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VIRGIL THOMSON'S PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to introduce the writings of composer and music critic Virgil Thomson to the discourse of philosophy of music. It is divided into four main parts. Part one is an introduction and biographical sketch of Thomson. Part two is a discussion of his views on the metaphysics of music as discussed in his article “Music Does Not Flow” as well as a discussion of the philosophical questions raised by his practice of writing “musical portraits”. This serves as a preliminary to part three, as well as covering topics important to contemporary philosophy of music that are not discussed effectively elsewhere in his writings. Part three is a summary of Thomson’s book *The State of Music* and a discussion of its philosophically interesting aspects. These consist of (1) Describing the arts as cultural practices and carried out by specialists and professionals (2) Describing all musical activities as explainable by economic determinism, and (3) Emphasizing the benefits of professional solidarity for musicians and autonomy for music as a cultural institution. Finally, part four is an assessment of the accuracy and value of Thomson’s views of music taken as a whole. This will involve a discussion of the truth and usefulness of (1), (2), and (3), as well the views summarized in part two. Part four will culminate in a discussion of Thomson’s place in the history of philosophy of music, and also discuss some criticisms one might have of his views.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There are many ways to discuss aesthetics. In the past 30 years, analytic philosophy of music has been dominated by questions about the metaphysics of music. These are questions like “what is music?”, “what is its relationship to emotions?”, and “what makes good music good?”. These are important questions, but surely not the only important questions. Questions such as “how is a piece of music written?”, “What circumstances shape its final form?”, “what causes the rise and fall of musical styles and trends?” and “what predictions can be made about how a piece will be written?”, strike me as equally important in their own right. Even if some feel they are not, they at least strike me as having the potential for answering the metaphysical questions I have already mentioned. This is why I believe a sociological dimension in the philosophical discussion can help explain interesting features of music. This raises the question of why the sociological dimension is frequently perceived as having little or no valid place in contemporary philosophy of music. Virgil Thomson’s writings are a good example of how one might use a sociological perspective to answer such questions, without doing injustice to the metaphysical questions that always linger around music.

A composer, music critic, and all around cultural figure of exceptional wit, perception, and cleverness, Thomson’s delightfully sociological perspective of music deserves more attention from philosophers of music. Specifically, I would like to discuss the view of music in his famous book *The State of Music*. My main project with respect to that book is largely one of introduction, exegesis, and summary. Additionally, I will also be doing a bit of philosophical translation, taking a book largely filled with slogans and assertions of a table-pounding sort of directness; clarifying, charitably interpreting, and arguing for the views therein. When a problem of interpretation or clarity arises, I will look to some of Thomson’s other writing to help provide an interpretation or construct a case for attributing a view to him. This will involve a substantial part of the essay, as it turns out that Thomson’s views on the metaphysics of music must be made

clear for his sociology of music to get off the ground. My hope is that this will provide a useful introduction to a thinker with a great deal to say about music, and whose perspectives and precedent will be welcome in contemporary philosophical and musical discussion.

The uniqueness and value of Thomson's view is his utter disinterest in music as anything other than a cultural practice. He famously says, "Music's definition is: that which musicians do" and stays true to this tone. Music is a guild, a trade, a business, and a profession. This comes first, and all considerations of quality, style, emotional impact and value can be seen through this lens. Important changes in musical taste and style might be more usefully compared to Kuhnian paradigm shifts, rooted in economic activity, than new theoretical discoveries. And like Kuhnian paradigm shifts, these changes are about the people involved and their personal concerns, general social trends in the wider culture and money. Perhaps we would do better to talk about the sociology of music than the metaphysical properties of it.

Here we have a musical figure who can give us a deflationary, pragmatic, and sociological account of music, one that borders on being a philosophy of music but fails only in not being directed at the appropriate audience or obeying the right scholarly conventions. But Thomson is hardly the first intellectual figure to be guilty of this omission, it simply wasn't his job to explain things in the manner considered acceptable to analytic philosophers, indeed it seems he was scarcely aware of such a scholarly demand when he wrote. Nonetheless, his writings as both as essayist for musical journals and critic for the New York Herald Tribune are, in their own way, masterworks of clarity, accessibility, and insight. It is due to his historical importance in the American musical scene and his excellence as both a composer and writer on music, and his general absence from discussions about the philosophy of music that I undertake this project. By explaining what Thomson has to say in *The State of Music* and elsewhere, and examining to see which of its claims are still viable today, I hope to do the field of the philosophy of music a useful service.

Virgil Thomson's Biography

Of what is great one must either be silent or speak with greatness. With greatness--- that means cynically and with innocence.

–Friedrich Nietzsche

The Will to Power

Virgil Garnet Thomson is one of our greatest, and least acknowledged musical figures. I am willing to call him a great composer because he wrote some unquestioned masterpieces in the genres of opera and film score. The majority of this music is turning out to have been pretty significantly influential in the development of the “American Sound” typically associated with Aaron Copland. Recent scholarship is steadily reinforcing this opinion.¹ I am willing to call him a great writer because he was able to write about music in a way that is both cynical and innocent. Cynical because he was always aware of the human machinations involved and innocent because he treats certain musical topics as obviously answered, but more than this he makes it seem like the most natural thing in the world. He was a very witty, enjoyable writer who aimed more at the educated masses and his fellow musicians than philosophers. He was also a very perceptive writer, who says things about music that are so startling that one wants to read more even if they are wrong. It is of substantial credit to his intellect that few of them are.

For all of my praise, I am not oblivious to the fact that few people know much about Thomson, and this lack of knowledge will inhibit a proper appreciation of the value of his work as well as the worthiness of his contributions to both the composition and criticism of music. In the interests of fixing this, I will tell you a little bit about him.

Born on November 26, 1896 in Kansas City, Missouri, Thomson displayed precocity, intelligence, and a preternatural musicality at an early age. By his teen years he was earning substantial money as a church organist and receiving the best lessons that Kansas City had to offer at that time. He joined the Army during the First World War, and rose to the rank of second lieutenant in the air service, trained as a radio telephone operator. He never saw action. Following his military service, he attended Harvard, where he studied music and made important connections with such figures as F. Foster

Damon. His travels to Europe with the Harvard Glee club left with a taste for living abroad that he would indulge as soon as he graduated. Thomson became one of the first of a whole generation of American composers to live in Paris and study with Nadia Boulanger, a matriarchal figure in the history of American music. There he refined his compositional style, and continued to network. It was in Paris that he made some of his most important personal and professional contacts. Gertrude Stein was a close friend and his best artistic collaborator, providing libretti for two operas (Four Saints in Three Acts and The Mother of Us All) that are still considered his finest works. He also connected with other aspiring composer-intellectuals such as George Antheil and Aaron Copland, as well as artists such as Christian Bernard and poets such as George Fay.

His return to the U.S. in 1940 was presaged by his many accomplishments from abroad. The successful premiere and Broadway run of his opera Four Saints in Three Acts, was his greatest personal and artistic triumph up to that time. The success of his film scores for Pare Lorentz' New Deal-Era propaganda films "The Plow that Broke the Plains" and "The River" brought his music and his name to the general public. Finally the minor sensation following the publication of his first book *The State of Music* established his literary and intellectual reputation and led to his position as the head music critic of the New York Herald Tribune from 1940-1954, and it was in this role that he attained his greatest public acclaim. He used his position to influence the world of music in a manner favorable to his friends and colleagues, and settled scores with his enemies, but this bias did not stop his criticism from being uniquely fresh, perceptive, and incisive. It's no surprise, then, that he was known as "the dean of American music critics." He also continued to produce great works such as the Pulitzer Prize winning film score for Robert Flaherty's film "Louisiana Story," and his second opera with Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All*, about Susan B. Anthony.

Thomson left the Herald-Tribune in 1954 to focus on composition, and while he had more free time, he traded it for less clout. Though consistently respected by his friends and associates, his works were performed less often and his name began to fade into obscurity. He continued to write music, such as the opera *Lord Byron* with poet Jack

¹ For example: *The Queer Composition of America's Sound* by Nadine Hubbs, *Prepare for Saints* by Stephen Watson, and *Virgil Thomson; Composer on the Aisle* by Anthony Tommasini.

Larson, and books about music, such as *Music With Words, A Composer's View*. He also remained an important influence to a new generation of composers, such as Paul Bowels, Ned Rorem, and John Cage. Even composers who did not receive guidance from him still acknowledge his legacy. Philip Glass has said that Thomson's operas were the only precedent to his non-narrative operas such as *Einstein on the Beach*. Thomson was recognized for these accomplishments with a Kennedy Center lifetime achievement award in 1979. This essay is a recognition of his legacy, albeit in the intellectual world rather than in musical composition or performance. He died in 1989, and was buried in Missouri, near his family.

Of equal significance for the purposes of this essay, however, is Thomson's intellectual development. Thomson showed a precocious intellect from the very beginning. Realizing that he could not defend himself physically, he felt the need to develop a social skill that would allow him to dominate others and protect himself, and for this he turned to his intellect. Though he was never a philosopher, he was certainly familiar with the philosophy of the time in which he matured. His first brush with it came from his piano teacher Ms. Lichtenwaller, who encouraged him to read Wagner's enemy, Nietzsche. Thomson read every one of Nietzsche's books, and Nietzsche could rightly count as a major philosophical influence on Thomson. It is probably the brush with Nietzsche that helped develop Thomson's distrust of people's purported motives, and to instead look to a baser interest such as power and profit. Thomson's intellectual growth continued even in spite of his big fish in a small pond stint at Kansas City Polytechnic, the only institution of higher education available to locals. He founded a club for fellow fish out of water intellectuals called the Pansophists, which published a newsletter and held meetings for the purpose of reveling in their collective intellectual superiority.

There is, however, a startling deficit of appreciation, or even awareness, of Thomson's musical opinions and positions within the field of philosophy of music. Here I wish to argue that Thomson's views, though not explicitly philosophical, are of great philosophical as well as musicological and historical interest. This is especially pertinent because of the aforementioned dearth of a sociological perspective in contemporary philosophy of music. Thomson is an able spokesperson for the use of sociological explanations to elucidate our understanding of music, without the ideological baggage of

a Marxists approach. I think his views desperately need to be examined by philosophers of music. For these reasons, I would like to make these views known, and I propose to do that here.

My project is to summarize and discuss Thomson's philosophically interesting views so that they may be of use to both philosophers of music and scholars of Thomson's writings. This is not so easy a task as it sounds. Thomson, though a great writer with an uncanny style, was not a philosopher, he was not even an academic. As a result, he did not obey the conventions of clarity, precision, and rigor that have come to be synonymous with analytic philosophy. Rather, he valued a slick and readable literary style, one that has merit for its unique sentence construction and refreshing economy of language. His writing style is bold, and he clearly aims for each sentence to be as declarative and definitive as possible. Many of his sentences or phrases could easily be lifted out to serve as slogans for this or that view of music. Put side by side, one might wonder if they were from the pen of the same writer at all. He can appear to contradict himself even within single writings, or at least across several. When he does not explicitly contradict himself, he comes near implicitly doing so. This is why attributing philosophical beliefs about music to him is so challenging. It is quite difficult, but far from impossible. More than that, I suggest it is quite rewarding. I have thereby taken it upon myself to share the gems so carefully extracted from the tortuous mine shaft of his writings, and permit his ideas to be appreciated, enjoyed, and put to good use without any of the aforementioned pitfalls.

To this end, the remainder of this discussion will consist of three parts, a discussion of his metaphysical beliefs about music drawn from his 1981 essay "Music Does Not Flow", a summary and discussion of the main ideas of philosophical interest in *The State of Music*, and finally a discussion of the validity, soundness, and value of the ideas discussed in the two prior sections. The final section will also involve an attempt to locate or assign to Thomson a position within the intellectual spaces existent in contemporary philosophy of music.

CHAPTER 2

THOMSON'S METAPHYSICS OF MUSIC

What Musicians Do

My discussion of Thomson's philosophy of music begins at what I consider to be the most logical place, with the question of what music is. Thomson's answer is famously preserved in an apocryphal story told by composer Ned Rorem. The story goes as follows:

When I first beheld Virgil Thomson, in the early forties, he was on a stage for one of those benighted roundtables about Meaning in Music. His fellow panelists, straining for a definition of the art, were about to settle for the Bard's "concord of sweet sounds" when Thomson yelled: "Boy, was he wrong! You might as well call poetry a succession of lovely words, or painting a juxtaposition of pretty colors. Music's definition is: That which musicians do." Which settled the matter.²

This definition may seem wrong to both philosophers and music lovers, but it is undeniably a philosophical view. Further, its merits, which may not be forthcoming to someone repelled by this kind of sociological thinking, are also eloquently stated by Rorem: "Thomson, like all composers, disdained metaphoric ascriptions to music as mere cushion for the emotions. His businesslike summation was the first professional remark I'd ever heard from a so-called creative artist, and I was soon to hear more, from the horse's mouth, when I quit school to work with the master."³

As I have said, this view is unconventional within philosophy of music. Looking at Jerrod Levinson's paper, "The concept of music" can demonstrate this.⁴ Its approach is representative of the more metaphysical approach I have already mentioned; it details

² Ned Rorem *A Ned Rorem Reader* pp.223

³ Ibid.

