

# FSM ONLINE

## Hello, Mr. Chips!

The music and the mayhem.

### Shore Gets Some *S.U.N.*

Another huge score.

### Virgil Thomson's Pulitzer Prize

*A Louisiana Story.*

### Spike Lee's *Inside Man*

Blanchard's call to action.

### Audio Archives: Elmer Bernstein

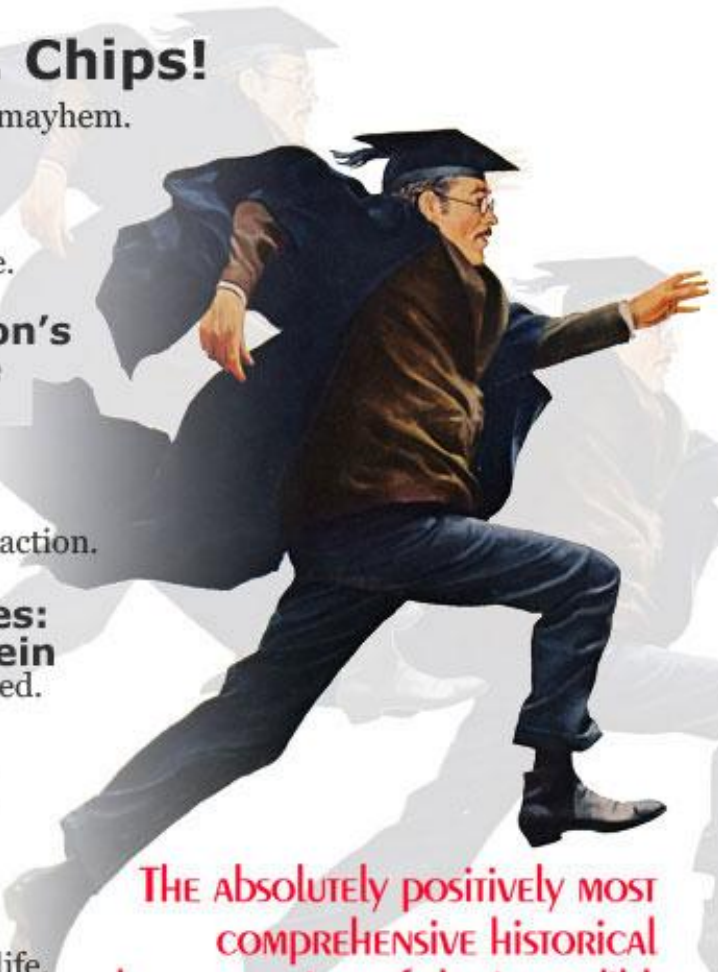
A voice sorely missed.

### Fred Steiner Speaks, Pt. 1

What a run!

### Interstellar Goonie, Pt. 2

Composers in real life.



THE ABSOLUTELY POSITIVELY MOST  
COMPREHENSIVE HISTORICAL  
DOCUMENTATION OF THE INCREDIBLE  
TRUE-LIFE STORY OF THE MAKING OF  
(AND THE MUSIC OF)

**"Goodbye, Mr. Chips"...PART 1**



## **Petroleum, Politics and Prizes**

### **Inside Virgil Thomson's Pulitzer Prize-winning score for *Louisiana Story*.**

*By James Lochner*



After a long winter, April showers recognition on journalists, photographers, authors, poets, playwrights and composers with the most prestigious accolade in American journalism, arts and letters—the Pulitzer Prize. In the 63 years since the first Pulitzer Prize in Music was handed out in 1943, only one film score has been accorded that honor: Virgil Thomson's score for Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story*.

Robert Flaherty is often called “the father of documentary films,” earning the title through groundbreaking feature documentaries such as *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934) and *The Land* (1942). His final film, *Louisiana Story* (1948), proved to be his most praised, most popular, and, in some ways, his most controversial.

Standard Oil of New Jersey commissioned Flaherty to make a film that projected its industry as progressive and environmentally humane. The company contributed over \$200,000 to the project, but an embarrassed Flaherty kept the Standard Oil name off the credits to minimize the critical drubbing.

