremely, but thrillingly, nervous. I arrive at Oakland. I check things. Everything's okay. So far.

As my job is lecturing to large numbers of people, I am surprised how nervous I am as I introduce the evening, the plan, the experiment; and I save the introduction of Mr. Thomson until I have the audience's breath positively baited. I tell them about the accident, the emergency room, and even Mr. Thomson's gleeful three vodka-and-tonics. I repeat his line about how "Waiters never wait," which gets a big laugh; but a dig at Northwest Airlines gets an even bigger one.

If I could stop sweating, I'd feel as relaxed and amused and in control as I am acting. But this act always works—because the audience *wants* it to work.

After the story of the accident, I say, "I had planned to introduce Mr. Thomson as a performer in the second half of the program, but I can't wait: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome America's greatest musician, Virgil Thomson."

Mr. Thomson is sitting in the middle of the front row, flanked by Jay and Tony, who push him upwards toward the applause. He seemed to be able to hear and follow me: he laughed in the right places. I hoped he would enjoy this: I tell the audience that no less an authority than Mr. Thomson himself thinks that there never was a performance of film and music *together* of the *Ballet mecanique*, so they may be witnessing a world premiere of a work envisioned by its creators but which was not technically possible to bring off in the 20's.

On the spur of the moment I say something about Jay Sullivan. As the driver of the car that was broad-sided, he felt, certainly, responsibility; I wanted to alleviate any guilt he might have felt. Caution made me not tell the full story: it was Jay who doggedly worked at fixing the seatbelt, and thereby almost certainly saved Mr. Thomson from serious injury. But some dreadful caution made me withhold the information that the University gave us a car in which the seatbelt didn't work and that I actually let him go in it.

So I said, "I know Mr. Jay Sullivan would be too embarrassed to take a bow. But that is no reason why, during the intermission, any of you could not seek him out and shake the hand of the man who just might have saved Virgil Thomson's life."

Gratifying applause. A shy smile on Jay's face.

And now it was time for me to shut up. Waiters never wait. And professors never shut up. I was getting too many laughs. It was a long program. With a great effort of the will, I announced that the first item would commence: we would see the usual, the silent, version of the *Ballet mecanique*.

In a silence broken only by French professor Dolores Burdick's quick translation of the opening words, the audience watched the 14-minute film. I went outside, right near one of Mr. Thomson's favorite bushes for relieving himself

and had a cigarette: how marvelous it is to be, at certain times of high tension, a cigarette smoker.

After the film, Charlotte Stoke's introduction to Leger's art went off perfectly: the slides all slid; the audience was right with her.

Bob Eberwein's discussion of the film was a tad lengthy; and it did not avoid entirely the curse of slow scholarly exactitude, but it was illuminating and helpful.

I raced through my part—mostly some (I hoped) well-chosen excerpts from Antheil's autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music*, and the first two minutes of the Netherlander's recording.

Lights down, sound up. The same film shown again but now from an excellent 16 mm print rather than a video, and the incredible music—pounding down from the ceiling in a mechanical-musical cacophony which I am sure Antheil would have liked.

Maybe it worked. The audience seemed interested, and I noticed that Mr. Thomson himself stayed through the entire program. (I had suggested he could rest in his office through all or part of the first half; but he had said he was looking forward to seeing the film because, incredibly enough, he had never seen it before—in any form.) Mr. Thomson slipped out just before the end—no doubt to the men's room.

Once again, he seemed to have no trouble at all trotting nimbly up the flight of stairs to the men's room.

As I tried to catch up with him, I took in some first reactions from the audience. "Fascinating experiment." "What a good *idea* this was!" "How's Virgil Thomson' being paid?" "George Antheil would have liked rock and roll: the *Ballet mecanique* sounds like Heavy Metal."

I went in the men's room and found Mr. Thomson just zipping up. He saw me and bellowed, "*Perfectly dreadful evening!*"

It amazed me how hilarious I found his reaction in its frankness and decisiveness, how little hurt or affected I was. (Maybe it was my afternoon dreaming about happiness and

success.) So Jay and I exchanged a look—Jay, obviously worried about my feelings, ready to repair the ravages of his employer. He had taken that on as a job throughout the week: he wanted people to *like* Virgil and he really hated to see people hurt.

I smiled and shrugged. “Well, it *was* an experiment. Didn’t work, eh?”

“*Perfectly dreadful!*” he repeated with the sort of emphasis that he laid on rehearsing singers. “That one fellow would *not* stop talking, and *then* we had to watch that silly film, not once but *twice!* Perfectly dreadful evening.”

“Well, let’s hope you enjoy the second half a little more.” My not-very-barbed irony was lost in the flurry of Mr. Thomson zipping up and going out the door shaking his head, lost in wonder that any one evening could possibly be so dreadful.

Well, for me, the second half was happily non-participatory. I would sit back and enjoy not being on stage. I was eager to hear Tony play Virgil’s *Portraits*, and I wanted to hear what he had to say: myself, I *loved* music becoming verbal, historical, personal, meaningful inside itself; and this was one of the great chances of the week to get closer to the music.