⁴ Jerrod Levenson "The Concept of Music" from *Music, Art, and Metaphysics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 267-278

different necessary and sufficient conditions for the definition of music. The first stab is to call music organized sound, and the final step is to call music intentionally organized sound for the purposed of aesthetic enjoyment as music. The last step is better than the first, but I find it interesting that a sociological definition like Thomson's does not even occur to Levinson, especially since he seems to be trying to exhaust all possible strategies for defining music. In this section, my objective is to clarify this kind of definition, and discuss possible counterexamples.

As I have already said, the view that "Music is what musicians do" is clearly sociological, like saying science is what scientists do, law is what lawyers do, and philosophy is what philosophers do. In spite of this view's apparent circularity, there is a long tradition of views of this kind. They work as follows: rather than provide necessary and sufficient conditions for X and then explain the existence of a profession or academic field as a group of people who do X, one switches around the cart and the horse. The sociological approach treats the existence of groups of people as a primitive, and then treats X as the result of the activity of a group. The group is the ontologically reliable entity; X is a social construction dependent on certain patterns of social organization and the procedures that ensure this organization. So, there are people called musicians, they are so called because they have special knowledge and skills no one else has. Whatever this group of musicians sanctions as the kind of thing they do, that is music.

I hope the value of these approaches is clear, but in case it is not, I will elaborate. The project of giving necessary and sufficient conditions for anything at all, even something as banal as a chair, can be surprisingly difficult. Every philosopher knows this. This difficulty leads some to abandon the practice of giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the identity of a concept altogether, and try different approaches. Of these alternative approaches, the sociological one is one of the most successful, because it acknowledges the importance of social groups in having authority over certain disciplinary domains. Therefore, this approach is in a sense a way of appealing to an authority, the authority of the group over its intellectual domain, without necessarily buying into that authority. The usefulness of this approach is especially salient with respect to music because music is so diverse, and includes so many avant-garde permutations and international varieties, that a clean-cut essentialist definition is

particularly hard to come by. Levinson's paper demonstrates this problem quite well. On the other hand, if music is just what musicians do, then this problem does not exist. If one can take for granted a group of people called musicians, then whatever is appropriately similar to what they do gets called music. Now I admit this view is not without problems and shortcomings; I was merely interested in clearly explicating it. However, there are problems, some of which hinge on how one handles the more specific details of the theory, and others with the approach in general. I will now proceed to discuss some of these.

Having made the sociological view of music more philosophically respectable, I would like to consider what counterexamples might present problems for this approach to defining music. The first, and most obvious problem is that musicians do things besides music. They eat and go to the bathroom. They drive cars and make love. Surely these things are not music, even though musicians do them. This is an easy fix, however, because we simply narrow the definition to that which musicians do professionally. But even this may not do. Musicians may paint walls or deliver pizzas professionally, but this does not make these things music. Again, another narrowing seems necessary, that music has to involve the skills and knowledge that allow the person to count as a musician.

Here one might appear to run into trouble, for what is to say that there is a uniform set of skills and articles of knowledge that allow a person to count as a musician at all? Also, don't amateur musicians have said skills and knowledge, but not engage in music professionally? The second issue is easier to fix than the first. It seems that the skills and knowledge are at the core, regardless of whether the individual actually earns money as a musician. This fact obtains in our society, where many musical amateurs are still appropriately referred to as musicians, even if they are then subsequently distinguished from the professionals. As for the second problem, whether we can justifiably believe in a group called musicians without identifying something called music is trickier, for if we cannot, then Thomson's whole view collapses into itself on account of the circularity I was trying to avoid. But I don't think the cause is lost just yet, because one can make some sense of an idea of a social group without having a clearly identifiable set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the identification of the group. My recourse here is to the Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" approach. This view

allows one to make identity and resemblance claims without appeal to necessary and sufficient conditions. In Wittgenstein's simile, members of a family are said to resemble each other because of a variety of shared traits, none necessarily held in common by all. Two members may have similar hair, another three might have the same nose, and several others might share the same eyes. Yet, for all this, we have no problem speaking of a family.⁵

For music, the approach would work as follows: find a paradigm case of a musician, Beethoven, Stevie Wonder, or perhaps your friend in a rock band. See which of their activities seems paradigmatically musical. Perhaps it's being able to play an instrument, or read and write music. Perhaps it's a talent for whistling catchy tunes. Maybe it's just the ability to talk intelligently about music, or perhaps it's an intuitive ability to treat sounds around them as musical material. The list could go on. One could argue that such a family resemblance view, when used sociologically on musician's behavior, allows for a meaningful and useful way of deciding if someone might count as a musician, and if so, perhaps accepting the activities of this diverse group as music isn't so problematic after all. Of course, there is a lot more to be said about this view, both in terms of other interpretations and further development. I will proceed to do the former, while saving the latter for the section dealing with *The State of Music*.

While I treat the above interpretation of Thomson's view that "Music's definition is: that which musicians do" as both the most correct and the most in keeping with Thomson's other views, I do not hesitate to point out that a few other interpretations are possible, and I feel they ought to be discussed briefly. One alternate interpretation is that Thomson's view is a more direct statement about musical ontology. That is, music is not really music unless it is performed. Thinking about music, talking about music, and even certain kinds of listening are not real cases of music, only performance, the paradigm case of musicians doing what they do, is. This view is narrower and less tenable than my prior interpretation, but it has some interesting points of contact with Thomson's other views that merit discussion. As will be seen in more detail later, Thomson had a certain refreshing hostility toward an overly abstract or detached involvement with music. It was

⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations* (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 2001)pp. 27e Paragraph 65-67

this feeling, along with concerns about the commercialization of music, that resulted in Thomson's polemics against the "Appreciation Racket", his term for the manner in which music appreciation is taught, involving only biographical information about the composer and a quick listen to some of their music. He thought this was a trick to sell records and codify the performing repertory of major orchestras rather than a musical education. Because the children are not doing what musicians do (playing and performing music), they are not learning anything musically substantive or valuable. While I am sympathetic to some of these claims, I think the more valuable parts of them are easily reconciled with the main, sociological interpretation, and that the ontological interpretation is too narrow to really be as interesting or useful.

Music Does Not Flow

Thomson rarely engages the metaphysical questions about music so central to contemporary philosophy of music. When he does address such issues, his claims can be confusing and they can be either ambiguous or inconsistent with other claims he makes. A good example of this is his language regarding the matter of musical emotions. He sometimes says music expresses emotion. He sometimes goes into great detail in discussing how a piece of music is good or bad based on how clearly it communicated its subject matter. Other times he speaks of music affecting the viscera, as if it arouses emotions. Finally, in some places, he seems to understand and sympathize with those who wonder, what if anything, could something as non-specific as music possibly communicate. This is only one example of how difficult attributing a philosophical view about music to Thomson can be. There are plenty of others I will not address.

One important reason for this failure to be precise when discussing difficult metaphysical questions about music was that he probably didn't think they were terribly important. As I hope will become clear in the next section of this paper, Thomson was an arch-reductionist about music. Most of the interesting things he has to say about music concern attempts to explain its goings-on by appealing to various cultural, historical, and most saliently, economic factors. The resulting view is a refreshingly sparse, deflationary view that strips musical aesthetics of many of its metaphysical trappings, leaving behind

only humans and how they get along in its wake. Whether this view is right, valuable, or even philosophy at all is a subject for the final section of this thesis. Whichever possibility is the case, the appreciation of Thomson's views as philosophy suffers without an attempt to make sense of his metaphysical views of music. To solve the problems of his sloppiness and apparent contradiction, I have chosen only one essay entitled "Music does not flow" from 1981 and will treat it as his definitive statement on these matters.⁶ I chose this essay among the many others (or the excerpts from many others) that might help elucidate his views because it was written near the end of his life and addresses at least some of the major metaphysical questions about music with a straightforwardness uncommon throughout his earlier career. Most of the other writings that mention these issues seem compatible with the position taken in "Music does not flow", so I see no reason to exhaustively comb through his writings to eliminate every possible inconsistency. It's all here.

"Music does not flow" begins with a bold debunking of a historicist or Hegelian view of music. These types of views describe historical processes as naturally and inevitably moving toward a pre-determined end point. Thomson is not interested in such teleology. As far as he is concerned, it is not an entity or force moving along a predetermined path. Rather it is a set of techniques and practices, the arrangement and rearrangement of some common materials throughout history. The common materials are three: Tones, intervals, and their ordering in time (rhythm). These materials are arranged according to techniques and practices, which are inventions. These inventions either catch on, or they do not. The history of music is just the history of which of these inventions were invented at what point in time, and not some other, and the consequence of their adoption.

Having fired his opening salvo, Thomson quickly raises the question of music and emotions, as he believes this to be the primary value of music. He says:

In all these kinds of entertainment [plays, films, and operas (ballets)] the element that affects people most intensely, that makes chills to run up and down the spine, the digestive apparatus to work faster, and the breath to hold or catch, is music. This element has no precise meaning and no dictionary, But it does provoke intensities; and it provokes these so rapidly

⁶ Virgil Thomson. "Music does not flow" in *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 82-93

and so powerfully that all the other elements---the verbal ones and the visual ones for sure---more often than not call on music's transports for reinforcing their own cooler communication. Music's lack of specific meaning, moreover, allows it to be attached to other continuities without contradicting them.⁷

He treats this as an explanation for recyclability, the use of the same piece of music for a variety of different (emotionally dissimilar) occasions; for example, setting the same tune to both a happy and sad text and having both settings seem emotionally moving.

Thomson thinks music is most effective when accompanying another art or occasion specifically because of its lack of expressive specificity. This explains many of its functional applications, but the question of why it is expressive when it has no specific content or meaning remains open. This question is especially salient when the music is non-functional, what Peter Kivy calls "music alone". His answer to this question is as follows: "Well, it would seem that over recent centuries there has developed for instrumental music, if not a vocabulary or meanings, a way of suggesting things that is capable, shall we say, of halfway evoking them and thus of attaching its own intensities to quite a variety of thoughts."⁸

Thomson identifies three main types of musical evocations. The first is combination with words and singing, which he calls strophic. The second is the regulation of movement as in marching or dancing, which he calls choric. The final is the stimulation of the intellect by innovative design, which he, tongue-in-cheek, calls spastic. Most concert music written after 1600 for the primary purpose of being listened to as music contain expressive devices reducible to one of the three aforementioned categories.

Thomson speaks of music as if it communicates. What exactly does music communicate? His answer is: anxiety and relief patterns. They have the property of both directly affecting the viscera, and indirectly affecting the intellect. What these are beyond that mere phrase is hard to say, but it is likely that he meant something like the theory elaborated by Leonard Meyer in *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, which I will summarize.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 83

⁸ Ibid. pp.83

Meyer's theory is built on what he calls the "psychological" theory of emotions, which derives from Dewey's conflict theory. This approach to emotions treats them as undifferentiated energies activated by unconventional events. In other words, emotions are aroused when our expectations are not consistent with actual experience.⁹ This may seem far off the mark, and Peter Kivy for one, dismisses it readily. I think this is a rash step, and that this view has some merit. Consider driving, for example. One may be in an emotionally neutral state while driving (or at least, emotionally indeterminate) but an emotional reaction occurs as soon as anything unexpected happens. If another driver is rude and cuts us off, we become upset. If we make it through a yellow light just before it turns red, we are happy with ourselves. Another example is humor. We often laugh at jokes precisely because the comedian purposely violates our habitual expectations of how the story should proceed. Setting aside the question of whether this is an accurate view of human emotions, I think it has a lot of explanatory power for questions of emotion and meaning in aesthetics, especially for forms of art that occur over time. Consider film. We often react with a variety of emotions every time we are surprised by what happens on the screen, and we often think less of a film if it conforms too closely to our antecedent expectations, we call it "boring." The view applies in a similar way to music. We, as musical listeners situated in a particular culture, develop expectations of what music "should" sound like, and what notes or chords should follow others. We often speak of a piece "sounding right" or of something "not quite making sense" without bothering to resort to musicological explanations of tonality, harmony, and structure. When something disrupts our expectations, it creates tension, and when our expectations are once again met, we feel release. Thus, Meyer sees music as a system of sonically stimulated tension and release wherein the composer plays with our conventional expectations and manipulates these patterns for emotional effect.

This view is roughly compatible with what Thomson says in "Music does not flow", but some questions should be raised. One is whether Thomson buys into the Psychological theory of emotions. Because Thomson does not say much that would allow him to be placed in any camp of psychology or philosophy of mind, this is a very hard question to answer. I will assume that Thomson does at least agree with Meyer's theory

⁹ Leonard Meyer. *Emotion and Emotion in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) pp.12-28

of emotions, but the question remains open. Another question is how music is appealing in the first place. Meyer's account explains our acquisition of norms and expectations from our culture well enough, but doesn't account for what we might call the "intrinsic appeal" of music. This is where contemporary philosophy of music concentrates a lot of its efforts.