After touring locations in Texas and Oklahoma, Flaherty found the perfect isolated setting in the Petit Anse Bayou of southern Louisiana. In the past, Flaherty had been criticized for “staging” certain sequences in his films; *Louisiana Story* was no exception. Flaherty and his wife, Frances, constructed a slim scenario (which surprisingly netted them an Academy Award nomination for Best Motion Picture Story) concerning a young Acadian (Cajun) boy viewing the effects of the encroaching oil industry on the simple lives of his family and on the bayou inhabitants who have lived on the land for generations. Frances found Joseph Boudreaux, a 12-year-old son of a sharecropper, in a schoolroom and signed him for

the lead. Other bayou natives were hired to portray the parents.

*Louisiana Story* had its world premiere at the Edinburgh Festival in 1948. Critical praise was high, but many reviewers advised their readers to ignore the story and concentrate on the stunning black-and-white images captured by Flaherty and young cinematographer Richard Leacock. In 1994, *Louisiana Story* was listed on the National Film Registry. The Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the UCLA Film and Television Archive restored the film for its 50th anniversary.

Flaherty was fond of music and always brought along his violin and portable phonograph on location. So it is not surprising that he would rely heavily on music to enhance the images of *Louisiana Story*, turning to one of the quintessential “Americana” composers: Virgil Thomson. Thomson was born November 25, 1896, in Kansas City, Missouri. He graduated from Harvard in 1923 and served as organist and choirmaster of King’s Chapel in Boston. Thomson was one of the first American students, along with his friend Aaron Copland, of legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

### **The Composer and the Critic**

Thomson composed in virtually every medium, including ballet, vocal, choral, orchestra, chamber works, and other documentary film scores. Some of his most distinctive compositions are the “musical portraits,” brief works (often under two minutes), most of which were written for piano with the subject sitting in front of him as if posing for a painting. He eventually composed over 140 portraits, which included such luminaries as John Houseman, Paul Bowles, Fiorello La Guardia, Copland, Pablo Picasso, Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein. However, it is his vocal and choral writing for which he became justly famous. Few composers could set text as naturalistically as Thomson. He composed songs and cycles for solo voice and chorus, but it is the operas, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), that remain landmark works. For all of Thomson’s ebullient music for these pieces, the nonsensical librettos by Gertrude Stein continue to challenge the classical music cognoscenti—perhaps one of the reasons neither has entered the regular opera repertoire.

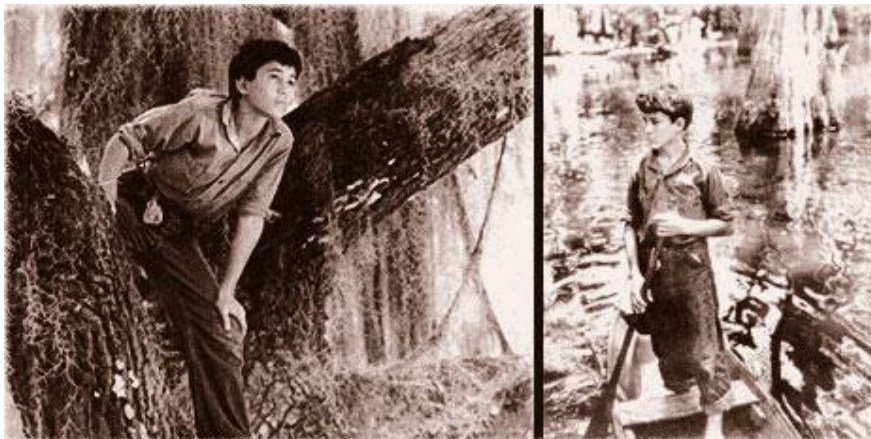
In addition to being a well-known, if irascible, composer, Thomson became one of the most influential music critics of the 20th century. With his take-no-prisoners style, Thomson’s critical writing was lucid and articulate, though his agendas championed certain composers and made enemies of others. He wrote his first pieces of criticism for *Vanity Fair* and *Boston Transcripts*; by the time of *Louisiana Story*, he had written three books of criticism. But it was his position at the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1940 to 1952 that cemented his role as an influential

critic.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks, who had originally approached Thomson to write his biography, described him in *The Musical Quarterly*: “As a composer, Virgil Thomson is probably the most controversial figure on the American scene; as a critic and writer on the musical life of our time he is internationally read and appreciated. His music is the subject of continual controversy not because of its idiom, which is simple, direct, and free of innovation, but because of its content...and his freedom from the restrictions of a specific ‘personalized’ idiom in an age of stylists delights some while it enrages others.”

