

FRANCIS THORNE LOOKS BACK AND AHEAD (at the same time!)

Francis Thorne, founder and President of the American Composers Orchestra, has had a long, distinguished, and exciting life as a composer. He turns 80 on June 23rd.

This interview took place on Friday, November 2nd 2001 at the offices of the American Composers Orchestra in New York.

MD: What will you be doing this year that surprises you – that you wouldn't have thought you'd be doing, say, 20 years ago?

FT: Well I think 20 years is the wrong number. Starting 25 years ago my life has been very regular. I work on a piece every summer and I'm here (at the ACO offices) every day the rest of the year. When I sit down to work on a piece I want to work day after day week after week and do nothing else. I can't do that during the year. But one thing is that I don't plan to compose this summer. I feel a little wrung out having done one big work after another. That's entirely different than the last 20 years.

MD: You just finished a big work, didn't you?

FT: That's right. A big work for the ACO. After all these years – we're in our 25th season – it was clear that some of the first desk players could be featured, many of whom have been with us since the beginning: Frank Morelli, Steve Taylor, Joseph Schor, Ben Herman, Gene Moyer ...

MD: A concerto for orchestra?

FT: Well, that's what it's called.

MD: It is true that you have acquired a justly well-deserved reputation as an administrative leader: now the ACO, before that the Lenox Arts Center, the Naumburg Foundation, the American Composers Alliance. That must take an enormous amount of energy and time. How do you do it?

FT: The thing that's been helpful to me Michael is that I was a businessman.

MD: True, you certainly do have a unique story to tell.

FT: Peter Mennin called it bizarre.

MD: Well it certainly isn't a typical composer's story. I've known composers who left music for Wall Street, but not the other way around as you did. Can we get into that a bit? The truth is you did grow up in a musical family.

FT: Well yes, in a way. My Dad was a gifted amateur pianist and played ragtime by ear. He couldn't read a note. And my grandfather was Gustav Kobbe. Kobbe's opera book has been on the market for about 80 years; in fact there's been a new edition that has just come out.

MD: I just saw it downstairs at Coliseum Books before coming here.

FT: We lived in New York a lot and my aunt, Kobbe's eldest daughter, took me to all kinds of things: we went to the Philharmonic, we went to Broadway shows. Between the ages of 8 and 20 I went to the opera dozens of times and heard nothing but Wagner. Grandpa Kobbe had actually known Wagner. He'd been sent over as a young reporter to write about him. And because of his close relationship with the music of Wagner he decided that Wagner was the greatest composer of everyone, and that was passed on to me. That Verdi, Puccini, Gounod, they were all second-rate. And so during those 12 years I never heard anything but Wagner. That was a strong influence but a rather biased one. That and the jazz through my Dad were things that just went all the way through my early life and which I think are discernible still.

MD: But you didn't grow up studying music seriously.

FT: No, when I went off to Yale I was going to major in English Literature, but going into my junior year I heard Hindemith was coming and I switched my major to music theory and composition. I was the only undergraduate music major – the others were grad students. But the war was on and they graduated us six months early so I never really got too much composition. Although I did get a lot of counterpoint and harmony from Hindemith.

MD: So then you went into the Navy?

FT: Yes, I was in World War II for three years, and when I got out I was already married with two kids, and I had to start making some money to support my family.

MD: Is that when you went into your father's brokerage firm?

FT: Not exactly. My dad had a seat on the NY Stock Exchange and he was very anxious for me to join him in his business, so I did what he suggested. I went out and got a job working in a bank – Banker's Trust -- to get some experience on the financial front. This was in 1945. I worked there for several years and just as I was about to join his firm he was dying, and we decided that his firm would be absorbed by a larger firm – which it was – and I went to work for that larger firm. Harris Upham, the third largest firm in the country. I worked there for another four years.

MD: Were you composing too, like Charles Ives, on his way back and forth from the office?

FT: No, not at all. I was commuting in from Bay Shore, Long Island, but wasn't doing any composing.

MD: So when did the magical transformation in your career take place?

FT: I met a very distinguished piano teacher named Claude Gonvierre in that part of Long Island and he said "I'd like to give you lessons." And after a while he said "You know you really could be on the concert stage."

MD: So you were going to pursue a career as a concert pianist?