So far, Thomson's words pledge allegiance to both an emotivist and an arousal theory of musical expression, and the difference between these views must be made clear to understand why this might be problematic. An emotivist theory is one that assumes that emotional state E is somehow contained in music M, whether it was intentionally put there or not. Emotional State E is therefore part of music M and the having emotional state E upon listening to M is to receive the emotion that the music is expressing. An arousal theorist, by contrast, believes the hearing of music M to be the cause of any emotional state E that occurs during the music as a result of listening. The key difference is that an emotivist believes that emotions are somehow "encoded" in works of art, whereas an arousal theorist thinks arts are more like drugs, direct stimulations of emotional responses, but not the communication of any specific feelings or information. A third position should also be mentioned, the cognitivism of Peter Kivy. For Kivy, music neither arouses nor conveys emotions; rather the listener perceives them in the music, regardless of whether they are "really" there. What I mean by this is that musical listeners hear a piece of music as emotionally moving because the music resembles other sounds associated with sadness, such as a sad human voice. Kivy's famous example is a picture of a St. Bernard at the beginning of his book *Sound Sentiment*, with the caption "the St. Bernard has a sad face." Whether the St. Bernard is actually sad or not is immaterial, because of the way the St. Bernard's face just happens to be arranged by nature, it looks sad to human eyes. In the same way, music can sound happy or sad in virtue of its resembling key indices of human emotion. I should emphasize that this view holds that music does not actually cause emotional experiences, rather it presents occasions on which emotional properties are recognized, much like looking at a picture of a sad child won't necessarily make you sad, though the child unquestionably looks sad.

In light of his view that music communicates anxiety and relief patterns, as well as the claim from earlier that music “halfway” evokes thoughts, Thomson could be considered an arousal theorist. Indeed, the strongest case for this perspective comes from his statements about recyclability. If he is certain that the same music can accompany a variety of emotionally distinct occasions equally well, then it seems to imply that this is because music is arousing emotions, which are then attached to whatever is juxtaposed with them.

This line of argument also involves an answer to an argument originally raised by Eduard Hanslick and later called the argument from cognitive content by Russell Dancy. It asks how music can either communicate or cause an emotional response when the emotions involved with musical experiences aren't about anything in particular. If hearing happy music doesn't make you happy about anything specific, nor hearing sad music make you sad about anything specific, then perhaps the effects of listening to music do not count as legitimate emotional events. Perhaps they are something else. Thomson's account understood as an arousal theory allows one to say that music alone does not involve cognitive content, but that affecting the viscera in the appropriate ways is enough to stimulate a physical and psychological state more congruent with some kinds cognitive content than others. By congruent with cognitive content, I mean that there is a similarity to real-life pairings of cognitive content and visceral state. For example, an excited visceral state would probably be more congruent with some cognitive content that would induce an emotional response appropriate to excitement, sexual arousal or danger perhaps. On the other hand, depressing cognitive content would be very incongruent with music that promotes an excited visceral state. But the point is that visceral arousal as Thomson's view would have it, is non-specific with respect to cognitive content, perhaps only acting as a filter for what kinds of cognitive content will seem appropriate to combine with the musically aroused visceral states. If this additional cognitive content can be supplied extra-musically, either by juxtaposition with another art (theater, opera, ballet, film) or by the individual listener, then perhaps the argument from cognitive content is not so dangerous to this view as it first appeared. But this depends on Thomson's view being an arousal theory of music; there is also room to think of it as an emotivist account.

The main motivation for labeling Thomson as a musical emotivist is that he makes abundant use of the word “express” in talking about music, saying that music expresses emotions and feelings. An excellent instance of this is Thomson’s short article “The Problem of sincerity”, which talks about authentic and inauthentic musical performances.¹⁰ The main reason this challenges my arousal theory reading is that the verb “express” implies, on an emotivist reading, that the emotion is already contained within the music and is being transmitted from composer to performer to listener the way a TV signal is transmitted from the broadcast station, to a satellite in orbit, and finally to a television. Clearly, transmission differs from arousal. It seems as though music either contains emotions in the way that a compact disc contains music, or that music causes any one of several possible emotional responses by acting as a mere stimulus for emotional and psychological processes in the listener. If one is an arousal theorist, then music does not express emotions, it just causes them. If one is an emotivist, then music does contain, and express emotions, and there is such a thing as being right or wrong about the emotional content of a piece of music. Since Thomson uses terms that imply aspects of both views, one must argue that he either really adhered to one view or the other, and create an error theory to explain the presence of the inconsistent terminology, or else create a new theory that reconciles the tension. My strategy is to try to fit Thomson in the arousal theorist camp, but also to seek reconciliation.

To see if one can incorporate the emotivist language used by Thomson within a larger arousal theory of emotions, I refer the reader to the discussion of the anxiety and relief patterns. Thomson’s claim that these anxiety and relief patterns affect both the viscera and the intellect is a stab at answering the problem of emotions in music more fully. In *The State of Music*, he says that visceral states produce emotions and the emotions produce thoughts. There are two ways to interpret this. One is to say that emotions and even thoughts supervene on visceral states, whatever these may be. The other is to say that there is a definite and asymmetrical causal relationship between visceral states, emotions, and intellectual activity, of the form $V \rightarrow E \rightarrow I$ but not the reverse. On this interpretation, the three components maintain their separate ontological

¹⁰ Virgil Thomson “The Problem of Sincerity” in *Music Reviewed 1940-1954* (New York: Vintage, 1967), pp. 334-336

identities, but are still related to each other in a regular and predictable way. Though it is impossible to be sure which he means exactly, I throw my hat with the second interpretation, as he nowhere expresses a view of the mind that would suggest he believed in the ontological supervenience of thoughts or emotions on the viscera, and he certainly doesn't seem to want to say that these apparently separate entities are really one. If he did, I don't see why he would have distinguished them in the first place. In either case, the arousal theory again seems to be a better interpretation than a more classical emotivist position.

To clinch my case, I would like to make one further point. Thomson's appeal to the viscera stimulating the emotions, and the intellect in turn, makes for a clean separation between what Peter Kivy calls contour and convention. Contour refers to aspects of music that are emotionally provocative in virtue of their auditory properties resembling certain voice tones associated certain emotional states. Convention refers to the specifics of a musical system that are shaped by the culture that brought them into being. Thomson's claim that "over recent centuries there has developed for instrumental music, if not a vocabulary or meanings, a way of suggesting things that is capable, shall we say, of halfway evoking them and thus of attaching its own intensities to quite a variety of thoughts"¹¹ seems to hint at the possibility of a surprisingly sophisticated account of music with room to account for both contour and convention. The key word in my interpretation is "developed" at the beginning of the sentence. The fact that this way of "suggesting things that is capable...of halfway evoking them"¹² developed within the context of non-functional western music suggests that convention plays a rather considerable role in Thomson's musical metaphysics. If this is true, then I suggest the following interpretation of Thomson's appeals to expression; when Thomson speaks of expression, the arguments outlined above might allow us to think he means it as a practice that functions by convention rather than a natural feature of music. More specifically, he might mean that a composer or performer might perform better if their visceral states are similarly affected by the music as those of the audience, (as opposed to, say, a detached musician who goes through the motions and feels nothing while he

¹¹ Thomson "Music does not flow" pp. 83

¹² Ibid. pp. 84

plays). This allows us to integrate talk of expression and sincerity into a model of expressive convention that is ultimately compatible with the arousal theory interpretation of Thomson's view, and thereby prevents a potential contradiction from splintering his position. While speculative, this may go a great distance toward resolving some of the tensions in Thomson's language concerning music and emotions.

Before moving on, however, I would also like to discuss the possible compatibility of Thomson's statements about music and emotion with Kivy's cognitivism. The case to be made here is that the mention of the "halfway" evocation of emotions, or the halfway suggestion of extramusical entities might be a crude and indirect way of saying that listeners hear these things in the music though they aren't there. Perhaps Charles Ives "The Unanswered Question" mimics the intonation pattern of a person asking a question closely enough that we might hear a resemblance there, though without the program notes we would never be guaranteed to know exactly what it was supposed to depict. More importantly, however, is the compatibility of Kivy's evolutionary account of musical resemblance with Thomson's belief in innate musical talent. One could certainly claim that while we experience music as though it were causing emotional happenings, we might just perceive the emotions in the music and misdescribing the happening. Explained in this way, calling Thomson a cognitivist would also allow for the reconciliation of the emotivist and arousal theoretic terminologies in his writings. As I have already mentioned, Thomson's view seems to have a distinction between contour and convention already built in, though it may not work like Kivy's. The main drawback to describing Thomson as a cognitivist is that his explanation of the mechanics of the relationship between music and emotions hangs on talk about the stimulation of the viscera, which seems to be a non-cognitive process. There may still be room to discuss these visceral stimulations as cognitive processes, but such an account would be highly speculative. Thomson doesn't say enough about how the viscera work, and Kivy explains our responses to music through a combined appeal to evolution and formal structure. The evolutionary aspect is compatible with Thomson's account, the emphasis on formal structure seems quite distant from it.

Thomson proceeds to discuss the three permanent elements of music, which are once again; tones, harmony, and their ordering in time (rhythm). The influence of these

permanent materials over musical conventions involves the practical limitations that hinder the functional use of music. For example, the ordering in time does the most to shape the other features of the piece, regulating as it does the actual patterns of tension and release, and by consequence the emotional experiences involved. But, as Thomson points out “these designs, for all their constantly recurring elaborations in different times and places, are limited by the inability of the human mind to perceive as a unity any count larger than two, three, or just possibly a fast five. Rhythm, therefore, is hopelessly tied up to footwork and to language, to meaning, to expression. It can copy, but it cannot grow or evolve.”¹³

As for the expressive power of tones themselves, Thomson attributes it to the harmonic (overtone) series as found in nature. These are a fixed series of intervals that occur concurrently with the sounding of any definite tone. The tonic pitch and its overtones can be arranged into scales for the convenience of human musical purposes, which among other things, seek to organize the occurrence of these pitches harmonically and rhythmically. Pitches originating from distant tonics are likely to produce interference patterns that obscure any clear pitch. According to Thomson, this phenomenon is what we call noise.

To support the basis of tonality in the overtone series, Thomson mentions a few studies he apparently became aware of second-hand. One concerns a group of test-subjects who first hear a fifth through their skull as well as their ear, and report hearing noise; but when played both tones only through the ear, they instantly recognize a fifth. The other is a gesture toward a book by the Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet.¹⁴ This book suggests that human beings are disposed to hear the overtone series because the shape of the ear canal is such as to compel the air within to vibrate in such a way.

This leads to Thomson’s hope that not only Pitches, but also Intervals have an existence in nature. He observes that some intervals are *ceteris paribus* naturally louder (able to reach higher volumes) than others. They allow sound to travel further. He also observes that musically talented children easily recognize six intervals. He then further observes that some intervals seem to have direct, natural affects of causing pleasure and

¹³ Ibid. pp. 84

¹⁴ *Les Fondements de la musique dans la conscience humaine*

pain. This seems to tie back into his claim that music is a series of anxiety and relief patterns, and supports his viscerally centered version of the arousal theory. Thomson's final conclusions on the relationship of the permanent materials to musical style seem to reinforce this reading further. "I see no reason to deny that the constants of music, which begin with rhythm and meter and go on to cover all the possible combinations of tones within any harmonic series, are not only structural elements for aiding memory but expressive vocabularies as well. Not dictionaries of emotion, not at all, but repertoires of device for provoking feelings without defining them."¹⁵ The final phrase "provoking feelings without defining them" strongly rules out an emotivist reading, leaving only cognitivism or the arousal theory to choose between. Since I have already explained my doubts that Kivy's cognitivism is the best fit, I think the arousal theory is all that remains.

Thomson proceeds to discuss the relationship between music and language. This discussion should be taken with special seriousness, for prosody was Thomson's specialty. His most enduring musical accomplishments are his operas set to words by Gertrude Stein, and much of their fame and favor comes from the perception that his musical setting helps demystify Stein's famously cryptic words. He tells it well:

The whole setup of her [Gertrude Stein's] writing, from the time I first encountered it back in 1919, in a book called *Tender Buttons*, was to me both exciting and disturbing. Also, as it turned out, valuable. For with meanings jumbled and syntax violated, but with the words themselves all the more shockingly present, I could put those texts to music with a minimum of temptation toward the emotional conventions, spend my whole effort on the rhythm of the language, and its specific Anglo-American sound, adding shape, where that seemed to be needed, and it usually was, from music's own devices.¹⁶

What Thomson did, then, was set Stein's meaningless texts according to the grammatical structure of the sentences and phrases rather than attending to the semantic meaning of the words involved. Thomson might well agree with Schoenberg that the relationship with the semantic meaning of the text is arbitrary,¹⁷ but with the syntactic structure of a

¹⁵ Thomson, "Music does not flow" pp. 87

¹⁶ Virgil Thomson, *Music With Words* pp.52

¹⁷ Arnold Schoenberg "The relationship to the text" in *Style and Idea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) pp.141-144.

sentence is not. Rather, it is a deep, structural connection that affects the practical success or failure of an effort at text setting. This shows that Thomson thinks, as Peter Kivy and the Camerata do¹⁸, that spoken language is a close relative of music; possibly a sibling, possibly a parent. Thomson also seems to believe, as Steve Reich does, that certain languages lend themselves to certain types of rhythms and musical techniques. Reich goes so far as to say that the character of a nation's folk music is largely determined by the rhythms of the spoken language, a view he attributes to Bartok. Reich's examples are illuminating:

The relationship between folk music and language can be appreciated in our own time by observing how successful rock and roll is in English and often in German as well. But do you really want to hear Italian or French Rock? This is, I believe, based on the rhythm of English and German in contrast to the more fluid rhythms of the romance language. Similarly, it is no accident that bel canto arose in Italy and, at least to my ear, sounds artificial as a vocal style in English.¹⁹

These sentiments seem to be exactly in keeping with what Thomson has in mind, though there is one apparent point of contention that requires some attention. Thomson says at times that tunes can cross borders and jump languages, yet the connection between music and language as described by Reich seems to cause problems for this claim. Careful attention to Reich's words, however, will show that Reich's argument can be applied to language groups or families (i.e. romance languages, Germanic languages) rather than individual languages themselves. A tune can easily jump from one language to another in the same language group or family. As an example, the German rock tune "99 Red Balloons" has had a fecund life with English words, as has Kurt Weill's song "Mack die Messer" known in English as "Mack the Knife". If such a similarity between these views is legitimate, then Thomson would seem to be locating the foundational elements of music (the permanent materials of music, in his phrase) in human hard-wiring, and suggesting that these materials are then subject to wide-ranging cultural modification.