Flaherty had been impressed with Thomson’s earlier documentary film scores for director Pare Lorentz, including the groundbreaking *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1937) and *The River* (1938). Thomson was keen to score *Louisiana Story* as it reminded him of his days stationed in the region during World War I.

Thomson composed nearly 60 minutes of music for the 77-minute film, dividing the music into three categories—“scenery music,” “folk music” and “noise music.” Natural scenery is illustrated through musical devices adapted from Mendelssohn, Debussy and other “landscape composers,” as Thomson called them, also utilizing Baroque forms, such as the passacaglia and fugue. The dances and songs that Thomson found in Irene Thérèse Whitfield’s Louisiana French Folk Songs and recordings of Cajun fiddle music collected by John and Alan Lomax housed in the Library of Congress represent the people of the bayou. As Frederick W. Sternfield remarked in *The Musical Quarterly*: “The continuous weaving in and out of these traditional songs removes them from the category of mere quotations...They are part and parcel of the entire fabric and, as such, balance the over-all musical style and contribute to the dramatic characterization.” Thomson wisely chose not to score the scenes aboard the oil derrick, instead letting the natural “noise” of the machinery mesh into its own music.



**Cajun Adventure:** Joseph Boudreaux as the boy who journeys through the bayou.

### **Americana Meets the Bayou**

Thomson was able to extract two orchestral suites from the score. The first suite, *Louisiana Story: Suite for Orchestra*, consists of the “scenery music,” while the second, *Acadian Songs and Dances*, preserves the various Cajun tunes used in the film. Adding to the cachet of the score, it is performed on the soundtrack by no less than Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. For the purposes of this discussion, themes will be titled as they are in the suites for easier identification (utilizing the acronyms *LSS* and *ASAD* for the first and second suites, respectively), but discussed in film order so that Thomson’s seamless mixing of the two styles will be more evident.

The film opens to shimmering strings, harp arpeggios, and an English horn solo as the boy steers his canoe among the moss-covered branches hanging over the bayou’s placid waters (*LSS—I. Pastoral: The Bayou and the Marsh Buggy*). Flute arpeggios blow in the wind followed by French horns and trumpets as the marsh buggy cuts a wide swath through the tall marsh grass (*LSS—I. Pastoral: The Bayou and the Marsh Buggy*).

As a barge floats down the river arousing the boy’s curiosity, an accordion and muted trumpet (*ASAD—VII. The Squeeze Box*) frame a violin two-step (*ASAD—VII. The Squeeze Box*). A speedboat interrupts the calm air of everyday life, but the English horn waltz accompanied by pizzicato strings (*ASAD—II. Papa’s Tune*) signals that it is no more than a curiosity to the land’s inhabitants.

A lively bassoon melody and oom-pah strings accompany the boy and his raccoon (*ASAD—IV. The Alligator and the ’Coon*) as they row along the water’s edge. But the speedboat disrupts the calm, upsetting the canoe, and the opening music becomes less bucolic (*LSS—I. Pastoral*) as the outside world encroaches on the boy’s idyllic life.

The boy and the raccoon play to the tune of a jaunty clarinet solo over “walking” pizzicatos in the strings (*ASAD—VI. Walking Song*) until the sight of an oil derrick floating above the marsh grass and moss-covered trees interrupts the fun. Thomson employs constantly shifting harmonies for a chorale (*LSS—II. Chorale: The Derrick Arrives*), the ecclesiastical effect of which conveys the awesome sight of the derrick and its steeple-like shape. In his definitive biography of Thomson, Anthony Tommasini calls the music “fearsome yet reassuring, unfamiliar yet uplifting. This is progress in action, the film sequence reassures us, disruptive, disconcerting, but nothing to fear.”