FT: Yes, but after a year he had me give a couple of recitals, one at a private school the other at a private home and I was so nervous performing I thought of going back into business at the same firm I had left. And to make a long story short – we're in August of '55 – a guy I went to prep school with named Louis Lorillard inherited a lot of money – in tobacco I think – and started the Newport Jazz Festival at the urging of his jazz fan wife. This was the year of the 2nd festival, I think, and it had just ended, and he called me up and said "I'm sitting with Ellington and Ellington has written a show – The Man with Four Sides -- and needs to hold some auditions." Ellington needed two pianos and Louis knew I had two pianos in the apartment and so they came over and did the audition, and I did what you would have done:

I offered drinks at the end. And suddenly there was a great party going. And during the course of the evening Billy Strayhorn left the bench for some reason or other and I found myself playing with Ellington. Two days later Louis Lorillard called me up and said "Ellington really liked the way you played and there's this wonderful job opening up and it's yours on his recommendation. You don't have to audition or anything." It was at the Hickory House, a well know jazz club. I took it and played there for two seasons alternating at various times with the Marian McPartland trio, Billy Taylor or Ralph Sutton. For a while I had a bass player, but mostly it was solo piano. And during the course of that second year I decided that I really wanted to get into composition.

MD: It's interesting that you felt perfectly comfortable performing on piano in this environment ...

FT: Well, I was playing jazz, I was improvising. Playing memorized music is what got me all uptight.

MD: Did you sing?

FT: No I never sang there.

MD: So after two years at the Hickory House you wanted to do something ...

FT: Something more serious. I thought that I'd like to pick up where I left off with Hindemith, which was really not that far. So a friend who was married to a Florentine told me that I should go to Florence and study with Luigi Dallapiccola, that he was a wonderful teacher. I had heard a little of his music, so that's what we decided to do. It took a while, because I had Ann and three kids.

MD: It must have been a major change in their lives too.

FT: Ann was very interested in doing this once we decided we were going to go to Florence.

MD: How did the rest of your family feel about you leaving the financial world of your father to run off to Italy to be a composer? They must have thought you were a bit eccentric.

FT: They did except for one. I had a first cousin, who also started at Banker's Trust like I did and he left to get into world politics. We used

to consider ourselves very sympathetic black sheep in the family. And my mother was totally confused by my playing in a jazz club and going off to Europe. But Ann was terrific. She backed me up all the way. In fact, I don't think I would have done it on my own. I think Ann really had the guts and the gumption to say "let's do it."

MD: So you off and went to Florence.

FT: Yes. When we got to Florence and rented a villa and put the kids in school I discovered that Luigi Dallapiccola had gone to New York to teach at Queens College! It was September and so we decided to stay in Florence through Christmas, admire the art, and take some trips and so forth. Then about six weeks later, in late October, I met David Diamond at a cocktail party and he asked me to come over to his apartment the next day to talk about possibly studying with him. And when I got there the first thing he said was "go over to the piano and play me some Ellington." And I said "how do you know I play Ellington?" and he said "well Sam Barber used to come in and hear you at the Hickory House and told me that he loved the way you played." So after I finished playing Satin Doll he said, "OK, if you work with me that's where we start. We never deny your jazz background."

MD: You had weekly lessons?

FT: Twice a week. I studied with David for two and a half years.

MD: What was your first composition?

FT: A duo for violin and viola, which was definitely a student work. It was performed once, in Florence.

MD: Did you ever study with or get to meet Dallapiccola?

FT: I got to know Dallapiccola later because he used to come back to Florence every summer. A lot of people thought he was terrific, like Henry Weinberg, but not me. I realized I could never have studied with him. He was humorless and self-absorbed and not at all interested in my jazz background.

MD: I vaguely know, I think, that you left Florence to come back to New York because you had a big performance with the Philadelphia Orchestra?