Thomson moves on to a discussion of the determinants of the history of music, and applies them to the recent history of music. Recall that for Thomson, music's history

¹⁸ Kivy, Peter. *Music Alone; Philosophical Reflections of the Purely Musical Experience*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) pp. 18-56

¹⁹ Steve Reich "Music and Language" in *Writings on Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp.193-201

consists of the invention of new styles and techniques for the permutation of the basic material of music. He believes the invention of such technical devices and the styles that employ them prompts the occurrence of an era in musical history, or “musical energy booms” as he would rather call them. He believes these have a life span of 300 years. Some examples of this phenomenon include the Monolinear music of medieval times, contrapuntal music, and Renaissance Polyphony. Predictably, Thomson believes that when new compositional techniques come to the fore, they spur the development of new styles. This permits a deflationary account of the history of music, one that features his signature gloss. Some examples of the new techniques that have an influence of contemporary music include harmony, free structure, freely differentiated counterpoint and rhythm, and contemporary orchestration. These techniques were all invented around 1600 or later, and classical concert music would largely be impossible without them. To take the same point further, one might point to the development of Jazz improvisation, Atonality, and minimalist styles as examples of the recent history of music being shaped by new compositional techniques.

Thomson enriches this discussion of the technical substrate of musical history by providing a brief, and admittedly crude, sketch of the economic forces shaping the development of concert music to its modern form. After the French Revolution came the network of buildings and institutions that is the musical establishment as we know it. These include symphony halls, orchestras, publishers, copyright laws, structured musical pedagogy, and the rise of the bourgeoisie to serve as a paying public for the performance of non-commissioned works. These tendencies have been carried into the modern era by the involvement of the radio and recording industries. Radio and recordings take the business interest of classical music away from successful performance and transfer it into profitable mass media dissemination, a change not lost on the twentieth century’s most famous philosopher of music, Theodor W. Adorno. This change takes classical music away from being a fresh, vital experience like a rock concert and transforms it into the production of recordings for sale and replay. This not only affects the managerial and financial priorities of music, but also threatens its autonomy as a cultural institution, and autonomy that Thomson feels is essential to music’s thriving.

The culmination of the article is a reinforcement of the point mentioned at the beginning of the piece; that music is not the kind of thing that progresses. It consists ontologically only of sounds, and the only thing that ultimately shapes music is the various techniques used to manipulate and organize those sounds. These sounds are of a special kind, and affect the viscera due to their use of clear pitches; techniques for their organization and manipulation affect the viscera all the more. This in turn, causes stimulation of emotions and thoughts. Music is functionally useful when the visceral stimulations facilitate some other human activity, whether practical or artistic. Abstract, non-functional music for the purpose of listening is a recent development, and with it has developed a whole set of culture bound conventions and practices that make such music appear to express specific emotions or convey extramusical information. It is not to be forgotten however, that the root of this process is a change in material circumstances, the creation of new musical devices and techniques. These are more like inventions than stages of evolutionary development.

The view that the history of music is determined by the compositional techniques and processes used by musicians, as well as the technologies that musicians employ to make music, is a species of a view called technological determinism. Though not the same as economic determinism, it has some important similarities. Though often associated with Marxism (as economic determinism is), Bruce Bimber argues persuasively in his article “Karl Marx and the Three Faces of Technological Determinism,” that Marx was not in fact a technological determinist.²⁰ Thomson, however, seems to be one. He does not seem to believe that certain musical inventions are the inevitable outcomes of prior musical advances, nor does he seem to believe that the history of music is best explained teleologically. Rather, he seems to hold what Bimber calls an “unintended consequence view” wherein features of technologies have unintended but powerful consequences on the future. For example, the invention of the automobile had the unintended consequences of polluting the air, as well as shaping the design of many American major cities to revolve around networks of highways, sprawl

²⁰ Bruce Bimber, “Karl Marx and the Three Faces of Technological Determinism,” *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 20, No. 2. (May, 1990): pp. 333-351

out and become decentralized. As an unintended consequence of this, many American major cities lack quality mass-transit systems.

This approach to technological determinism seems more like what Thomson believes about the history of music, but Bimber argues this to be a form of indeterminism, not determinism. I agree that it can be treated as a case of luck, but if one is antecedently committed to determinism, as Thomson apparently was, then one could always believe that whatever unplanned human events occur are still ultimately determined by the laws of physics. The introduction of any other laws, be they social, technological, or economic, may only be an explanatory heuristic. Their falsehood does not render determinism *tout court* false. This discussion is important to the discussion of Thomson's economic determinism that will occur in a later section of this essay.

Musical Portraits

Possibly the most philosophically and aesthetically interesting product of Virgil Thomson's is not a piece of writing but a rare and unique genre of composition, the "musical portrait." Thomson expert and biographer Anthony Tommasini aptly raises these questions in his book *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits*, the definitive (and only) large-scale study of these unique creations:

What can music express? Some twentieth century musicians, Stravinsky among them, try to argue that music can express nothing other than commentary upon itself or other music. Stravinsky's music from his neo-Classic period is sometimes described as music about older music. It could be argued that even so seemingly "meaningful" a piece as Messiaen's Quartet for the end of Time is more about Rhythm than it is about Eternity. But one music genre for which this viewpoint presents special difficulties is the abstract music portrait.²¹

My aim in this section is to see what sense can be made of these portraits in light of what is already known from Thomson's metaphysical views on music discussed above.

²¹ Anthony Tommasini *Virgil Thomson's Musical Portraits* pp. 2

Though Thomson claims to be neither the creator nor the perfecter of this form, he is one of only a handful of composers to seriously contribute to the practice. The philosophical and aesthetic interest comes from the well-documented details of Thomson's compositional process. Thomson would usually compose these portraits in the presence of his subject, like a painter, and claimed to strive for an accurate representation of the character of his subject. Thomson's method for the composition of these portraits is something he called "disciplined spontaneity," an approach to portraiture that he adapted from his friend and collaborator Gertrude Stein's "Literary Portraits"; and indeed, he did strive to write these as spontaneously as possible. Picasso (possibly the most famous of some very illustrious portrait subjects) said of the process: "Ah, yes, of course! If I am working and you are in the room, anything I draw is automatically your portrait." Thomson himself acknowledges "My effort while at work is to write down whatever comes to me in the sitter's presence, hoping as I transcribe my experience that it will, as the painters say, 'make a composition.'"²² Tommasini has the following to say:

Thomson's insistence upon and need for contact with the personal presence of his sitters, as described above, is the most striking and unusual aspect of his procedure. He can "sketch" equally well a close friend or a stranger if he senses an ease of what is really psychic communication. If the sitter is closed and does not "give," either because of social posturing, emotional introversion, or excessive volatility of character, Thomson can not "receive" and can not compose. Thomson's sitters can sleep while being sketched because to sleep comfortably while being observed closely by someone else is a very trusting and "giving" act. But when the progress of these compositions so directly emanates from Thomson's psychic perceptions of the inner lives of his subjects, it is obviously essential for Thomson to place his sitters in a specific situation conducive both to portraiture and to this psychic exchange.

Of course, on one level, Thomson's whole procedure can be seen as the very personal method devised by one composer for facilitating his much sought-after discipline of spontaneity. Yet, Thomson describes the process of composing a musical portrait as if it were an objectively tested method with a codified set of procedures, the logical extension of which was mocked by Picasso in the story related above. Thomson believes he has found a viable "method" for writing musical portraits; though he

²² Virgil Thomson "On Portraits and Operas" in *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 273

would not urge it on another composer, he would not be displeased if it were “stolen” and put to use.

On another level, however, Thomson embraces his portraiture method as a vehicle for successful characterization. He believes that the portraits do bear some resemblances to their subjects, resemblances that those acquainted with the subjects should recognize. Yet, in the Preface to the Schirmer edition of selected piano portraits he writes that “the interest of these pieces of the musical public at large, however, must depend, of course, on whatever intrinsic merits they may be found to possess.”²³

I believe these works have said intrinsic merit, but whether they do or not is immaterial to the matter up for discussion. What is philosophically interesting is the tension between the idiosyncrasy of the procedure and the apparent reliability of its results. Even if one is forced to relegate the portraits to the realm of non-representational idiosyncratic fancy, their unique method of composition cries out for some further explanation. This “disciplined spontaneity” helps shroud these works in mystery. Due to the weak connection between the subject and the portrait one would like to ask how exactly the character or personality of a living, complex human being could possibly be represented in music. Thomson addresses the issue saying “As to what is a likeness in music, resemblance there, like characterization in opera writing, can come from divers (sic) directions. Music can imitate a gesture or typical way of moving, render a complexity or simplicity of feeling, evoke a style or period, recall the sound of a voice, or of birds or trumpets or hunting horns or marching armies.”²⁴ This answer, for all its detail, is unsatisfying, and is honest in capturing the complexity of the problem of representation in music. For my part the connection seems to be that Thomson is the composer of something called a musical portrait, and its stated content is the personality of the subject. This, combined with the diverse array of representative musical devices Thomson mentions above, seems to allow us to take Thomson’s claim to representation on faith.

I propose to reconcile the philosophical questions raised by Thomson’s musical portraits by an appeal to the contour/convention distinction I mentioned in discussing “Music Does Not Flow”. In that part of this essay, I suggested that perhaps one could

²³ Anthony Tommasini *Virgil Thomson’s Musical Portraits* pp. 19

²⁴ Virgil Thomson “On Portraits and Operas” pp. 83-84

speak of musical expression (of emotions) if one treats it entirely as a matter of convention. Perhaps musical representation can be dealt with in the same way. This is a particularly useful approach if one wants to account for both the high degree of personal idiosyncrasy Thomson's portraits involve, both as a matter of compositional method and of content, and their apparent objectivity. My suggestion is that the musical portraits be treated as a unique microcosm of the contributions of contour and convention in music generally. Thomson's portraits use western tonalities and instruments, but are organized according to features of Thomson's psychology. These psychological features are invisible to everyone else, but real enough to structure and organize a piece of music, even an apparently spontaneous one, in a way that makes them meaningful to those with an appropriate ability to key into Thomson's psychology. Thomson often composed these portraits for friends and intimates, and all portrait subjects were, without exception, alive at the same time as Thomson, even if the ages differed greatly. This means, of course, that a great deal of cultural and historical background information was already shared by all those involved in these musical portraits. Too often, the question of musical representation seems to revolve around intrinsicity; does the music represent its subject matter faithfully to anyone under any circumstances? Is the subject matter somehow "encoded" in the music for all to see, the way the fibonacci sequence is encoded into the structure of a pinecone? I am inclined to think that posing the question this way makes an answer impossible. Thomson's musical portraits no more represent their subjects with this kind of intrinsicity than Richard Strauss's tone poems represent the stories of Don Quixote or Don Juan without a program. Perhaps the test of representationality should be made only if the appropriate cultural and musical knowledge is shared by both the composer and listener, though I am not prepared to say what the "appropriate" level of shared knowledge would consist in; it would no doubt vary in each individual case.

Since I have put so much stock in Thomson's apparent distinction between the natural and the cultural aspects of music, the time has come to deal with it in full. A detailed account of the role of culture in shaping musical understanding, as well as music itself, follows in my discussion on *The State of Music*.

CHAPTER 3

THOMSON'S SOCIOLOGY OF MUSIC

The State of Music

The discussion surrounding “Music does not flow” left us with a fresh appreciation of the interaction between nature and culture in the history of western music and the development of musical styles. It also left us wondering if musical meaning and expression can be explained effectively by cultural influences, and if so, how? *The State of Music* is Thomson's full frontal assault on the issue of music and society. It can serve as a test case for the effectiveness of sociological approaches to music in providing causal explanation, generating useful predictions, and rendering music history more intelligible.