As the boy pries through the weeping willows and branches looking for the alligator’s nest (*LSS—III. Passacaglia: Robbing the Alligator’s Nest*), the ascending

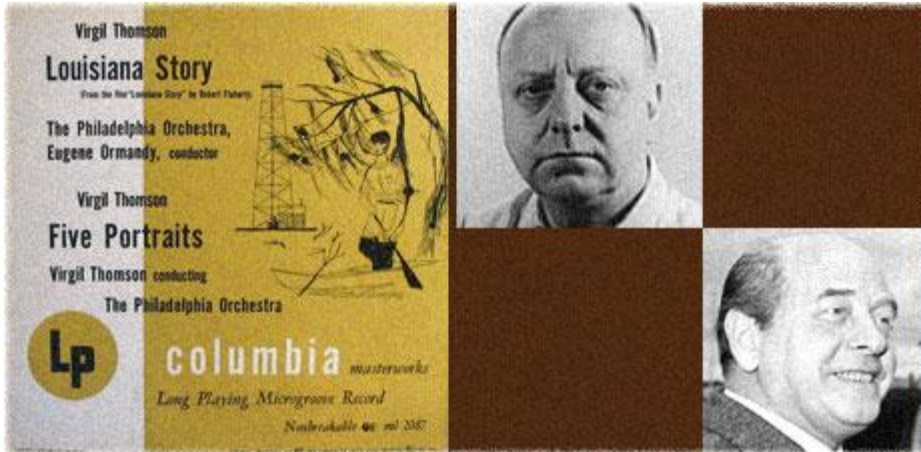
stepwise melody in the English horn and trumpet hovers over the descending bass line, giving the music a sense of impending danger (*LSS—III. Passacaglia*). The music is composed in the form of a passacaglia, a stately Baroque dance in which there is continuing repetition of the theme in the bass. The music steadily builds throughout the six-minute cue until the frightening roar of the alligator cuts off the music and the boy runs for his life.

Returning to his canoe, the boy finds that the raccoon has escaped from his leash. We see the alligator sneak up on the animal, and the music—with its minor-mode accompaniment to the “coon theme,” additional percussion, hunter-like muted French horns (à la Prokofiev’s *Peter and the Wolf*), and half-step trumpet clusters—leads us to believe that the little rascal is a goner (*ASAD—IV. The Alligator and the ‘Coon*). Slow-moving strings (*ASAD—I. Sadness*) convey the heartbreak and despair of the boy’s search for his missing pet.

Convinced the alligator has killed the animal, the boy traps it into a ferocious fight (*LSS—IV. Fugue: Boy Fights Alligator*) accompanied by a vicious fugue consisting of four two-measure subjects. The first subject emphasizes the interval of the tritone, the longstanding “devil in music,” conveying the alligator’s terrifying presence. The countersubject accompanies the boy straining to capture the creature. The third subject, with its jerky rhythm and chromaticism, outlines the sharp triangles of the alligator’s teeth snapping in a desperate struggle to free itself from the boy’s hook. The last subject is expressive of the father’s anxiety as he calls for his son. The fugue ends in major rather than minor, finishing with what is known as a Picardy third, trumpeting the father’s rescue of the boy.

More of the pastoral music accompanies the boy as he wanders through the empty derrick. Another Acadian tune (*ASAD—V. Super-Sadness*) sits heavy over the despondent boy as he peels potatoes. Each statement of the tune is in a new key and always in horn-like two-part counterpoint.

When the boy finally finds the raccoon, its theme is played on a bright clarinet. Thomson reprises many of the score’s tunes for the departure of the derrick at the end of the film, and the camera lingers on the smiling boy waving good-bye, all ending happily with a final major chord. Thomson employs one last Acadian segment contrasting two syncopated dance tunes for the end credits (*ASAD—III. A Narrative*).



**Not Worthy?:** Thomson's and Ormandy's work on *Louisiana Story* apparently didn't warrant Oscar consideration...and for the silliest of reasons.

### **Bringing the Score to the Fore**

Flaherty saw no reason not to emphasize Thomson's score since the film consisted of less than a hundred lines of dialogue. Thomson was pleased: "I know few films—indeed, none other recorded in America—in which orchestral color has been kept so vivid."