FT: That's right. A very early work of mine, a Jazz Suite for two pianos, was performed in the courtyard of the Pitti Palace and in the audience was the director of the American Academy in Rome, Lawrence Roberts and his wife Isabel. They had with them a very nice gentleman and we invited them all back to the apartment for a drink after the concert. The gentleman turned out to be Max deSchauensee, the principal critic of the Philadelphia Bulletin. And he said to me, "when you have an orchestra piece that you and David feel is worthy, I'll look at it, and if I like it I'll personally recommend it to Eugene Ormandy." So I thought that was very nice, and kind of forgot about it. A couple of years later I was back in New York briefly to see my mother and I bumped into Max at the Metropolitan Opera at a matinee, and he said "what about that orchestra piece?" and I said, "as a matter of fact I've just finished one which may qualify and I'll send it right off to you." It was my Elegy for Orchestra. And within two weeks of sending it to Max I had a letter from Ormandy saying that he had programmed it in November of 1964 for three performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra. We felt it was time to come home.

MD: Then it wasn't just a matter of coming back for the performance? You decided it would be a career move?

FT: Yes, we thought there might possibly be a career. The most successful period I've ever had in my life as a composer was right after that. But the longer I stayed in New York the more I realized that to get your music played by the small ensembles you had to be writing in a twelve-tone, atonal kind of style. And I was sort of slipping into that and began to realize that that wasn't the real me at all. So we went back to Florence to spend what turned out to be another three years. And when I got there I was looking at a blank page for several weeks getting nowhere and I finally decided I was going to read Dante to help get my Italian back. And I was so taken with the final 39 lines of Dante's Paradiso that I set them to music for soprano and orchestra. Once I had the text in mind – and I set it by the way in Italian – the music flowed very easily in a tonal, long-lined way, and I felt I was very much back on track.

MD: You must be referring to "La Luce Eterna" which, if I'm not mistaken, is the title track of your new CD.

FT: Yes. Ned Rorem believes that Americans should set all their texts in English, but I can't imagine setting that beautiful, beautiful Italian in English. I think he's off base on that one.

MD: (laughs)

FT: Well, the Italian really brought back the long line.

MD: Yes, I associate your music with long lines. Not to get too far off track, there's a new piece on that CD, "Rhapsodic Variations" which is rather chordal. Is this a departure for you?

FT: No, I wouldn't say so. The fast parts have more jazz, and there are some lines there.

MD: I know you've said you regard your music as highly chromatic, yet tonal, and very much influenced by late Wagner.

FT: Yes, now you know about the strong Wagnerian influence on my life.

MD: And jazz. That's quite an interesting combination.

FT: I guess it is. Jazz up that Wagner.

MD: Let's spend a moment talking about the influence of jazz on your music. Other composers come to mind who have claimed the same influence, like Gunther Schuller and Donald Martino.

FT: Even Copland.

MD: Yes, but Copland never played jazz. I'd like to ask not so much where does one find jazz in your music, but more when you're composing, where does jazz fit into the equation?

FT: I think it's very clear. Take for example the piano concerto I wrote for Ursula Oppens. The third movement of that has a deliberately bebopish feeling (gives a vocal imitation) and she gets it and feels it. Even though my piano playing didn't get too bebopish when I was playing in the 50s, I was fascinated by Gillespie and that's probably when – jazz chords, I guess you could say – were influential on my music. Those bebop lines also appear – one of the best examples is the last movement of the piano concerto. As far as the sleazy Wagnerian chromaticism I just adored that music so much as a kid and I can't help but think that has to influence you.

MD: Yes, and if I can make this statement, I think it was that influence that pointed you in the direction of writing large orchestral pieces. There's really a more Wagnerian bent unlike, say, Gershwin, who tries to write more explicit jazz.

FT: I've written some pop tunes, but no explicit jazz.

MD: You're referring, I take it, to "Chewing Gum", the hit tune you wrote back when you were living in Florence?

FT: Yes, it was one big hit but not a very good piece. Good enough to have three different recordings in Italy back in '59. Unfortunately I didn't belong back then to any royalty-collecting organization – it was before I joined ASCAP – and so I never really made any money out of it.

MD: But you're now a BMI composer.

FT: Yes, I started in ASCAP, because of those pop tunes. After I came back to New York and the Ormandy experience, I was being played by other orchestras, and they were only paying me 200 bucks. So Felix Greissle, Schonberg's son-in-law, who was my editor and publisher at E.B. Marks introduced me to Oliver Daniel at BMI who said "I'll multiply that by 10."

MD: So you were saying that you went back to Italy to get back to tonality and the long line. How long did you stay?

FT: We came back to New York to settle in 1971.

MD: Is that when your association with the American Composers Alliance began?