First published in 1939, *The State of Music* instantly established Thomson's reputation as a man of letters and an original musical thinker. The book did not sell well, but was a minor sensation in high-cultural and musical circles. It was in these circles that Thomson's descriptions of the goings-on in the musical world were praised for their accuracy, perception, and insight. The book, loosely organized though it is, amounts to nothing less than a practical manual for handling musical politics and a polemical pamphlet advocating the autonomy of music as a cultural institution. Like Thomson's other writings, its style is snappy and engaging but philosophically unclear. Anthony Tommasini has this to say:

For all its calls to action, *The State of Music* reads like a descriptive, not a polemical book. The polemics are neatly nestled into the audacious, brilliant, and wickedly funny descriptions. Thomson's technique is to seduce the reader through his writerly charm into going along with his generalization, and into agreeing with his polemics.²⁵

While I believe many observations and arguments of value are to be found in the pages of *The State of Music*, I will not settle for being seduced by rhetoric or writerly charm. Instead, the opinions and arguments within are to be held up to a higher critical and intellectual standard, though I will continue my policy of charity toward Thomson and his

²⁵ Anthony Tommasini *Virgil Thomson Composer on The Aisle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 306

views. Through this, I hope to extract what is of real value to contemporary philosophy of music.

The book begins with a clear annunciation of its sociological orientation: “Every profession is a secret society. The musical profession is more secret than most, on account of the nature of music itself. No other field of human activity is quite so hermetic, so isolated.”²⁶ While this may not be completely true, in that many fields of human activity are probably more hermetic and isolated, it is clear that music is to be treated according to the social processes that make up a secret society or a club. This literary conceit will persist throughout the book, making Thomson’s arguments catchy and easy to grasp even as it makes the imprecise or literally untrue. I beg the philosophical reader to appreciate the merits of this strategy.

How does this secret society work? Thomson’s first glossy answer gives an idea.

The professional rules are extremely simple. In the unwritten popular vein, or folk-style, anything goes. If a piece is written out and signed, then all the musician has to do is to execute the written notes clearly, accurately, and unhesitatingly at such a speed and with such variations of force as are demanded by the composer’s indications, good common sense, and the limitations of the instrument. Inability to do this satisfactorily can be corrected by instruction and practice. The aim of instruction and practice is to enable the musician to play fast and slow and loud and soft in any known rhythm, whether of the pulsating or of the measured kind, without any non-deliberate obscurity, and without any involuntary violation of the conventions of tonal “beauty” current in his particular branch of the art. The musician so prepared is master of his trade; and there are few emergencies he cannot handle, if he still likes music.²⁷

Also of interest is an appeal to “the nature of music” itself, which was discussed in “Music does not flow.” Thomson develops this point by saying “among the great techniques, music is all by itself, an auditory thing, the only purely auditory thing there is. It is comprehensible only to persons who can remember sounds. Trained or untrained, their personas are correctly called ‘musical.’ And their common faculty gives them

²⁶ Virgil Thomson *The State of Music* (New York: Vintage, 1962) pp. 15

²⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 17

access to a secret civilization completely impenetrable by outsiders.”²⁸ While music may not be the only purely auditory thing there is (what does purely auditory mean, anyway?) there is still reason to take the distinction between musical and non-musical persons seriously. Recalling “Music does not flow” once again, one might be able to cash out the distinction as follows: musical people are people who, for one reason or another, have viscera that are susceptible to being affected by musical sounds, they benefit from musical training. Those who are unmusical are oblivious to them, and indifferent to musical training. We all probably know someone who is unmusical in this sense, even if we are not interested in the visceral version of the arousal theory. Some people simply do not get much pleasure out of musical listening experiences. They may enjoy social ceremonies that feature music, but the music itself leaves them cold. We all may just as easily know someone who is hypersensitive to music, swooning to even the sounds of muzak and constantly surrounding themselves with musical stimulation. Thomson’s autobiography provides an excellent example of this; he describes himself “rolling on the floor in ecstasy at hearing for the first time in real string sound the repeated high F’s of the *Cavalleria Rusticana* Intermezzo.”²⁹ This little piece of anecdotal evidence is all the more compelling when one realizes that it was not the result of growing up in a musical family. Thomson’s own father was a paradigm case of a non-musical human being, and it may be Thomson’s awareness of their lack of musicality that accounts for his taking the distinction so seriously.

This distinction between musical and non-musical persons leads to the next point, the division of the musical world into subgroups. Musicians are the caste that administers this secret society, “proud, dogmatic, and insular.”³⁰ Once again, we see how music is “that which musicians do”, music is a secret society, and what its core members do determine what that society is all about. Those not in the secret musical society are either potential customers or not. Customers are those who might enter into some kind of economic exchange with the musical society. Of customers there are two kinds, music employers and music-consumers. Neither are musicians, neither are in the secret society.

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 16

²⁹ Virgil Thomson *Virgil Thomson* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967) pp.12 quoted in Tommasini *Composer on the Aisle*.

³⁰ Virgil Thomson *The State of Music* pp. 16

But the employers have some direct power and leverage over this society; the consumers have only very indirect influence.

Music-Consumers come in many kinds, and with varying degrees of musical sophistication. Thomson elaborates by saying “Sometimes a music consumer is musically literate to the point of executing string quartets in the home. Sometimes he can’t read a note. He is still a consumer if he likes music. And he likes music if he has visceral reactions to auditory stimuli.”³¹ There are conformist musical consumers. There are brilliant musical consumers. There are amateurs, there are dunces, and there are dupes. Whatever kind of consumer one talks about though, one must keep in mind that their primary role is supporting music. They buy tickets, fill auditoriums, applaud, and buy recordings. Their interest and money keep music going, and their approval and disapproval builds or busts individual careers and the development of stylistic trends.

The music employer is also of vital importance, but relations with him and the musicians are more strained.

The musician and his employer are like an Englishman and an American, or like a Spaniard and an Argentine. They think they are differing over principles and disliking each other intensely, when they are really not communicating at all. For what they speak, instead of being one language with different accents, as is commonly supposed, is really two languages with the same vocabulary. The grammar is the same grammar and the words are the same words, but the meanings are not the same meanings.³²

This is an excellent example of people from two different sociological groups “talking past each other” to use Thomas Kuhn’s famous phrase. And Thomson and Kuhn would agree that the reasons for this talking-past are due to the different background beliefs and experiences of the different groups informing their word uses and behaviors in subtly different ways. But, as Thomson aptly shows, these minor differences of belief and experience can make a vast difference in group membership or social interaction.

Thomson closes the chapter with a nice summary of his overall approach.

I am trying to tell in this roundabout way what it feels like to be a musician. Mostly it is a feeling of being different from everybody but other musicians and of inhabiting with these a closed world. This world functions interiorly like a republic of letters. Exteriorly it is a secret

³¹ Ibid. pp. 18

³² Ibid. pp. 21

society, and its members practice a mystery. The mystery is no mystery to us [musicians], of course; and any outsider is free to participate if he can. Only he never can. Because music-listening and music-using are oriented toward different goals than music-making, and hence nobody really knows anything about music-making except the music-makers. Everybody else is just neighbors or customers, and the music world is a tight little island entirely surrounded by them all.³³

And it is to the subject of the island of music and the neighbors surrounding it that I now turn my attention.³⁴

The musical society which has so far been discussed only with respect to its secrecy and uniqueness now gets described in rich detail. Thomson uses the metaphor of an Island where musical society is based. It is laid out in four concentric circles.

1. The outer one defines the requirements of Minimum Musicianship. These are musical literacy and an ability to play some instrument otherwise than by ear. Singing doesn't count in the literacy test. The basic instrumental skill usually turns out to be piano-playing. There are some exceptions; but roughly speaking, our musical state can be said to consist of fourth-grade pianists.
2. The next circle includes everybody who can play any instrument properly. Call this the region of Special Skills. It is divided into pie-shaped sections, each representing an instrument. The pianoforte has its section here just as the other instruments do, and there is a small terrain allotted to singers. The singers who have a right to inhabit the region of Special Skills are more often than not those who have had operatic experience. Although the pie-shaped sections are pretty well walled one from another, they are open at both ends. There is free access to them from the surrounding suburbs of Minimum Musicianship, and through any of them it is possible to pass into the higher circles.
3. The third region is Orchestral Conducting. Its altitude and climate are salubrious; the good things of life, including public honor, abound. The superiority of conducting as a professional status over mere instrumental virtuosity is due to the fact that its practice requires a broader understanding of both technique and style than playing an instrument does. Its practitioners have a happy life, not only on account of the attendant honors and general prosperity, but also because it is technically

³³ Ibid. pp. 23-24

³⁴ In doing this, I am largely bypassing chapters two and three. I do this because these chapters consist mostly of amusing but crude generalizations about the sociology of painting and poetry. They only contribute to Thomson's views of music as demonstrations of his sociological analyses. They are of little value to this essay because they do not explicitly concern music, nor do they discuss anything that meaningfully enriches points made elsewhere in the book.

the easiest specialty in all music. Residence in this region is usually limited, however, to persons who have migrated into it from the region of Special Skills. There is no other access normally.

4. The inner circle and summit of our mountain-city is Musical Composition. One does not have to go through Orchestral Conducting to get there, one can jump right over from special skills. It is a little difficult to get there directly from Minimum Musicianship. It is the summit of music because extended composition requires some understanding of all musical problems. Composers are the superior class in a musical society for the simple reason that they know more than anybody else does about music. This superiority is not necessarily reflected in their income-level.³⁵

The waters around the island teem with schools of painters. Enormous Titan-like poets that roam the seas in lonely isolation are seen occasionally.

The island is a cooperative civilization, owing to the fact that music is a collaborative enterprise. There is, however, some conflict on this island, as the musicians in sections two and three, called musical executants, have frequent disagreement with composers on the summit of the island. These conflicts stem from the two kinds of musicians practicing music in very different ways. The executants are more fiscally secure, but must submit to the autonomy and authority of the composer, who they tend to find demanding in work situations. The composer has the challenge of maintaining good relations with the executants under his charge, all while earning less than they do. These conflicts however minor and removed from general public perception, have the potential to destroy the musical civilization. Why this is the case will be addressed later.

Musical executants are usually wage earners, unless lucky enough to get a job with a musical organization such as an orchestra or traveling ensemble. They are paid for their time, even if they are paid very well for very small amounts of time. Musical employers are usually straightforward businessmen. They sell the commodity of musical performance or musical recordings. "Composing is a profession, however, just like law and medicine. To be more exact, it is a profession like literature, scholarship, science, and invention, if I may be allowed to group the professions according to their ways of collecting money for professional services."³⁶ With being a professional comes the prestige our society affords to specialists. This combines with the prestige our society

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 61-62

affords creators and designers over executants to give the composer an extraordinary deal of status. This status, and its attendant privileges, are maintained by certain social practices which Thomson calls “intellectual rights” and the layman calls a mark of “professional integrity.” These practices are the very core of a sociological analysis, and do a great deal to establish the sociological identity of composers. These are three:

- (1) Members of the profession are the final judges of any question involving technique. For example, no executant musician has the right to publicly perform an altered or reorchestrated version of a piece of music without the composer’s consent.
- (2) The professional groups operate on their own educational machinery and are the only persons legally competent to attest its results. Nobody but a group of lawyers or doctors can certify to any state the fitness of a candidate to practice law or medicine.
- (3) Their professional solidarity is unique and indissoluble. They fight their battles in private; present a united front to the state and to the customers.

This merits comparison to a more traditionally sociological analysis of what a profession is. Judge Richard Posner, a prolific writer on matters both legal and philosophical, advocates an understanding of the law analogous to Thomson’s way of looking at music. He has this to say about what constitutes a profession:

The hallmark of a profession is the belief that it is an occupation of considerable public importance the practice of which requires highly specialized, even esoteric, knowledge that can be acquired only by specialized formal education or a carefully supervised apprenticeship. As a consequence of these features a profession is an occupation that cannot responsibly be entered at will but only in conformity with a prescribed and usually exacting protocol and upon proof of competence. Because of the importance of the occupation, and therefore the professional’s capacity to harm society, it is often believed that entry should be controlled by government. Not only should the title of “physician,” “lawyer,” and so forth be reserved for people who satisfy the profession’s own criteria for entry into the profession; no one should be allowed to perform professional services without a license from the government. For the same reason (the profession’s importance and its capacity to do harm), but also because the arcane skills of professionals make their performance difficult for outsiders to evaluate and therefore facilitates exploitation of the client by the professional, it is usually believed that the norms and working

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 67

conditions of a profession should be such as to discourage the undiluted pursuit of pecuniary self-interest.³⁷

This analysis of professionalism can be analyzed as containing several sociologically popular conditions for what counts as a profession.

[1] Command over an important and esoteric body of knowledge.

[2] This knowledge can only be obtained through a specialized educational process.

[3] There are barriers to entry, administered by currently practicing professionals.

[4] Government also erects barriers to entry in the form of controlling certifications.

[5] Professional working conditions are intentionally manipulated to put productivity over profit.

Thomson's (1) is loosely encapsulated in Posner's [1], taken as an analysis of what exactly it means to "command" a body of knowledge. Thomson's (2) and Posner's [2] match up almost perfectly. Thomson's (3) seems to cohere, though perhaps imperfectly, with Posner's [3] and [5]. This leaves Posner's condition [4], about government's role in endorsing professionally regulated standards, as the only condition not mentioned by Thomson for music at all. While a truly thorough discussion of the meaning of a profession, complete with many different sets of necessary and sufficient conditions would be helpful for this paper; it is simply unnecessary for the elaboration of Thomson's views. Posner's analysis, drawn from commonalities in the sociological literature and common sense, will do just fine. What is important to notice however is that music is a good candidate for being thought of as a profession. Even if it is not a profession in the fullest sense of the word, it could still be a borderline case.