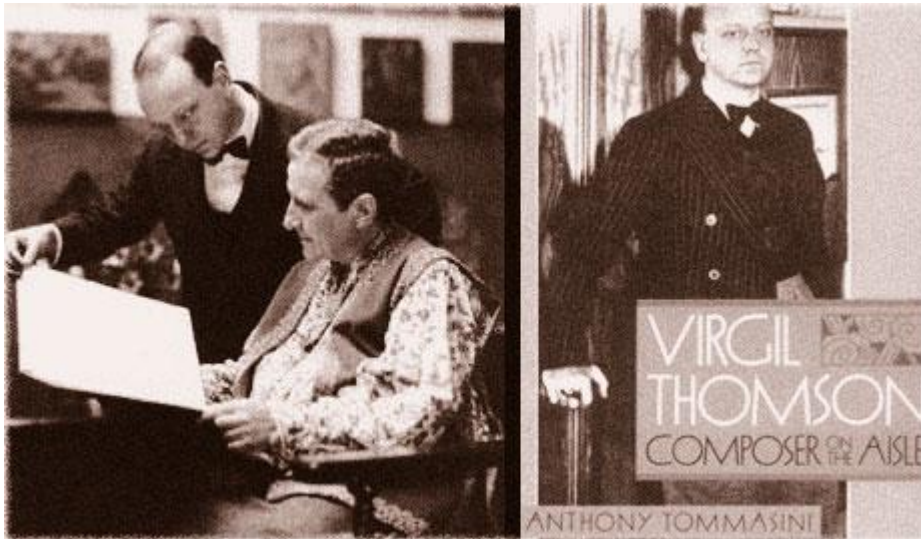
Critical reception for the score was high. Thomson's own paper, the *New York Herald Tribune*, gave the film a positive review and included a two-paragraph analysis of the music: "The score, which is one of [Thomson's] finest, is orchestrated in masterly, luminous fashion... The orchestration, leaning heavily on woodwinds, has a share in revealing the material's essence, for its accordion effects are idiomatic to Cajun music, and the sparse accompaniments, often distilled out of the material itself, ingeniously epitomize it." Peggy Glanville-Hicks wrote that the score "seems to have a greater eloquence, a closer fusion of all his musical resources than almost anything he has written."

John Cage, who wrote the music section of Thomson's 1959 biography, stated, "The quality of mastery moves through the music of *Louisiana Story*. All the notes perform the composer's commands, never once seeming to be useless or engaged on their own independent projects... Neither a paste-up job nor a neo-romantic expression of personal feelings, *Louisiana Story* is a public project. The musics that go in and out of it...[appear] well behaved, well spoken, well dressed." Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* deemed the music "a great asset," and *Vogue* praised it as "a triumph of movie music." London's *News Chronicle* went so far as to call it "the loveliest score ever composed for an American film."

With such high praise, Thomson hoped he might be nominated for an Academy Award. However, as he related in his 1966 autobiography, "the music was found unworthy of that honor, I was told, because the Philadelphia Orchestra's sound

track was ‘unprofessional.’ That term meant, I was also told, that our engineers had failed to ‘sweeten the line’—a practice long observed in Hollywood, by which the first violin part is recorded as a solo (molto vibrato, naturally) then superposed on the full ‘take,’ to add plangency.”

But Thomson took justifiable pride in his Pulitzer Prize. The music category had only been in existence since 1943, though the prizes had been awarded since 1917. Joseph Pulitzer had not made a stipulation in his will for a music prize but left it up to the Pulitzer Board to make additions and changes. The 1949 music jury consisted of conductor Chalmers Clifton, who had invited Thomson in 1923 to participate in his conducting class; Thomson’s one-time friend, composer Henry Cowell; and Beveridge Webster, a distinguished pianist teaching at Juilliard. Surprisingly, Webster proposed yet another film score, Aaron Copland’s *The Red Pony*. But Chalmers and Cowell outnumbered him two to one with their votes for Thomson.



**History Dictates:** Thomson at work with Gertrude Stein on *The Mother of Us All*; Anthony Tommasini's authoritative biography.