And Mr. Thomson himself had always insisted (perhaps with just a touch of over-much protesting) that the history of music is the history of its composition. So, here was living music by a live composer (indeed, one with whom I regularly had chats in the men’s room) played and discussed by his biographer and (I guessed) his spiritual heir. I settled back.

Alas, the composer got in the way. Virgil decided, for reasons of his own, that he would *not* hear Tony play. He would wait outside in the hallway until he was summoned onstage.

Jay told me of this arrangement just before the second half began. It distressed Tony—already fairly distressed from his flight, the accident, the strangeness of it all, and of course he would have his own performer’s nerves in any case. He was especially disappointed: “Jay has never heard me play.” He shook his head. By now, we had all come to know something of the nature of the beast.

Tony, more professor than performer, took the stage. He explained, he digressed, he amused. But he didn't really have to tell the audience not to applaud between the movements: Ah, the East Coast; ah, the provinces!

After the first few bars, I could attend to nothing from the stage because, very faintly, but not distantly, I could hear the unmistakable rumble of Mr. Thomson's bellow. Obviously, he was out there complaining to Jay—who was certainly earning his keep that night—about the perfectly dreadful evening.

Finally, I went into the hallway.

Jay stood up. "Are they ready for the Satie?"

"Oh, no, not yet. I just thought I'd see how things were out here."

"Can you, uh, hear him in there? I'm trying to keep him quiet, but. . . ."

"Oh, no, don't worry about it." What could the poor fellow do? No need for added stress.

I had another cigarette outside and consoled myself that a fairly elaborate audio and video taping system would preserve Tony's performance. Hi tech meant later: there was always later.

I slipped back into the hall. Tony was just finishing the last *Portrait*. This was it. Now we would somehow get Mr. Thomson on the stage.

As always, the magic of the theater worked. All crabbiness ebbed away, along with a decade or two: and Mr. Thomson stood in the wings, rocking back and forth, eager to go to work, growing more concentrated, having more fun. I would introduce Flavio and then . . . the great moment.

Just before I walked out for the introduction, Mr. Thomson's bellow roared through the wings, the stage, and the audience: "Well, here's shit to the thirteenth power!"

We laughed; the audience laughed. I made my quick introduction, my escape, and Flavio strode briskly to the piano, bowed, and took his seat.

Mr. Thomson did not stride—briskly or otherwise. His legs carried his half-egg shell roundness with great purpose

and dignity to the center of the stage. He smiled graciously, and bowed charmingly. As the applause melted slowly away, he walked to the reading table, moved the lamp we had so carefully positioned and put a manila file folder down on the table; then he seated himself with regal aplomb.

Flavio straightened his back and flexed his fingers—when Mr. Thomson gave an imperial wave: “Now just wait there, don’t start playing; I’ve got a very long introduction to make here about Erik Satie.” His tongue exploded the “t” with great verve.

The audience laughed.

Perfect, I thought. This will give me a chance to slip back into the hall. I made sure that the tape players were going, that Jay was at *his* post: his job was to change the slides—the pictures during the narrative, the manuscript score during the music.

I crept back and found a seat. Mr. Thomson was still reading his encomium to Satie—to the composer, for his inventiveness and dry wit; to the man, for his saintly modesty and his charming deflating of the pompous.

After a few minutes, I thought: poor Flavio! No pianist should be asked to sit on a piano bench while a lecture is being given from behind his left elbow. He twitched and stretched and laughed gamely at the amusements Mr. Thomson tossed out.

Really, had we known about it, this introduction should certainly have come *before* Flavio’s entrance. Virgil would have had the stage to himself. But, then, he would not have *dominated* the scene quite so fully. Not surprising he loves saintly modesty . . . in Erik Satie.

Finally it ended. (It seemed not nearly so long when I viewed and listened to the tapes. Was I the nervous impresario on that Friday evening—or was I subconsciously angry with Virgil and getting even by noticing that *he* can go on as long as a professor?)

Then Satie’s dry, witty prelude. The blow-up of the score

and first pictures worked perfectly. Then: quite suddenly, they didn't work perfectly.

Mr. Thomson read a sardonic line or two and the images seemed to chase each other madly. At last, the correct image would be found—just as another began: and the mad chase would begin again.

Ah, I thought: what folly. Oscar was right: no good deed ever goes unpunished. I had thought it *virtuous* of me (there was my mistake; I am justly punished) to praise the audio-visual technicians and name the chief amongst them . . . so that now, in the second half, all the audience would know the name of the man they thought responsible for a graphics chase during the historic appearance of Virgil Thomson. I sat and stressed out.

Finally, the torture came to an end.

And so did my misprision. Poor technician! Poor assistants! The blame is all yours? The fault, it transpires, lay elsewhere.