Posner follows his discussions of a profession with those of a profession hiding its weaknesses, detailing what techniques of professional organization can be used to cover a lack of purported knowledge and skill. I include this discussion because it will be of relevance to Thomson's discussion of music appreciation, to be addressed shortly. Posner

³⁷ Richard Posner *the Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1999. pp. 186-187

describes nine ways a profession can use its “professional mystique” to preserve its power and status in the absence of producing real results. There are:

- (I) Cultivating an obscurantist style of discourse.
- (II) Screening prospective applicants for intellectuality.
- (III) Maintaining impermeability of knowledge.
- (IV) The cultivation of a charismatic personality.
- (V) Underspecialization
- (VI) Lack of Hierarchy.
- (VII) Espousal of an altruistic pretense.
- (VIII) Anticompetitive professional dynamics.
- (IX) Antialgorithmic resistance to the systematization of knowledge³⁸.

Finally, Posner provides two symptoms of the flimsiness of a profession’s knowledge claims: failure to meet new challenges, and irrational hiring practices. These will also bear on the upcoming discussion of music appreciation.

The Economic Determinants of Musical Style

Thomson now moves to the very core of his sociology of music, his economic determinism. While Thomson’s keen observance of the sociological dynamic and politics of music has been speculatively linked to his homosexuality (since closet homosexuals in the early half of the 20th century had to hide from mainstream society, they were unusually aware of the role of such aspects of social organization)³⁹ his penchant for economic determinism has a more personal source. While living in Paris before WWII, Thomson befriended his neighbor Sherry Mangan, poet, novelist, Time Magazine correspondent, and secret Trotskyite revolutionary. Biographer Anthony Tommasini says:

Virgil, though apolitical, was struck by Sherry’s clear-headed explication on the economic determinism of practically everything, his faith in collective action, and his analysis of capitalist exploitation. Virgil had a

³⁸ This phrase may be opaque. I take it to mean the resistance by the so-called profession to the formalized modeling of their activity by quantitative means, such as used by economists. An example of this strategy might be a musician who discourages musicology because music is “ineffable.”

³⁹ This claim is primarily advocated by Nadine Hubbs in *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound*, and offers an excellent discussion of the role played by gay networks in the history of America’s cultural scene.

sophisticated understanding of social and artistic politics. Some of it he had gained by befriending wealthy families (the Lassels, the Fāys, the Askews and their salon group) and by following the money trail. How did they invest? Which art and institutions were deemed worthy of patronage? He had fought in the trenches of the new-music movements; he had been involved with every aspect of the theater: patron supported, government supported, and commercial. He had associated with not only with writers, poets, and painters but with publishers, bookshop owners, literary agents, union lawyers, picture deals, and everyone engaged in the “pseudo-philanthropic museum racket.

In no way did Virgil accept Sherry’s leftist take on these matters. But it did encourage him to lace his analysis with a more provocative view of the musical state.⁴⁰

The validity of economic determinism as a philosophical theory and as an approach to sociology is an important question that is well beyond the scope of this essay. The question of how well the arts are explained by sociology and economic determinism is my more modest aim, but I shall tackle that question in section four. My purpose at the moment is merely to report on a summarize Thomson’s own account of it, and the explanations it produces. I will also concern myself with a bit of philosophical clarification by attempting to make as clear as possible the specifics of Thomson’s view of economic determinism. This will make the discussion of its validity as charitable as possible.

Thomson provides an exhaustive list of what he considers the total possibilities for the sources of a composer’s income. He spends the majority of chapter Six providing this list, then writes with more detail on each listed part in chapter Seven. For reasons of brevity, I find it convenient to run these two chapters together.

The Composer’s possible income sources are:⁴¹

1. Non-Musical Jobs, or Earned Income from Non-Musical Sources. A composer who makes money in this way is less likely to be influenced by contemporary trends and aesthetic controversy. They are also not writing music to please anyone but themselves. These types of composers are therefore often outsiders to the profession of music, Naïfs. Their music is often the most original, and only wins acceptance gradually.

⁴⁰ Anthony Tommasini *Virgil Thomson; Composer on the Isle* (New York: W.W. Norton 1997) pp.304

⁴¹ The outline beginning here is written using the same letter and number choices as Thomson provided, for convenience of scholarly reference.

2. Unearned Income from all Sources.

a. Money from home

- x. His own. This composer will be financially secure but caters to the conservative tastes of the upper class. His music will be light, charming, and possibly frivolous, rather than abstract or grandiose.
- y. His Wife's. If the composer marries into money, he is in a similar position to his independently wealthy brother. The difference is he may spend more time socializing and less time composing.

b. Other people's money.

x. Personal patronage:

- i. Impersonal subsidy. Like Beethoven, a composer funded in this manner will be free and autonomous. However, he must maintain the persona of a brilliant and outcast musical figure in order to justify the need for the subsidy in the first place. A good deal of large-scale symphonic music is written due to this kind of funding.
- ii. Commissions. Composers writing for a commission must write a piece in the prevailing international style of the time, otherwise their work will be accepted and simply not performed.
- y. Prizes. Prizes affect the style of a composer's output in much the same way commissions do. The only significant difference is that the piece must be written first, and must be a textbook example of the international style in vogue.
- z. Doles. Composers subsisting on welfare can write almost any kind of music. The only thing this type-of income source is able to predict is a likely affiliation with political leftism.

3. Other Men's Music, or Selling the By-products of His Musical Education.

- a. Execution. Skill at performance is good for a composer, but such skill at the expense of skill at composition is not. This type of income source can make for some inferior music, or less often, some excellent music.

- b. Organizing musical performances. These ways of earning income have a musician more involved in business than in the craft of musical performance or composition and take him away from music too much.
- c. Editing and Publishing. Editing and Arranging may be the only one of these that provides useful musical experience. It doesn't pay enough, however, and is best treated as a source of extra income for the serious composer.
- d. Pedagogy. As a supplement to a rich compositional career, teaching is good. It provides valuable experience and exposes students to experienced musical practitioners. As a primary source of income, it destroys creative output. The music professor must teach conventional truisms rather than developing his own abilities, and is stifled by this role.
- e. Lecturing. Rarely is this a musical career unto itself. It neither pays enough, nor can one be a musician if one constantly lectures. Thus a lecturer is either an expert musician, a stale pedagogue, a critic, or an emissary of the dreaded appreciation racket.
- f. Criticism and Music Journalism. These are too demanding to combine with full time composition (though Thomson did it as the head critic of the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1940-1954). Occasional participation in these activities sharpens the composer's mind and helps him clarify his stance toward lots of musical issues. Criticism is also useful because it teaches the composer about audiences, an invaluable piece of the compositional puzzle.
- g. The appreciation racket. The appreciation racket is Thomson's conception of the devil. It is the greatest single threat to the autonomy of music as an independent cultural institution. Working with the appreciation racket can be very financially rewarding, and is therefore tempting for any struggling composer. Due to its morally suspect status however, working for it is considered "selling out" by Thomson. Since the appreciation racket makes for such an excellent illustration of Thomson's views of music as a professional enterprise, it will be discussed in much greater detail in a later section of this paper.

Now that Thomson's map of the musical business-scape is visible, I would like to elaborate on the specifics of his view. Following cultural historian Stephen Watson, I will call it the Economic-Aesthetic view of music.⁴² The mechanics of this view need to be properly spelled out so that an effective evaluation of it can take place later in this essay.

There should, first of all, be some terminological clarifications. Thomson goes to great pains to explain what he means by musical style. For him, it is a lot like what he describes in "Music Does Not Flow", a term describing compositional devices and techniques. Thomson himself uses the term "syntactic devices".⁴³ A composer's choices amongst those available to him in his time and place result in the composer's "stylistic orientation". Thomson also renames "absolute music" (music without an explicit verbal program) "introspective music"; he seems to believe that the absence of an explicit program allows more freedom for the listener's introspection. Contrasted to this is program music, which is explained by some kind of verbal description.

As mentioned earlier, the economic-aesthetic view uses economic determinism to explain the behavior of musicians, especially composers. I should take a moment to define just what economic determinism is usually understood to mean, the belief that a society and its culture are largely determined by the economic system it uses and the activity within that system. I will now elaborate on what I take his version of economic determinism to be.

As usual, Thomson is quite capable of speaking for himself. He explains the view as follows:

Between the extremes of being too rich for comfort and being really poor, the amount of money composers have doesn't seem to affect them very much... The source of their money has, however, a certain effect on their work. We have noted that the composer, being a member of the Professional Classes, enjoys all the rights and is subject to the obligations of what is known as professional integrity. This does not mean that he enjoys complete intellectual freedom. He has that only with regard to the formal, or structural, aspects of his art. His musical material and style would seem to be a function, at any given moment, of his chief income source.⁴⁴

⁴² Watson, Stephen *Prepare for Saints* (New York: Random House, 1998) p. 317

⁴³ *The State of Music* pp. 82-83

⁴⁴ *The State of Music* p. 81

For Thomson, what is economically determined is the stylistic choices made by a particular composer in response to a particular funding-source. The stylistic choice amounts to the implementation of certain compositional techniques or devices in keeping with the wishes and preferences of the customer. Thomson goes to great pains to point out that each **individual piece** is determined by the preferences of its funding-source, not a composer's overall career or style. A composer could write music throughout his career that is economically determined in the way Thomson suggests but still retain a personal style as well.

While plausible, this theory is likely to strike many as unacceptably crude. Common explanations for the style of a piece (or a composer's style overall) usually involve appealing to a composer's biography or intellectual development rather than his funding sources, but Thomson's economic-aesthetic theory seems to leave these considerations behind. I will concede that this is an empirical question that can best be answered by looking at biographical or psychological information about composers past and present and seeing if the funding-source for each piece correlates with the kind of music ultimately written as the economic-aesthetic theory predicts. If not, then it might be falsifiable. Though such a project is well beyond the scope of this paper, I welcome any work that takes up the task. One matter of methodology that must be addressed if such a project were undertaken would be the correct guidelines for the application of Thomson's terms and categories across different times and places. What counts as "light music" or "the upper class" when looking at the biography of Camille St. Saens? Are they the same as what counts for Perotin, William Billings, Tchaikovsky, Astor Piazzolla, Philip Glass or a composer of Hindustani raga from several hundred years ago? Though this is a vexing problem, I think it is a surmountable one for certain historical and social scientific fields, and I hope it will not be too much of an obstacle to impede progress toward biographical and historical investigation of composers and their earnings.

Even if the economic-aesthetic theory proves true once the methodological problem of investigating it in the biographies of composers is solved, many will still find it unconvincing. It seems too narrow and deterministic, leaving little room for human agency or individual idiosyncrasies to help explain why pieces are written as they are. Part of this objection rests in the determinisitic nature of the claims, bound to fail because

our abilities to predict future economic (or even psychological) behavior are so unreliable that Thomson's claims can not be true except as gross generalizations. I think this is the case, but I am more impressed by how much better they are than many gross generalizations that attempt to explain the same things about music. They are at least, right-headed gross generalizations, the kind that might be very illuminating if clarified and refined through more modern methodologies. What do I mean by clarified and refined? By clarified I mean the kind of work I am now attempting. By refined I mean to apply more modern intellectual tools to fix the problems with Thomson's economic-aesthetic theory as originally stated. For example, the economic-aesthetic theory predicts the behavior of certain kinds of agents against the background of certain kinds of circumstances. Stated as they are, these generalizations are crude, as I have already granted. When cultural history is brought to bear on the historical circumstances of each composer in question, and economic decision theory is used to articulate the choices of these composers within the context provided by cultural history, then the Economic-Aesthetic theory might prove a useful analytical tool for engaging in a sociology of the arts, one that could apply to all kinds of music across many different times and places.

One final objection with the economic-aesthetic theory is its similarities to a Marxist view of aesthetics, one that locates meaning in the social and economic circumstances of production. This follows directly from orthodox economic determinism. The belief that cultural activity supervenes on economic activity is a belief that is correctly attributed to Marxism. The matter is complicated all the more because Thomson himself has often been lumped into the Marxist view in virtue of his economic determinism, a comparison he did not deny outright, though he denied any belief in Marxism. While it is true that Thomson's theory uses economic determinism, this alone is not enough to make it a Marxist view. Instead it can be thought of as merely a sociological view that uses a crude economic decision theory to solve the problem of collective action that separates social psychology from sociology. Nowhere in Thomson's writings is there a support of any other Marxist beliefs or political goals, and the points of agreement with Marxist aesthetic theory are too tenuous to allow for these views to be grouped together. One reason I suspect they are grouped together in spite of Thomson's personal distance from Marxism is because they are often thought to be guilty of the

same fallacy, that of methodological holism. Methodological holism is a view that posits the existence of social entities such as government institutions and *zeitgeist* that are *a priori* irreducible. This is distinguished from methodological individualism, which is interested in reducing social entities to the psychology of individuals. Methodologically holistic theories are often accused of being untestable and unfalsifiable, and of discussing trends rather than laws. For some, this kind of criticism is enough to remove such theories from consideration altogether. This indeed was Popper's criticism in *The Poverty of Historicism*.⁴⁵ I have already suggested reasons, however, that indicate Thomson's view is testable and falsifiable. Furthermore, I have made it clear that Thomson's view does have room to reduce the properties of social kinds like the bourgeoisie into the behavior of individuals. Therefore his economic determinism is of a methodologically individualistic flavor, and this alone makes for a considerable difference from Marxist theories.