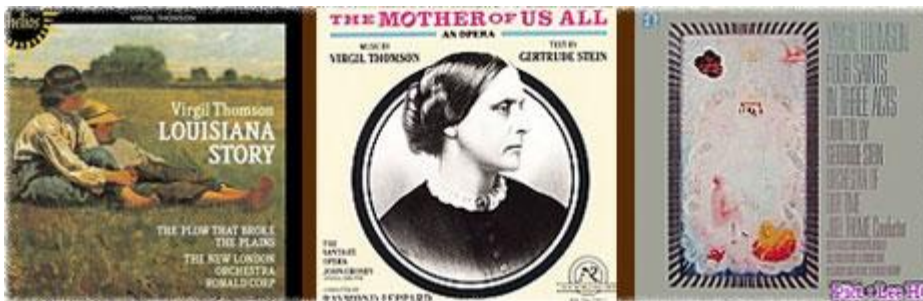
### **And the Pulitzer Goes To...**

With the prestige of a Pulitzer Prize, Thomson’s music found new life in the two concert suites. The first suite was premiered in Philadelphia in November 1949, once again with Eugene Ormandy leading the Philadelphia Orchestra. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called it one of Thomson’s “finest, most spontaneous and refreshing scores.” Ormandy and the orchestra also gave the New York premiere at Carnegie Hall later that month, and the staid New York critics raved as well. *The New York Times* wrote: “It is impossible not to imagine images and actions described in the program book as the music unfolds. The evocation is almost uncanny.” John Briggs of the *New York Post Home News*, usually a harsh Thomson critic, ate some crow: “This reviewer, having long since pegged Mr. Thomson as an amusing but rather superficial dabbler in musical composition, was bowled over by

*Louisiana Story*. It is a first-rate piece of work. Its solid craftsmanship was no surprise; Mr. Thomson has shown himself to be a competent technician... But in *Louisiana Story* there is something more—a new depth and power of musical expression. The score is no musical pot-boiler; it has weight, dignity and something that frequently approaches grandeur.” The suite quickly received further performances by other major U.S. orchestras, including those in New York, Cleveland, San Francisco and Boston.

Thomson may be the only film music composer so far to win the Pulitzer Prize in Music, but there is hope for the future. Effective with the 2005 competition, the definition of the Prize was revised to “encourage greater diversity in entries while assuring even-handed evaluation of compositions.” A June 2004 statement by the Pulitzer Board declared its “strong desire to consider and honor the full range of distinguished American musical compositions—from the contemporary classical symphony to jazz, opera, choral, musical theater, movie scores and other forms of musical excellence.” Though no film scores have been submitted as of this writing, the public release of a recording can now serve as the equivalent of a public performance, a requirement for Pulitzer consideration, further helping the film score cause. (“Pulitzer Prize-winner John Williams” certainly has a nice ring to it!)

In 1952, Igor Stravinsky suggested to famed New York City Ballet choreographer George Balanchine that Balanchine should create a ballet out of the first suite of *Louisiana Story*. (Stravinsky said it had more to “get one’s teeth into.”) However, Balanchine chose the less-dramatic *Acadian Songs and Dances* to create *Bayou* in 1952. Dance critic Edwin Denby praised the choreography but lamented, “Balanchine missed the originality of the score.” In his autobiography, Thomson simply wrote, “[It] failed as a ballet.” Ruthanna Boris also chose the second suite for her ballet (titled *Bayou* as well), but it too was a failure. Not surprisingly, but unfortunately for Thomson’s music, neither version has stayed in the repertory.



Thomson’s voice has always been unique, if not as easily recognizable as other “Americana” composers such as Charles Ives and Aaron Copland. Since his music has fallen out of favor over the years, much of Thomson’s prodigious output isn’t available on CD. However, in addition to *Louisiana Story* (available on a CD that also features *The Plow That Broke the Plains*), I heartily recommend *Four Saints in*

*Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All*, the “musical portraits,” and the score to *The River* as a beginning. In addition, Anthony Tommasini’s authoritative biography, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*, makes for fascinating reading. *The Dallas Morning News* put into words the thoughts of all Thomson fans: “Thomson’s music we would like to hear again and again.”

—FSM

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