

POST-CLASSICAL ENSEMBLE
Angel Gil-Ordóñez, Music Director
Joseph Horowitz, Artistic Director

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Joseph Horowitz

“From 1930 on, all films that played in the newly equipped cinemas, even ‘documentary’ films, had to have sound,” Richard Laycock reminisced in 1996.

Going out into the “real” world with all this complicated, delicate equipment was impossible, so our enterprising documentarists discovered the virtues of music and narration, *sans* dialogue. The higher class documentaries assigned as much as 30 per cent of the budget to commission original scores from leading composers, Virgil Thomson, Benjamin Britten, Aaron Copland, Hanns Eisler, and Marc Blitzstein among them. By adding a stentorian voice to carry a “message,” they created a particular form where the image became almost incidental to the voice and music, especially when the voice took on poetic form.

Laycock – one of the great names in American documentary film, who as a young man spend 14 months as cameraman for Robert Flaherty’s *LOUISIANA STORY* (1946), with music by Thomson – vividly remembered his first encounter with **THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS** (1936), with its opening narrative thrust:

High winds and sun
A country without rivers
And with little rain

Settler: Plow at your peril

Two hundred miles from water
Two hundred miels from town

But the land is new

Many were disappointed

The rains failed
And the sun baked the light soil.

Absorbing the impact of such language in conjunction with Thomson's soundtrack and Paul Strand's inspired cinematography, Laycock discovered an "operatic form combining poetry, moving image, and music."

Pare Lorentz, who both directed *THE PLOW* and wrote the narration, was a notable film critic who had never made a film. He had convinced the U. S. Resettlement Administration to fund a documentary that would justify its program for aiding families in areas devastated by natural disaster. He envisioned a lyric educational exercise, both practical and aesthetic, incorporating a history of the Great Plains from the first cattle drives to the punishing drought then entering its sixth year: "Our heroine is the grass, our villain the sun and the wind, our players the actual farmers living in the Plains county. It is a melodrama of nature – the tragedy of turning grass into dust, a melodrama that only Carl Sandburg or Willa Cather, perhaps, could tell as it should be told."

Lorentz was already at the cutting stage when he began looking for a composer. Virgil Thomson was recommended by John Houseman. As Thomson recalled in his *Autobiography*:

[Lorentz] first explained his film, asked could I imagine writing music for it. My answer was, "How much money have you got?" Said he, "Beyond the costs of orchestra, conductor, and recording, the most I could possibly have left for the composer is five hundred." "Well," said I, "I can't take from any man more than he's got, though if you did have more I would ask for it." My answer delighted him. "All those high-flyers," he said, "talk about nothing but aesthetics. You talk about money; you're a professional."

Thomson also remembered:

Lorentz at thirty, already getting heavy but still darkly good looking and with an eye that both laughed and calculated, was talkative, ambitious, truculent, ever a battler. He battled with Hollywood and with Washington; he battled with his cameramen and with his cutter. For seven months he battled with me over music, money, aesthetics, every single point of contact that we had . . . Pare's film was his brainchild not yet born, and he could not be stopped from going on about it. He could not bear that I should have to wait till it was

finished to add music. He even seemed to hope that I, by sharing his birth pains, might end by writing music in his person.

At forty I could not write music in anybody's person. Collaborative art, I knew from instinct and experience, can only give a good result when each man offers to the common theme, through his own working methods and at the proper time, his own abundance.

Thomson proceeded to score his accompaniment for standard orchestra plus – tellingly -- saxophones, guitar, banjo, and (for church music) harmonium. He quoted cowboy songs. He evoked the drought in bare, neo-medieval two-part counterpoint. The final parade of cars, fleeing bankrupt farms, was wickedly coupled with a catchy habanera. Thomson's entire musical patchwork was ineffably American – in its sources, its blithe eclecticism, its informality and humor.

Thomson's score is today considered one of his peak achievements, and a peak achievement in music for film. Lorentz was so impressed that he re-cut sections of *THE PLOW* to accommodate the music. Though the U.S. Government had for 30 years produced instructional and informational films, no previous government film had been intended for commercial release and distribution, or had illuminated a national problem so vividly, artistically, or persuasively.