The Appreciation Racket

Now that the mechanics of Thomson's sociology of music and his economic determinism have been made more explicit, I would like to illustrate the fullness of his view as applied to his own favorite case study, the corrupting influence of the appreciation racket on the vitality of classical music in the first half of the twentieth century.

As has already been alluded to earlier, the appreciation racket is the name for an unholy alliance of orchestra managers, record companies, and music educators. Its purpose is to turn a profit, but its mechanisms of working are indistinguishable from legitimate education and acculturation for the layman. Only an experienced musical executant can see through them to their baser motive. According to Thomson, what distinguishes the machinations of the appreciation racket from legitimate music education is that it "transmits no firm knowledge and describes no real practice."⁴⁶ Remember that music is "that which musicians do" and that knowing and imitating what they do is the

⁴⁵ Popper, Karl *The Poverty of Historicism* (Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2002) pp.110

⁴⁶ *The State of Music* p.112

quickest route to become familiar with what music is all about. Though the ability to make music does not encompass the totality of music appreciation, Thomson considers it central to a serious musical education. It allows one to learn to make their own music if they wish, and appreciate other music as the efforts of people who have successfully done so. But the appreciation racket does none of this. Thomson explain it eloquently, as usual:

The basic sales-trick in all these manifestations is the use of the religious technique. Music is neither taught nor defined. It is preached. A certain limited repertory of pieces, ninety per cent of them a hundred years old, is assumed to contain most that the world has to offer of musical beauty and authority...It is further assumed (on Platonic authority) that continued auditive subjection to this repertory harmonizes the mind and sweetens the character, and that the conscious paying of attention during the auditive process intensifies the favorable reaction. Every one of these assumptions is false, or at least highly disputable, including the Platonic one. The religious technique consists in a refusal to allow any questioning of any of them. Every psychological device is used to make the customer feel that musical non-consumption is sinful. As a penance for his sins he must:

- A. Buy a book.
- B. Buy a gramophone.
- C. Buy records for it.
- D. Buy a radio.
- E. Subscribe to the local orchestra.⁴⁷

What is the reason for all of this religious preaching disguised as teaching? Nothing less than the standardization of the orchestral repertory. It is part canon-formation (a process studied endlessly by cultural critics and sociologists of art and culture) and part practical standardization of business practice. Every orchestra around the world will thus have the uniformity and dependability of a McDonalds franchise, able to produce a similar product according to similar procedures and subject to only the most minor variations. The purpose of the symphony orchestra itself is therefore changing. It is moving away from a venue in which new and culturally relevant pieces of art music are premiered, and transitioning toward being a feather in the cap of the rich, an example of what Thorstein Veblen would have called “conspicuous consumption.”⁴⁸ Veblen’s claim, very briefly, is

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.114-115

⁴⁸ Veblen, Thorstein *Conspicuous Consumption* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) pp.42-59

that many indulgences in luxury goods, while practically and functionally trivial, serve the sociological function of displaying the status of those affiliated with them. This in turn is an outgrowth of a primitive human disposition to stratify into different status rankings, a perspective that has been out of favor until the recent revivals of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. While it is unclear whether Thomson embraces Veblen's view in its entirety, the following passage gives credence to the possibility.

I know ladies who have been going to symphony concerts since childhood and who are lucky at sixty if they can recognize eight pieces out to the about fifty that make up the permanent repertory. These women are not stupid; they are just not very musical. They go to symphony concerts for reasons. I don't mean always social reasons, either, although a great many people do go to symphony concerts to be seen, just the way they used to go to the opera. What they like about orchestral concerts mostly, I think, is (a) the conductor and (b) the resemblance of the musical execution's super-finish to that of the other streamlined luxury-products with which their lives are surrounded. They feel at home, as if they were among "nice things," and as if the Revolution (or whatever it is that troubles rich people's minds) were far, far away.⁴⁹

Obviously (b) constitutes the more clear example of conspicuous consumption. I indulged in this discussion to show how great a role the concept of social class plays in Thomson's understanding of classical music, as well as to suggest a way by which it might be legitimized.

To help clarify Thomson's claims about the appreciation racket, I will compare them against Posner's earlier analysis of "professional mystique" used to identify when sociological practices are being used to cover up a dearth of real skills and abilities. The following passage by Thomson makes the case with his usual directness:

(i) It is uncritical, in its acceptance of imposed repertory as a criterion of musical excellent. (ii) It is formalist, in its insistence on preaching principles of sonata-form that every musician knows to be either non-existent or inaccurate. (iii) It is obscurantist, because it pretends that a small section of music is either all of music or at least the heart of it, which is not true. (iv) It is dogmatic, because it pontificates about musical 'taste.' Whose taste? All I see is a repertory chosen for standardization purposes by conductors (who are musicians of the second category) and managers (who are not even musicians), (v) and expounded by

⁴⁹ *The State of Music* pp. 188

unsuccessful pianists, disappointed composers, and the well-meaning but irresponsible little school-teachers who never had enough musical ability to learn to play any instrument correctly (vi).⁵⁰

Thomson's claim that it is uncritical (i) matches with Posner's condition (III) the maintenance of the impermeability of knowledge. Thomson's claim that the appreciation racket is formalist (ii) also fits (III) as well as (I) and to some extent (IX), because sonata form is not an accurate description of the actual compositional practices of the past. The assertion that the appreciation racket is obscurantist (iii) meshes with Posner's condition (I) as well as (III) and (VII). The alleged dogmatism of the appreciation racket (iv) fits (VII), (III) and (IX). Thomson's concern that the repertory is a standardization of convenience by conductors and managers (v) fits (II), (V), (VI) and (VIII). Finally, the use of musically deficient school teachers to further their agenda is an example of (IV). This is not the end of Thomson's indictments, however. Thomson's observation that the appreciation racket uses the "religious technique" is a prime example of (I) and (III), and its favoring of established composers and executives to write its literature is a clear case of (II), (IV) and (VII). Thomson's belief that the appreciation racket resists the teaching of useful musical knowledge in order to manipulate musical taste seems well founded.

What I find so useful about the case of the appreciation racket, is its demonstration of how economic determinism can tell us about the workings of classical music. It is in fact economic interests that shape musical taste and musical pedagogy, and even go so far as to distort the understanding of the history of music itself. All the talk generated to explain the goals and ambitions of the appreciation racket are in fact window-dressing intended to hide the real motives of those with the purse strings. Though this does not discredit all discussion of music, it does give one reason to be suspicious of purely aesthetic discourse. Such discourse may genuinely stimulate thought and encourage the appreciation of the arts, while telling us nothing about how the arts actually work. The consequence of this would be to render such discourses useful fictions, they enhance enjoyment, but do not tell the kinds of truths they claim to. Because this is such a potent criticism of traditional aesthetic discourse, and because it concerns the

⁵⁰ *The State of Music* pp.118

value and truthfulness of Thomson's view overall, I will postpone the furthering of this discussion until section four.

CHAPTER 4

THOMSON'S PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

What are we to say, then, of Thomson as a musical thinker? My preceding discussion has covered a great deal of ground, so I think it would be useful at this point to summarize and formalize his views as much as possible. This will facilitate the subsequent tasks of evaluating their coherence, usefulness, and place within the history of musical thought.

We will begin, as appropriate, at the beginning. Thomson's definition of music is sociological, it is "that which musicians do", but it also includes appeals to facts about music as a non-sociological entity. These include appeals to the stimulation of the viscera, and the physical features of the overtone series. The tension between these two approaches may seem crippling, as they are often thought to be mutually exclusive. I contend that this is not so, and that Thomson's views actually marry these two treatments of music with aplomb. For that he is a uniquely great musical thinker, too long deprived of the recognition he deserves.

1. Music is that which musicians do.
2. Musicians are human (so far).
3. What musicians do is limited to what humans can do.
4. Humans can hear certain kinds of sonic organization in virtue of their evolved physiology.
5. The physiological features in question are visceral susceptibility to particular kinds of sonic organizations featuring; tones, harmony, and their ordering in time.
6. This visceral susceptibility to these forms of sonic organization disposes them to certain functional uses for human beings, such as religious rituals and film-scores.
7. The sonic production of visceral affects allows for the combination of sounds, visceral states, and other extramusical elements into a meaningful whole.

8. The relationship between music and the associated extramusical elements is metaphysically arbitrary, but can be preserved and reified through consistent cultural practice.
9. Musical meaning is a social construction.
10. Any examination into music beyond its interactions with human physiology must be sociological.

For Thomson, then, music is a cultural creation built upon a natural human capacity. But this capacity will not provide an essentialist definition of music, because there is too much variation in musical practice to conveniently define it according to anything more than this. The claim that it must use the permanent materials: tones, harmony, and their ordering in time, seems suspect. Surely something lacking in any of these would fail to be music, but something absent harmony would probably not (unless Thomson can gerrymander his theory so as to encompass possible counterexamples, I will not attempt it here). Nonetheless, this point aside, I think Thomson's view is quite tenable. It is a position very similar to Chomsky's view of language. A natural capacity allows humans to use language, but there is enough variation in how languages can work that they are still largely acknowledged as cultural constructions. Leonard Bernstein, in fact, famously advanced this very position, in his series of Harvard Lectures titled "The Unanswered Question." Thomson wrote Bernstein a letter of support for taking this stand, and though his motives were more pragmatic than scholarly, it is nonetheless appropriate to consider Thomson an adherent of a view like this based on what he says in "Music Does Not Flow." It also explains his complex relationship with atonal music.

Atonal music raises many questions about Thomson's philosophy of music, because it counts as music on a sociological definition, but not perhaps on certain metaphysical definitions. Thomson's musical metaphysics would count it as music, but also allow an explanation as to why it never caught on. It would seem that Thomson, and much of the music-loving general public, never found atonal music to their liking. This in spite of its heavy influences on the establishment of classical musicians (and collegiate music educators) in the latter half of the twentieth century. The claim would be that it is music, but music that tramples roughshod over the physiological basis of tonality and is

therefore harder to make functional use of. This allows atonal music to remain in the canon of classical music, but also to remain forgivably opaque. Making sense of the status of atonal and other avant-garde musics is important, because a view that excluded them would be accused of missing an important part of music, but a view that failed to explain its unpopularity would be just as remiss.

Thomson's musical metaphysics, then, are very valuable because they are compatible with the recently popular evolutionary explanations of human nature, but also because they entail a sociological view of music. It is to that sociology of music that I now turn.

Thomson's sociology of music is interesting partly because, to the best of my knowledge, it is naïve. That is, it was conceived and written without a heavy reliance on sociological theory. It was, instead, exactly what Thomson said it was, an attempt to help people understand what it feels like to be a musician. It was informed by practical experience, and geared toward providing practical advice. This is what accounts for its accuracy in spite of its use of questionable methodologies and explanatory procedures such as economic determinism. I do not mean this as a condemnation of Thomson's explanatory procedures or intellectual commitments, however. As I said, I think Thomson's views are sufficiently right-headed that they could be refined with more modern methods and serve as the basis for a fruitful research program. Their main virtue is their compatibility with reductionism. Thomson provides a mechanism by which to reduce music history into historical and technological circumstances. He can also reduce group behavior into individual behavior. He can explain the behavior of an individual in a larger society according to economic determinism, but the actual mechanics of the theory allow it to be translated into terms of economic decision theory. This strikes me as yet another virtue, because leaving human decision making to be explained by economics is a very naturalistic approach to the social sciences, and therefore more prone to reduction than a holistic approach. The question of whether the patterns of behavior predicted by Thomson are genuinely deterministic strikes me as a primarily empirical matter, though it could be rendered false *a priori* if deterministic theories of all kinds were decisively refuted.

Though Thomson's theory does use economic determinism to explain the existence and evolution of musical styles, and though this economic determinism does involve a commitment to some background beliefs commonly associated with Marxism, I have argued that it is not a Marxist view. The belief that cultural activity supervenes on economic activity, or that social changes follow from technological developments, are not enough to make one a Marxist. They could just as well be held by a follower of Adam Smith, and indeed, Smith seems a better representative of Thomson's view of economics. And therein lies another virtue. Because Thomson's view is not Marxist, one need not worry about the other troublesome features of Marxism when considering it. In fact, far from Marxism, Thomson's view seems altogether apolitical. It's true that he has a discussion of how a composer's political orientation is economically determined just as musical style is, but there is no advocacy of any political doctrines. Thomson's only message that is remotely political is a call to protect the autonomy of music from the insidious intrusions of big business and the appreciation racket. As a result of this political detachment, Thomson's economically driven sociological analysis makes an excellent analytical tool for the understanding of the arts. I concede that it is perhaps only useful in capitalist economies, but since that is the entire world, I doubt this will present a serious problem. It also appears to be an ahistorical view, though many of the actual claims Thomson makes are so dated, and some of his predictions so off the mark, that one must acknowledge that cultural and historical circumstances affect the kinds of claims that can be made with his method. Specifically, the problem is with how his conceptual categories mesh with time periods where they do not apply. One would have to solve the problem of how to apply his method to different time periods in order to make it useful for historical analysis.⁵¹ Finally, Thomson's approach is very well suited to analyze the workings of other kinds of music besides classical. This is extremely important, because a great deal of theorizing about music by philosophers as well as sociologists and musicologists are concerned only with the tradition of western classical music. A good philosophy of music (or indeed, a good sociology of music) ought to be able to deal with

⁵¹ This has not stopped several music commentators from using as a jumping off point for an analysis of Today's musical scene. Composers William Bolcom and Barry Drogan have both had success implementing this approach to the present.

all music, not just one tradition favored by the upper-class of the world's dominant culture. In fact, this is where many theories of music, philosophical or otherwise, fail.

