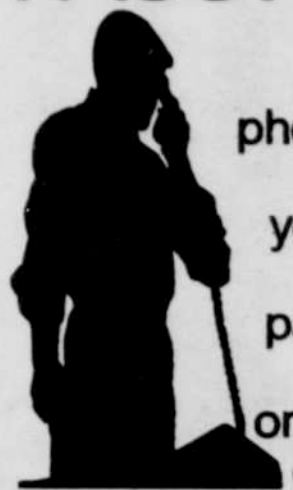


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FOUR STARS FOR *FOUR SAINTS*

*Reissue of Stein and Thomson's 1927 opera evokes the
"childlike gaiety and mystical strength" of the ascetic*

by Bob Roehr

It is one of the queerest and queerest compositions in the annals of serious U.S. music and now it is available in a glorious reissue. *Four Saints in Three Acts* was a 1927 collaboration between Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson—the grand dyke of letters and one of the foremost U.S. composers of his day, also gay.

Thomson proposed an opera based on the lives of saints. Stein wanted it set in Spain.

Music

"She then chose (and I agreed) two Spanish saints, Teresa of Avila and Ignatius Loyola," Thomson wrote in his autobiography. "The fact that these two never knew each other did not seem to either of us an inconvenience."

The title bears only a tangential relationship to the contents. The saints present number not four but more than 30, and the acts number four, not three. As for stories of the saint's lives, well, it is Gertrude Stein.

The libretto is thoughtfully provided, though the singers' enunciation is so distinctly clear that

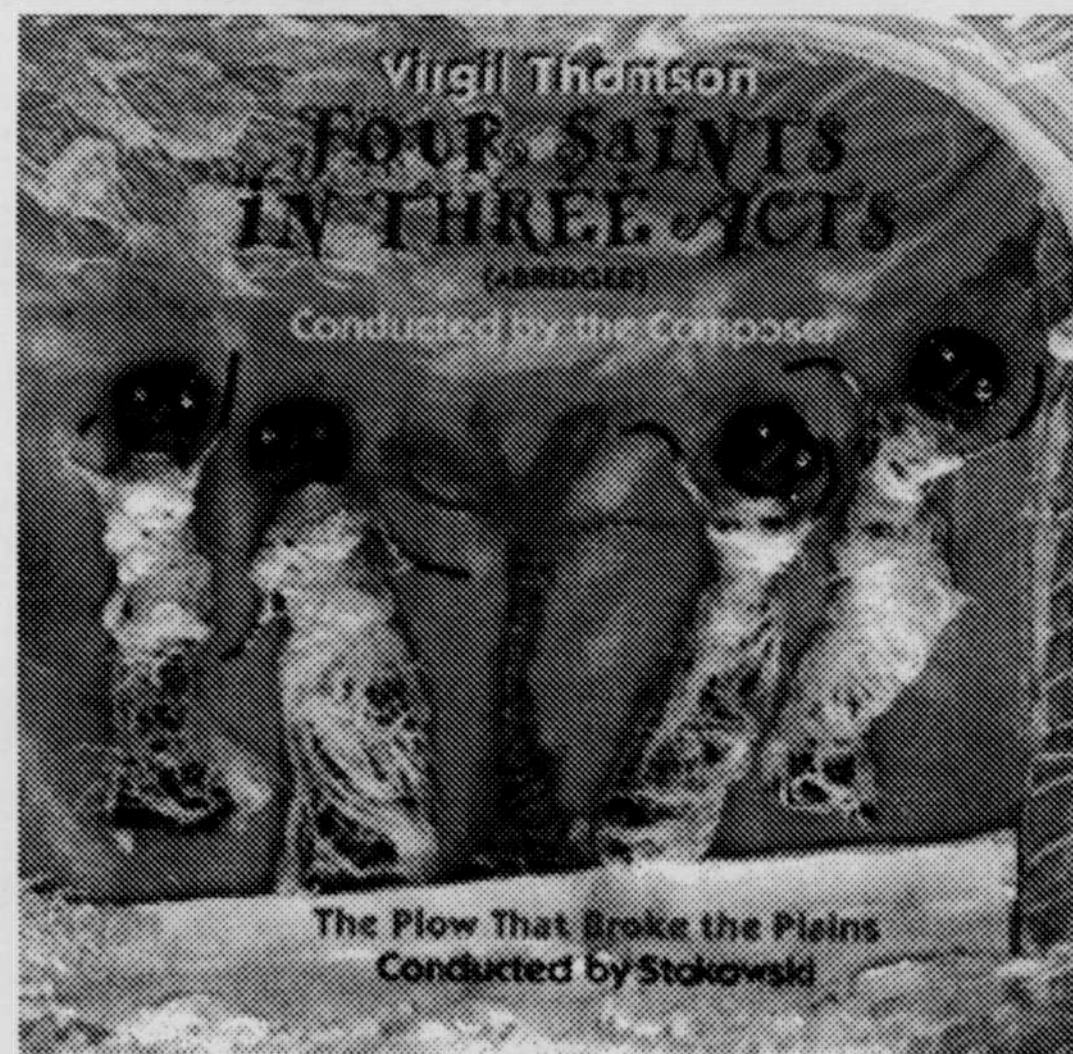
to borrow and adapt elements from the musical theater, African American spirituals and Dadaist performance art. The result is delightful—a whimsical interplay of song and word which pleases the ear and tweaks the mind.

Thomson's notes offer perhaps the best advice to approaching the work: "Please do not try to construe the words of this opera literally or to seek in it any abstruse symbolism. If, by means of the poet's liberties with logic and the composer's constant use of the simplest elements in our musical vernacular, something is here evoked of the childlike gaiety and mystical strength of lives devoted in common to nonmaterialistic end, the authors will consider their message to have been communicated."

The work premiered in Hartford, Conn., in 1934 with an "all-Negro cast." Filmmaker John Houston directed; Frederick Ashton provided choreography for the production, which was mounted by The Friends and Enemies of Modern Music. It later toured to New York and Chicago for an amazing 60 performances.

This recording is an abridged version conducted by Thomson himself in 1947 with much of the original cast. It runs 48 minutes.

The companion piece is *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, a suite derived from Thomson's score



the text seems almost unnecessary. Still, through eye or ear, it is difficult to make much sense of Stein's words. She indulges her penchant for obscurity, repetition and wordplay.

Thomson set the words to music, stage directions included. He chose a traditional lyrical approach rather than "modernist" avant-garde structures and tonalities, which would have challenged the audience on their own merits.

The work is called an opera, but it is not afraid

for the 1936 documentary film of the same name. It adapts elements of jazz, as George Gershwin did earlier, as well as American folk tunes—a source Aaron Copland would later tap for two of his most popular works, *Appalachian Spring* and *Rodeo*.

Four Saints in Three Acts (Abridged), RCA Victor "Gold Seal"/BMG Music, \$10.99 CD.

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