THE PLOW was denounced (accurately) as New Deal propaganda. Sensing competition, Hollywood barred the film from its distribution system. Billed "The Picture They Dared Us To Show!" it opened at New York's Rialto Theater and was cheered nightly. Public demand prevailed: eventually over 3,000 theaters screened *THE PLOW* to enthusiastic reviews.

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Lorentz and Thomson followed *THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS* with another Resettlement Administration documentary: **THE RIVER** (1937), a case for flood control. As *THE PLOW* had traced the history of the Great Plains and shown how abuse of the land led to the dustbowl, the *River* traces the history of the Mississippi River and argues the necessity of a system of dams (specifically including those of the Tennessee Valley Authority) to harness water. At the same time – following *THE PLOW* – the film magnificently celebrates American land and people.

Thomson's classic score, called by Aaron Copland "a lesson in how to treat Americana," again demonstrates how a style culling American folk music and jazz could prove both aesthetically and didactically satisfying. He

intimately partnered Lorentz in the creative process. Lorentz explained in an interview: “Virgil made piano sketches of each section of the movie, and then the crew and I tried to edit it down to a preconceived time, at which point Virgil would get some ideas, genius ideas, and we would work back and forth so that you didn’t have a completed score put on top of a completed movie or vice versa.”

Lorentz’s script links the Depression to misuse of the great river and over-cultivation and urbanization of its valley, leaving farmland unfit for farming and the “ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed” Americans whose condition Roosevelt famously decried. Lorentz’s decision to include the text of General Robert E. Lee’s final letter to his troops was political. At the film’s premiere, in New Orleans, the entire audience rose in silence when the letter appeared on screen.

Voted the best documentary at the 1938 Venice Film Festival (beating Leni Riefenstahl’s OLYMPIC GAMES), THE RIVER was an overwhelming critical and commercial success. Paramount Pictures accepted it for national distribution. Lorentz’s script, a Whitmanesque free-verse poem called by James Joyce “the most beautiful prose that I have heard in ten years,” was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

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The influence on composers of Thomson’s scores for THE PLOW and THE RIVER was scarcely less remarkable than the influence these films exerted on film-makers. In 1939 Copland was invited to score a similarly conceived documentary, funded by the Carnegie Corporation: THE CITY, for New York World’s Fair. Based on an idea by Lorentz, it was directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, both of whom had worked on the earlier Lorentz films. The script was by the city planner Lewis Mumford. Again, this was essentially a silent film, exquisitely shot, with overlaid narration. Cueing on Thomson’s achievement, Copland explicitly fashioned bracingly spare urban and rural musical signatures for America. He also followed Thomson’s lead in spurning musical literalism for cheeky ironic juxtapositions. In THE PLOW Thomson had accompanied an automotive cavalcade with a habanera; in THE CITY, a Sunday traffic jam is set to a jaunty dance tune. Like his ballets BILLY THE KID (1938) and APPALACHIAN SPRING (1944), THE CITY embodied Copland’s new direction, beginning in the socially conscious thirties, toward a mass audience he sought to inspire, entertain, and instruct.

And the success of *THE CITY* enabled Copland to break into Hollywood, where his impact was great; Andre Previn has remarked: “If I had to summarize what Copland represented in Hollywood, it would be ‘fewer notes.’” Thomson, equally parsimonious in the notes department, was arguably as great an influence on Copland as Copland was on Previn and other Hollywood composers. Together, Copland and Thomson counteracted the luxurious Romantic soundtracks of Erich Korngold and Max Steiner that had previously defined Hollywood’s musical taste. Copland went on to score a total of 10 films; he won an Academy Award for *THE HEIRESS* (1949). All told, Thomson scored eight films; he received a Pulitzer Prize for *LOUISIANA STORY* (1948)

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To judge Virgil Thomson’s scores for *THE PLOW* and *THE RIVER* from the gritty 1930s soundtracks is hopeless. Fortunately, as there is no dialogue, both films are ideal for presentation with live, “restored” music. A 1996 performance of *THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS* by the Brooklyn Philharmonic, so conceived by the present writer, proved a revelation – and laid the groundwork for this weekend’s AFI presentations. A DVD version of both films, with soundtracks recorded by Post-Classical Ensemble under Angel Gil-Ordóñez, is planned by Naxos.