FT: Almost. From 1970-72 I worked at the Naumburg Foundation. Then from '72-'74 I worked with Lyn Austin at the Lenox Arts Center. The Naumburg thing came up because Schuyler Chapin, who I'd known for a long time, thought I would be a very good president of the Mannes College of Music and he proposed me as chairman of their search committee and the board turned me down because they said I hadn't had enough experience. So Schuyler got me the job at the Naumburg Foundation. Lyn snagged me away from the Naumburg by offering me more money and by giving me the chance to organize an ensemble for the Lenox Arts Center, not only to play in their music theater productions but also to give concerts. In that first year I had

Harvey Sollberger on flute, Charles Wuorinen on piano, Fred Sherry on cello and Joe Passaro, just out of the Manhattan School, was up there on percussion. It was just a terrific group.

MD: Where did ACA fit in?

FT: I was chatting with Charles Dodge at a cocktail party and he said to me "Why don't you belong to ACA?" and I said "Well I don't have any particular reason to." To which he said "Well you really ought to come out of that ivory tower and associate yourself with your colleagues." So I said OK. At the time I was looking for a job. I was offered a job with the National Orchestral Association. I asked Charles if he would recommend me for the job at ACA. But when he proposed me to the ACA Board they turned me down on the basis that a composer shouldn't be in that position because it would be so easy to exploit it to the composer's own benefit. We went through this routine twice at which point Joan Tower got up in arms. So she and Charles arranged to have a lunch with the three principal nay-sayers. They grilled me for about two hours and finally came around. They had a board meeting at which I was elected Executive Director of ACA and went to work on the 15th of September, 1975.

MD: Readers will, I am sure, be interested in the origins of the American Composers Orchestra which originally started as part of ACA.

FT: The point is when I came to work for ACA the first thing Charles (Dodge), then president, said was "we have to celebrate the 40th anniversary" of ACA. I thought to myself that I could raise enough money for an orchestral concert. Just to digress, I owe Charles, who is young enough to be my son, for a good piece of advice about ACO. He said "if you want to keep this thing going, do EVERYTHING yourself." And that was really good advice from a young person.

MD: Meaning?

FT: Meaning I was President, I was Treasurer, I did the programming, because Dennis was never here, someone had to do the programming. I had to hire the guest conductors, the soloists, everything. That's the way things get started. I did get some help from Oliver Daniel at BMI. The Riegger was pretty serious, he said, and we should have something a lot of fun to offset it and he suggested the Harrison.

MD: The first concert took place when?

FT: February 7th, 1977, a year and a half after I went to work for ACA. The only person I knew who was into computers was Charles, so we commissioned Palinode from Charles, Lou Harrison's Marriage at the Eiffel Tower -- by then I knew Virgil Thomson quite well and he agreed to be a narrator along with Lou, which was just delightful. And we had a piece by Yehudi Wyner. Then there was intermission then the Riegger Third. Harold Schonberg gave us quite a good review and said it was the first time he ever enjoyed a Riegger performance. The great review was in The Village Voice which is up there (points to the wall) which is by Tom Johnson, a fabulous, rave review. It was clear that to let this thing just die was not the way to go.

MD: So was it too difficult for you to do the things required to keep an orchestra going and continue to be the Executive Director at ACA?

FT: Yes, except that I continued to do it for ten years. I didn't leave ACA until 1985. It was a gradual thing. ACA became an easier thing to deal with once we got some programs in place, and the ACO became more of a challenge and needed more work.

MD: So when did the ACO officially become a distinct entity?

FT: The first year, which was 76-77, we were called the American Composers Concerts Inc., and we did the February concert in Tully Hall with 50 players and then we did three chamber concerts at the American Place Theater in which we employed a stage director, used lighting and motion and stuff -- that didn't turn out to be very interesting so we dropped that right away and I was able to raise enough money to put on three orchestral concerts in Tully Hall the following season. We actually made a little money that year.

MD: When did Dennis Russell Davies get involved as conductor?

