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LOWELL LIEBERMANN WINS THE INAUGURAL \$40,000 VIRGIL THOMSON AWARD FOR VOCAL MUSIC



Virgil Thomson (photo: Pach Brothers, NY)



Lowell Liebermann (photo: Christian Steiner)

Virgil Thomson was a champion of American music. His 1947 premier of The Mother of Us All was an extraordinary moment in the coming of age of the American composer's commitment to voice. I can't imagine a better namesake for this terrific award.

-Ezra Laderman, jury chairman

March 27, 2014, New York, NY – The Virgil Thomson Foundation and the American Academy of Arts and Letters are pleased to announce that Lowell Liebermann has won the inaugural Virgil Thomson Award of \$40,000. The award, endowed by the Virgil Thomson Foundation and administered by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, recognizes an American composer of vocal works.

Mr. Liebermann was among five finalists selected from composers nominated by members of the Academy. Their work was studied closely over the course of several months by a special jury comprised of the composers David Del Tredici, Carlisle Floyd, Ezra Laderman, and Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, and the poet and librettist J. D. McClatchy. “It was instructive perusing and listening to the submissions of composers in mid-career,” said Carlisle Floyd, “and a pleasure to discover that the scene for vocal writing is very healthy indeed.”

Voice has played a central role in the work of Lowell Liebermann for over thirty years. “In his songs, sequences, and operas, he is sensitive to the text and to the voice, while sustaining them with music that radiates grace and

gravity,” said J. D. McClatchy. “The traditions of vocal music are honored, even as he extends them in directions that are emotionally rich. The pulse is quickened by his intelligence and virtuosity.”

“Within the impressively broad range of Lowell Liebermann's vocal writing, his settings of texts are clear, nuanced, and evocative. We were moved by his work,” said Ellen Taaffe Zwilich.

The prize will be presented to Mr. Liebermann in May at the Academy’s annual Ceremonial. “Giving such a substantial award to a composer for his vocal works is to my knowledge unique. It is an emphasis as long overdue as it is refreshing, even necessary, in the world of composing today,” said David Del Tredici.

Lowell Liebermann (b. 1961) was educated at Juilliard and is one of his generation’s most frequently performed and recorded composers. In 2012 he joined the faculty of Mannes College The New School for Music, and in 2013 he was appointed head of the composition department. He is also founder and director of the Mannes American Composers Ensemble (MACE), which is dedicated to performing the works of living American composers. Major vocal works include the operas *Miss Lonelyhearts*, 2005, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1995; the song cycles *Four Seasons*, 2012; *Six Songs on Poems of Raymond Carver*, 2002; *Appalachian Liebeslieder*, 1997; *Night Songs*, 1987; and *Six Songs on Poems of Nelly Sachs*, 1985. Mr. Liebermann has received an Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Grammy nomination for *Piano Concerto No. 2*, and various awards, including those from ASCAP and BMI.

Virgil Thomson (1896 – 1989) was a many-faceted composer of great originality and a music critic of singular brilliance. After studying at Harvard, he worked in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, and remained in France for most of the next 15 years, meeting Cocteau, Stravinsky, Satie, and the artists of Les Six. When he returned to the U.S. in 1940, he became chief music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*. Thomson composed in almost every genre, utilizing a style marked by sharp wit and overt playfulness, and produced a body of work rooted in American speech rhythms and hymnbook harmony. Among his most famous works are the operas *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All* (both with texts by Gertrude Stein); scores to *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River* (films by Pare Lorentz), and *Louisiana Story* (film by Robert Flaherty). In addition to his compositions, he wrote eight books, including his autobiography. Among his many honors and awards are the Pulitzer Prize, a Brandeis Award, the Gold Medal for Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Book Circle Award, and Kennedy Center Honors. The 25th anniversary of his death is being commemorated in 2014.

The **Virgil Thomson Foundation** was established in 1980 to further and promote the performance, preservation, dissemination, and public appreciation of contemporary American classical music in general and the work of Virgil Thomson in particular. In recent years, the Foundation has been planning and sponsoring the creation of films, live performances, new and reissued recordings, and publications on the life and works of Mr. Thomson. From 1980 to 2013, the Foundation awarded grants to performing ensembles, service organizations, and presenters throughout the U.S. in support of activities involving contemporary American classical music.

The **American Academy of Arts and Letters** was established in 1898 to “foster, assist, and sustain an interest in literature, music, and the fine arts.” Election to the Academy is one of the highest formal recognitions of artistic merit in this country, and current members are 250 of America’s leading voices in Art, Architecture, Literature, and Music. Each year the Academy awards over 60 prizes, and presents exhibitions of art, architecture, and manuscripts, and readings of new musicals. It is located in three landmark buildings on Audubon Terrace in New York City.

Virgil Thomson, who once called the Academy “a craft guild of the highest order,” was elected to membership in 1948. He sat on several committees, served as Treasurer, and delivered the Blashfield address in 1960.