Formerly Associate Conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra of Spain, **Angel Gil-Ordóñez** has led the American Composers Orchestra, Opera Colorado, the Pacific Symphony, the Hartford Symphony, and the Brooklyn Philharmonic. Abroad, he has been heard with the Munich Philharmonic, the Solistes de Berne, at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival, and at the Bellas Artes National Theatre in Mexico City. In summer 2000 he toured the major music festivals of Spain with the Valencia Symphony Orchestra in the Spanish premiere of Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass*. A specialist in the Spanish repertoire, Mr. Gil-Ordóñez has recorded four CDs devoted to Spanish composers with the Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra of Spain, the Madrid Symphony Orchestra, the Galicia Symphony Orchestra and the Camara XXI chamber orchestra. Born in Madrid, he worked closely with Sergiu Celibidache for more than six years in Germany. In addition being the founding Music Director of Post-Classical Ensemble, he is Director of Orchestral Studies at Wesleyan University and Music Director of the Wesleyan Ensemble of the Americas.

Joseph Horowitz has long been a pioneer in classical music programming, beginning with his tenure as Artistic Advisor for the annual Schubertiade at the 92nd Street Y. As Executive Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra, he received national attention for “The Russian Stravinsky,” “American Transcendentalists,” “Flamenco,” and other festivals exploring the folk roots of concert works. Now an artistic advisor to half a dozen American orchestras, he has created more than two dozen interdisciplinary music festivals since 1985. Called “our nation’s leading scholar of the symphony orchestra” by Charles Olton, former President of the American Symphony Orchestra League, Mr. Horowitz is also the award-winning author of seven books mainly dealing with the institutional history of classical music in the United States. His *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall*, was recently published by W.W.Norton.

Post-Classical Ensemble, called by the *Washington Post* “a welcome, edgy addition to the musical life of Washington,” was created by Angel Gil-Ordóñez and Joseph Horowitz in 2003. “More than an orchestra,” it breaks out of classical music, with its implied notion of a high-culture remote from popular art. Its concerts regularly incorporate folk song, dance, film, poetry, and commentary in order to serve existing audiences hungry for deeper engagement, and to cultivate adventurous new listeners. The present concerts are the Ensemble’s second with film – earlier, it has presented the Mexican classic *Redes* with Silvestre Revueltas’s soundtrack in live performance. Another Post-Classical program, “Csárdás!” (with the Gázsa Band of Budapest, which furnished gypsy and peasant sources for music by Liszt, Brahms, and Bartók) was recorded for national broadcast via Chicago’s WFMT, and has also been heard in part over National Public Radio. Next November 19, Post-Classical Ensemble will offer a *Don Quixote* tribute at the Kennedy Center’s Terrace Theater, with readings, songs, and a staged version of Falla’s masterly puppet opera *Master Peter’s Puppet Show*.

Floyd King is well known to Washington Shakespeare Theater audiences. In more than 20 years with the company, he has acted in more than 100 productions. He has won four Helen Hayes Awards for his work in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Quills*, *The Lisbon “Traviata,”* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. He also teaches at the Juilliard School in New York and the British American Drama Academy in Oxford, England. His many local roles have

included Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Fool in *King Lear*, and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.

Composer **Charles Fussell**, a close associate of Virgil Thomson, was Artistic Director of New Music Harvest, Boston's first city-wide festival of contemporary music, and co-founder and Director of the New England Composer's Orchestra. Long a teacher of composition at Boston University, he currently teaches at Rutgers University. His works include *Wilde*, a symphony for baritone and orchestra that was runner-up for the 1991 Pulitzer Prize (and was recorded in 2004 by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project).

Born in 1916, **George Stoney** showed *The River* hundreds of times to audiences in the Southeastern United States as an information officer for FDR's Farm Security Administration. He joined the Southern Educational Film Service as a writer and director in 1946. In 1950, he formed his own company, and by 1980 had made over 40 films on subjects ranging from birth control, insurance, and the mentally ill, to the nature of the Baha'i faith and the situation of indigenous people in Canada. In 1972, he co-founded the Alternate Media Center with Red Burns at New York University, which trained the first generation of public access producers/activists. In 1976 he was a founder of the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers. He is currently Godard Professor of Cinema at New York University.

Support for these performances was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, the MARPAT Foundation, the Virgil Thomson Foundation, the Dallas Morse Coors Foundation, and the American Film Institute.