FT: I went down to Bradley's (a jazz club) to hear Hall Overton who was a jazz pianist I admired very much. Well I arrived at Bradley's and Hall came over and said "could you play my next set?" He had an emergency at home he had to take care of. I was playing a solo set and vaguely noticed that someone had pulled up a chair and was sitting very near to me. When I finished needless to say I turned to this person and it was Dennis. Nothing happened for a couple of years and then he went to the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and he called me up one day and said "did you hear that Hall died?" and I said no I hadn't and he said "I want you to write a piece in his memory" and that began an association with Dennis which continues to this day.

MD: Of course the ACO isn't the only thing you do. And I wanted to ask you: does being on the boards of the Naumburg and the Virgil Thomson Foundation ever create a conflict for you? Do you find it difficult to be objective about other's work, composers of other kinds of music, some of whom may not even be that friendly to your own?

FT: I think quite honestly I've been pretty open-minded. My policy with the ACO has always been "the infinite variety of American music." I hope I've been able to do that. For example I'm not the world's greatest fan of pure minimalism, but once in a while you hear a pretty good piece.

MD: So if you're not planning any pieces for your and Ann's 80th years, what are you going to do?

FT: We've talked about taking a Baltic cruise, we've talked about driving around and seeing people one-on-one that we're fond of. We have kids and grandchildren scattered around. It's all up for grabs at the moment.

MD: Don't you have a performance with the New York Chamber Symphony coming up this year?

FT: Well yes. Gerry Schwarz, when I met him, was playing 1st trumpet in the American Brass Quintet, and I don't think he liked the piece I wrote for them in the early 70's. So he never showed much interest in my music until David Diamond heard the 3rd piano concerto with Ursula Oppens, and flipped over it, and insisted the next time he saw Gerry that they sit down and listen to it together. And Gerry called me up right after he heard it to say they programmed "Elegy" with Seattle, then commissioned the Clarinet Concerto, and he's going to premiere my Oboe Concerto, so that's been a wonderful new relationship. The memorandum I got from him went this way: if the NY Chamber Symphony is in business in '02 or '03 I will do it on my one concert, and then I'll do it in Liverpool. If there's no NY Chamber Symphony, then I'll premiere it in Liverpool. So it's going to be done, one way or the other. I was originally supposed to write it for our 25th anniversary here, and I had a short score finished, then Dennis said he'd like me to write a Concerto for Orchestra, so this little piece was an orphan for quite a while. It will be premiered in Seattle in January of '03.

MD: What would you regard as the single most important musical event for you?

FT: Oh it's awfully hard to beat the Ormandy performance. To hear that music played so beautifully was really thrilling. Getting hooked up with Dennis, that too, though that's a little more abstract.

MD: If your friend Louis Lorillard hadn't called you that evening ...

FT: I'm sure I would have been back in business. I'm sure I would have served on some boards and done some public service that way.

MD: It must be gratifying to have Ellington as the lynchpin.

FT: Ellington became a pretty good friend. Ann and I, whenever we had a chance, would go and hear him. And as soon as he spotted her he would tell the audience she was there and dedicate the next piece to her. And sometimes when he was on tour he would pick up the phone and call and ask how things were going.

MD: What did he think of your concert music?

FT: He heard "Fortuna" when it was produced in New York off-Broadway and he liked it, though he said it was ruined by the direction because he liked the music very much. It was wonderful to see him there on that opening night.

MD: That's the show you did with Arnold Weinstein?

FT: Yes. In 1961. It was fun working with Arnold. But my work, except for my opera "Mario and the Magician", has been pretty much locked into concert music. And I'm loving it.

MD: Any mistakes that you've made that you can help the rest of avoid? Anything you would do differently?

FT: I think I've always been much better at promoting other people's work than my own. I'm just lazy at promoting my own work.

MD: It's not that you're lazy, you're shy.

FT: I am basically a shy person. My instinct is to cross the street when someone is coming. Or to go to a party and leave. I do that a lot. I don't like big parties.

MD: That seems consistent with your short attempt to be a concert pianist.

FT: (Laughs) I like doing cabaret, though. Maybe because it comes naturally.

MD: Lastly, let me ask and I don't know if it's possible to even answer: what are your thoughts and feelings about the state of music today?

FT: I can answer that very easily, and it may surprise you to know that I think we're in a golden age. Someday we're going to look back on this and think "there was an awful lot of good stuff going on." I'm sure there are a lot of people who would disagree with me, but I hear a lot of good stuff these days, and it's all different. And I think it's just wonderful.