Thomson's approach to the analysis of music and society not only transcends the boundaries of musical style (in a given time period) but also can tell us a great deal about the classical/popular distinction itself. Thomson's view reveals the mechanics of western classical music to be a business, and in this respect, no different from any other style. What distinguishes it, in the eyes of the layman, is the age of its tradition and its status as art rather than mere "entertainment." It did not stumble into this status, but rather actively sought it in response to the growth of competing musical forms and styles much more popular with the people of their times and places. In contrast to popular music, which is very transparently a business, music labeled as art can be safely removed from the demands of the market economy and receive protection through government and philanthropic funding. Once removed from competition with popular music, its composers no longer need to pander to popular taste, and are likely to see the refusal to do so as a virtue, and it is this virtue that entitles them to government and philanthropic subsidy. Thomson's own theory predicts that composers in such circumstances will write "introspective music of strained harmonic texture and emphatic instrumental style." While I'm not sure exactly what this means, he also says they are "revolters against convention" and that "Beethoven is their model." These latter claims, at least, cohere with the polemical stance adopted by many atonal and avant-garde composers of the latter half of the twentieth century. Such were the circumstances that left modern classical music all but dead to the general public in the 1970's. The movement that counterbalanced this trend was Minimalism. It is even more interesting to note that minimalism began, much like Thomson's music and that of his gay, tonal-writing ilk, with an alliance with the art community. Minimalism fed off audiences of non-musical avant-gardists until it had reached a certain level of maturity, at which point it entered the general musical market and competed for income with all other types of music, including Modern and canonic classical music, Jazz, Broadway, and Rock. Its successful use of tonality with new compositional techniques (strict repetition of a short musical fragment that evolved slowly throughout the performance), made for a success in the music market, unsupported by subsidy. The classical training of the founding figures Steve

Reich and Philip Glass, and intellectual defense of the new style they provided, allowed it to be absorbed into the tradition of classical music; it has often been treated as its successor.

The preceding history of classical music in the twentieth century is evidence of the usefulness of Thomson's perspective. By removing the status of art from classical music, we not only avoid sugar-coating certain features of its past, but also see the role of the notion of art itself in its development, decline, and fall. I see no reason why a similar analysis of Jazz, Rock, Hip-Hop, or Electronica would not also be possible, and I hope it would be just as illuminating.

Thomson in the History of Musical Thought

Virgil Thomson already has a small place in the history of musical thought. He is studied mainly in the contexts of composer-critics, American composers, and gay composers. But these classifications leave him a marginal figure, and his ideas regarding music are not put up against canonical musical thinkers. It is this shortcoming that I hope to address.

Metaphysically, Thomson's beliefs about the role of physiology in the enjoyment of music put him in the company of Leonard Meyer and Leonard Bernstein. Recall that Meyer said that music has meaning in virtue of patterns of tension and release, and his book *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, is a very able defense of this view. The one point of dissent between these two on this matter is that Meyer's view rests on an unusual theory of emotion, Dewey's conflict theory. It is not clear whether Thomson would endorse this theory, but it stands to reason that even if he does not, that the idea of emotional (and visceral) tension and release could be accommodated in another theory of human emotions, perhaps as a special case for the explanation of musical meaning. This seems to be the only hurdle keeping the two from holding similar positions about the nature of music.

Bernstein's view, as I have already mentioned, is that human beings have an "innate musical competence" akin to the "innate grammatical competence" posited by Noam Chomsky to explain language acquisition in children. Though it does not explicitly

identify itself as such, I consider such views to be claims of evolutionary psychology. Any attempt at positing an innate human trait that resists (though is not immune to) cultural molding strikes me as needing such support to thrive. Thomson seems perfectly able to accommodate such a view in order to account for the affects music can have on the viscera. At minimum, he does seem to believe some aspect of human musical experiences rests on our biology, and I suspect he thinks it to be more than just the ears.

Meyer and Bernstein are the only figures in the philosophy of music that Thomson is clearly in agreement with, he avoids heavy embroilment in more uniquely philosophical controversies such as music and emotion or music as a language because of his sociological turn. It is to this turn that I now turn.

Thomson has a great deal of company in the sociology of music. His overall approach most closely resembles that of Max Weber, who took more than a passing interest in classical music. For Weber, as for Thomson, music is a product of the history and economic circumstances of the society in which it exists.⁵² Thomson takes his historical circumstances for granted, however, and in this respect is inferior to Weber. Weber takes the time to explain how a series of contingent factors (including capitalism) converged to give western classical music the features it has. Thomson is also in the company of contemporary sociologist of music Peter J. Martin. Martin's book *Sounds and Society* is an excellent introduction to the sociology of music that argues that music is a thoroughgoing social construction. While this conflicts to some extent with Thomson's musical metaphysics, it develops an account of the sociology of music that coheres well with Thomson's. It uses symbolic-interactionist sociology to look at how music fits into its society, and ultimately concludes that music is best understood as a business (though not exclusively so).

Thomson ought to be compared to one of the great towering figures in the history of musical thought, Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno spans the divide between Philosophy and Sociology of music, largely because he was a philosopher who chose the sociological perspective to study music. Adorno's view is that music reflects its social circumstances because it embodies features of its time and place in its composition. This is called a

⁵² Alan C. Turley, "Max Weber and the Sociology of Music," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 16, No. 4. (Dec., 2001): pp. 633-653.

reflection theory. Thomson might be in loose agreement up to this point, but the agreement ends when Adorno begins his Marxist-ish polemics. Adorno, a founding figure of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (The School for Social Research based at the University of Frankfurt), believed that revolution would not come so long as the proletariat were deluded from seeing their opportunity for freedom. Adorno then looked for this delusion in the culture around him, and found it everywhere. This ubiquitous enemy he named “mass culture” and saw it as a force for the enslavement of the masses by virtue of its role in promoting “false consciousness” on a grand scale. Mass culture, then, is distinguished from Art, which alienates its appreciator rather than entertains him. Such alienation allows for the development of rationality and critical thought, which would resist the prevailing cultural trends of a time and place. Thus, Adorno thought that Schoenberg and other atonal composers were misunderstood geniuses making great art and were inadvertent promoters of the revolution.

Thomson’s disagreements with this perspective are numerous. First of all, Thomson doesn’t distinguish between art and entertainment the way Adorno does. It all works the same, and the difference must be somewhat arbitrary. Thomson does agree that some works are better, meaning more edifying, than others, but thinks the purported dangers of “mass culture” are vastly exaggerated. He says:

The whole concept of mass culture is obscurantist. Does Shakespeare or Beethoven lose quality through becoming massively available? No. Are populations elevated by being massively subjected to base literature, obscene photographs, and trivial shows? Again, no. Then, to speak of our enormous facilities, through publication and radio, of distributing art, information, and entertainment as a sociological phenomenon to be worried over under the name of mass culture, but not really to be changed or controlled, is not a culture concept at all but a political one. It is a protective screen against possible professional (hence really cultural) interference with a shameful business.⁵³

It’s hard to know just what Thomson means here, but it’s possible he may have misunderstood key features of the concept of mass culture. Thomson, it seems, is attacking the idea that there is something inherently dangerous in the scale of modern communications technologies. His view that the quality of art remains the same regardless of how widely it is distributed is reminiscent of the belief that violent video-

games do not really incline children toward violence, that children are every bit as potentially violent or latently aggressive regardless of what technology they are raised on. This is a good counter-reply to the concern about mass culture, but it would not satisfy Adorno, who seems aware of a reply like Thomson's and is still concerned. Adorno would feel that mass culture is dangerous not because of its power to distribute, but because it keeps people from being intellectually challenged and resisting the cultural trends of their times. Thomson would say the solution would be the restoration of professional self-regulation in the entertainment industries, unyoking them from the profit motive. Adorno would say that such industries are highly professionally regulated (think of Hollywood) and are still soullessly profit-oriented. I cannot say that Thomson beats Adorno here, only that he does not see mass culture as such a threat. Given the highly paranoid nature of Adorno's view, Thomson may be right in spirit even if he does not prevail in argument.

Criticisms

Though my project is to advocate Thomson as a musical thinker, I must not shy away from bringing potential criticisms of his views after I have presented them as strongly as possible. One possible criticism, though a minor one, is the encounter with Adorno above. Thomson just doesn't always seem to argue for his position as well as he could, and even with the benefit of my clarifications, his views do not always have the resources to meet all comers.

One problem with his musical metaphysics is its general failure to address the issue of what exactly the viscera are, or how music affects them. It is an easy enough theory to accept, given the anecdotal evidence or one's phenomenological experience, but this hardly amounts to proof. However, it is a fixable problem so long as one accepts an account like Meyer's to fill the gap. However, it isn't overwhelmingly clear that Thomson and Meyer are compatible (though it seems reasonable to think they are), more crucially, it is not clear whether Meyer is right, even if his view is plausible.

⁵³ Thomson, *The State of Music* pp.153

A more serious problem concerns Thomson's attitude toward human agency. His writings seem suffused with an ambivalent attitude toward this concept. On the one hand, he wants to say that material circumstances such as technology and economic activity determine (not merely guide and constrain) all human social activity. In this sense he agrees with the Marxists, and while I do not believe this view is altogether false, this is a far cry from proving it is true. At best, I can claim that it is a useful tool for explaining the goings-on of the arts, useful because it is no worse than any of its competitors, possibly better. However, in his more unguarded moments, Thomson sounds like a typical believer in human agency. We do not often read of him describing himself as economically determined, though I wouldn't be surprised if he were willing to swallow this pill.

Another concern with this economic determinism is that it can explain trends well enough, but wishes to treat them like laws. This makes for an unexpected weakness in his theory, because the laws he advocates are very general (musical style is determined by the composer's income source) and cannot generate specific predictions (or even specific claims of any kind) without the addition of many contingent details. Due to the contingency of these details, it is hard to treat Thomson's view as using laws. If they are laws, they have to be shown to be such by advances in the philosophy of social sciences that have yet to be made, advances that could establish the ontology of these laws. Changing the focus to technological determinism doesn't improve the situation much, because stating that the history of music follows from the unintended consequences of the invention of musical techniques and devices doesn't allow for the effective making of predictions either.

Finally, another objection might be that it is mainly sociology of music, and has no special claim to philosophy. This is false for two reasons. One, because sociology of music and philosophy of music explain the same phenomena, and address the same basic questions (musical meaning, music as a language, musical understanding), they are merely divided over methodology. Sociologists of music are more likely to assume music is socially constructed all the way down, but not all of them do. This brings me to the second reason this objection is false, because Thomson's view includes claims about both

musical metaphysics *and* sociology of music, and I have tried to show how these two aspects cohere in a way that is unusual for any theory about music.

CONCLUSION

Virgil Thomson does not have a perfect theory of musical aesthetics, but who does? While Thomson's view is flawed, it has some virtues that merit further research. One is its compatibility with a generally reductionist approach. Another, related to the first, is its scope. It is a very coherent theory that addresses music very far down, and very high up. Furthermore, these two aspects of Thomson's view support each other rather than pull against each other, as is the case with so many other views of music. Finally, the flaws in Thomson's views are rather fixable. One can replace the economic determinism with economic decision theory, and the talk of the viscera with Meyer's account, or any other evolutionary account that can explain an intrinsic emotional reaction to certain kinds of sounds, musical sounds.

Even if one is unimpressed by the case I have made for Thomson's views, this essay should still be very valuable to the community of Virgil Thomson scholars interested in making sense of Thomson's intellectual positions as part of other research projects. It will hopefully also be useful to those interested in discussing and assessing his intellectual reputation. Regardless of what one might ultimately conclude about the truthfulness or value of Thomson's opinions about music, I hope I have made the task of talking about him and his views a little bit easier.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jeffrey A. Hinzmann was born in Winter Park, Florida on October 20th, 1981. He grew up entirely in Orlando, Florida. From an early age, he preferred books to socializing and sports. He was fond of history, particularly the history of the Second World War. In middle school, he developed a powerful love for classical music. His love for music was so great, that he learned clarinet later than his peers, as a tenth-grader, in order to be able to play in his high-school band. In spite of great success with this project, he did not continue to pursue the clarinet upon attending Florida State University. There, he found a new passion to grip his mind, philosophy. He particularly enjoyed his freshman-year philosophy of music course, taught by Dr. Russell Dancy, the supervising professor of this thesis. Philosophy of music allowed Jeffrey to combine his enjoyment of both classical music and philosophy into a single pursuit and greatly enriched his experience and understanding of his favorite music. Near the end of his senior year at FSU, Jeffrey found a view of music that seemed both philosophically satisfying and accurately described the workings of the music world in the writings of Virgil Thomson. This thesis has been an attempt to share this enjoyment of Thomson's views on music with others.