Jay told me. It was he who had the slide control in his hand, it was he who was the first to realize what had happened: after two of the little sports had been duly read and played, with picture and score nicely in place behind pianist and narrator, Mr. Thomson began reading not the third, but the fifth or sixth diversion; and Jay began frantically punching his way through pictures and score to the right spot. And so it was that he found the right picture at just about the moment Mr. Thomson chose some other sport or diversion to read.

Of course, Jay might not have been the very first to see what was happening. A videotape of the performance shows Flavio as one very astonished pianist who suddenly put a scholarly finger in the air—"Ah-hah! What have we here? Eine mistake!"—and then flip through *his* score to find the right sport. Flavio knew his business and from the opening word or two—like some game-question on the Metropolitan Opera Quiz—dashed to the right place in the score.

Only Jay, Flavio, and—oddly enough—my wife Toni, pressed into service in the front row as photographer, knew

what had happened. The rest of us blamed poor George, sitting in innocent helplessness in the control booth.

Naturally, Jay did not want Virgil to know even that it had happened. The sure sign of a great artist: he creates his own world and increasingly comes to live in it and finally those around him conspire to keep him in that world.

(Would Tony, just for a second, wonder if he *did* know? Any chance it was a real game show? And I think, no: the man who shouted, “Well, *merde*, everybody,” is too much a performer to do anything like that. Still)

Jay told me what had happened during the predictably enthusiastic applause.

More applause.

Another bow,

And Mr. Thomson came into the wings just as the applause faded, and people went out into the late Friday evening.

“Well,” he said, “got that over with. Now. You have your music there, and I’ve got my things.” I smiled at him. He said, “I can’t hear myself out there, so I didn’t know how loud I was; felt like I was shouting.”

Pleased I could be both sincere and enthusiastic, I said, “Oh, it was perfect, perfect. I was sitting in the back and heard everything. It was a wonderful performance, Mr. Thomson. Congratulations.”

He looked keenly at me. Seemed as if I was telling the truth, so he smiled. Then alluring wife Toni arrived and offered congratulations.

Flavio shook hands with Mr. Thomson, and got a warm and enthusiastic review: “Every note: beautiful.”

Flavio said, “Thank you!”

“Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.” His voice got that same energy and warmth of tone, *molto animato*, as on the night of the rehearsal. “Now,” he said to me, “we’re going up to where you live.”

He meant my office. Odd how he knew how I felt about it—that I really did “live” in the Honors College.

He was getting set to do a little living of his own: “There’s a Chicago reporter who wants to see me.”

True. He was quite aware of this fellow. This was a kind of prelude to the Saturday Music Critics’ Symposium. We had invited the major music critics of the Midwest to join in a panel discussion after Mr. Thomson gave his Lecture Number Two: “The Music Critic and His Assignment.” The response had been almost *too* enthusiastic—given the size of the panel, the time critics take to talk (worse than professors!), and the staying power of the human bladder.

The Chicago critic had spent the whole day on the train from Chicago. He hated flying and he really wanted to see Mr. Thomson.

“I forget which way to go,” Mr. Thomson murmured. We escorted him up those stairs that he could climb apparently only when he had participated in some musical experience.

“The Satie is funny, very funny,” I said.

“Well,” he said distinctly—and with him distinction of enunciation was closely related to eager enthusiasm; when he was bored, you could hardly understand him—“they’re almost *not* funny . . . and then they are.”

Jay, Tony, and I greeted the writer from Chicago who didn’t like to fly, and I set Jay and Tony guard.

“He gets twenty minutes. Virgil must be exhausted.” We all agreed.

And we agreed that I, more exhausted than Mr. Thomson, and certainly more wired from the “performance” could leave early—“early” being almost midnight. I stayed to hear the raves from a couple of audience members who wanted to know more about Antheil and more about how we got Virgil Thomson here and what a good idea it was and many other matters that kept us standing outside the Honors College offices well past midnight,

When I got home, Toni had already prepared the place for one of our late parties: my brother and his wife, Larry and Jeanette, were already there. Larry and Jeanette are rabid

music lovers, but not classical music lovers. I was curious how they had enjoyed the evening.

“Oh, it was really interesting. Jeanette enjoyed the first half, and I liked the second half, so it all evened out.”

Jeanette said, “That music in the first half was really fantastic!”

“So,” Larry concluded, “it was an interesting Friday evening. Certainly wasn’t *Miami Vice*.”

I abandoned myself to vice for a time, knowing that there were only two more events, two in one day. I was only an impresario, not a performer (unless you count my playing the typewriter in Satie’s *Parade*), and then it would all, thank God, *conclude*.

Full of vice and accomplishment, I went to bed a very happy man.

FINAL NOTE: Jay Sullivan stayed with Virgil Thomson to the end. Mr. Thomson died, peacefully in his sleep, sometime before 5 AM, on Saturday, September 30, 1989. When Jay called to tell me about the death and to invite Toni and me to the memorial service at St. John the Divine, in New York, he told me that Virgil had always called it St John the too-too Divine and said that Virgil had, basically, *willed* himself to death. Anyone who had spent a week with Virgil Thomson could understand both the humor and the will-power.