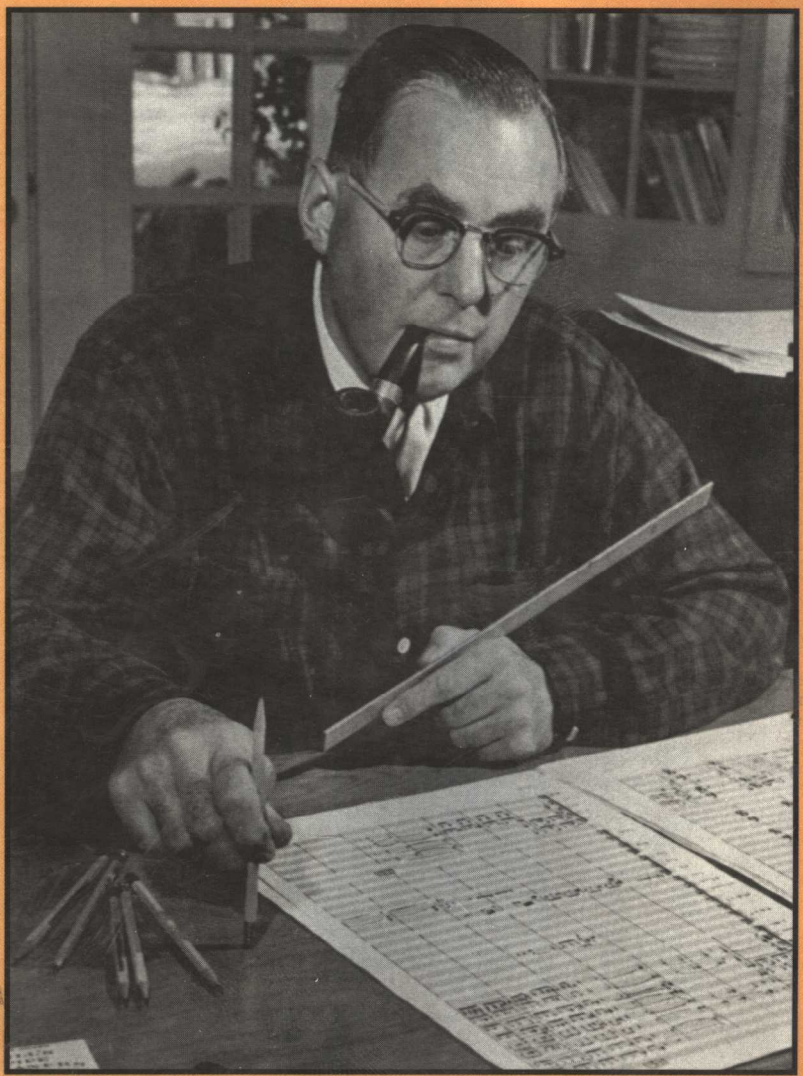
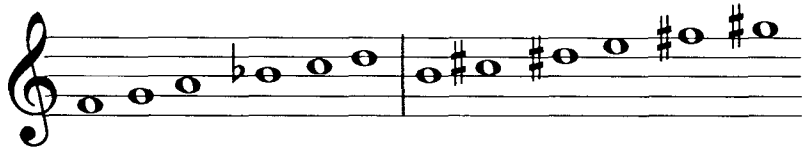
Thinking about Music



The Collected Writings of Ross Lee Finney

Edited by Frederic Goossen



Thinking about Music

The Collected Writings of Ross Lee Finney

Edited and with a Preface by Frederic Goossen

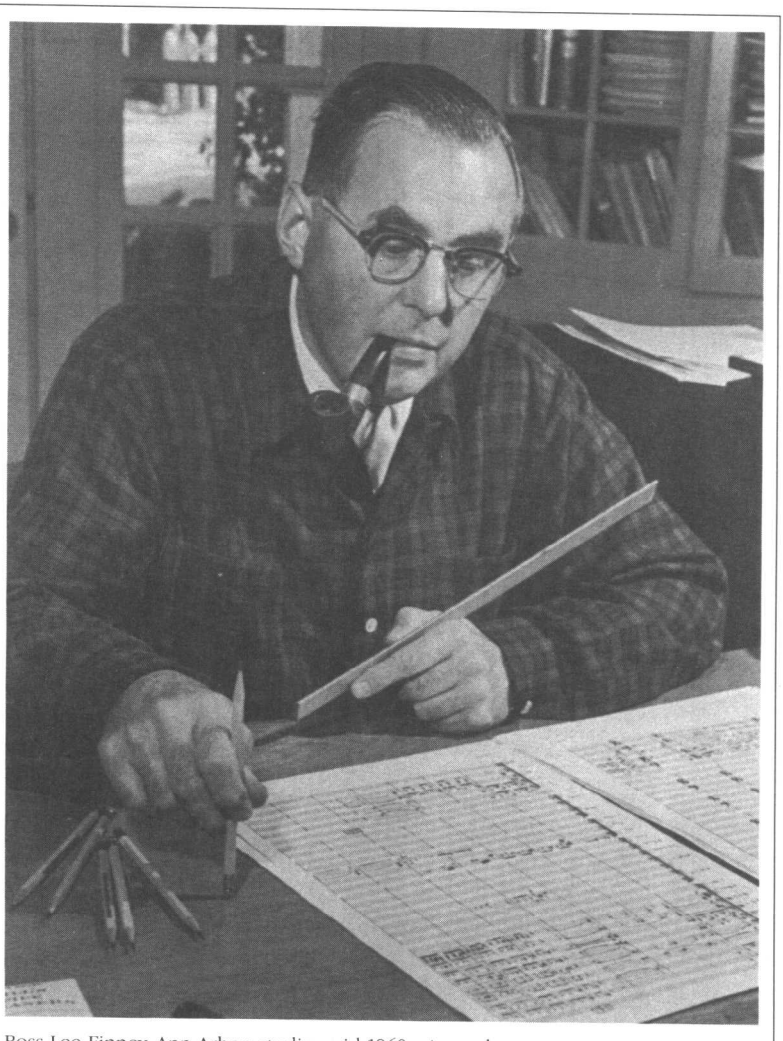
The University of Alabama Press • Tuscaloosa and London

The paper on which this book is printed meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Science-Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI A39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Finney, Ross Lee, 1906–
[Literary works. Selections]
Thinking about Music: The Collected Writings of Ross Lee Finney / edited, and with a preface, by Frederic Goossen.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 0-8173-0521-1 (permanent paper)
1. Music—History and criticism. I. Goossen, Frederic.
II. Title.
ML60.F54 1991 90-11104
780—dc20 CIP
MN

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available



Ross Lee Finney, Ann Arbor, studio, mid-1960s. At work.

Preface

Most composers believe that their works should speak for them. Few are notably voluble either about themselves or other topics, although when they do speak, often they have interesting and original things to say. In our century such masters as Igor Stravinsky in the *Poetics of Music*; Roger Sessions in *The Musical Experience of Composer, Performer, Listener*; Paul Hindemith in *A Composer's World: Horizons and Limitations*; and Aaron Copland in *Music and Imagination* have demonstrated uncommon skill in verbal expression while enriching our understanding of the creative mind and its ways.

The association of composers, especially in the United States, with institutions of higher education has encouraged them to speak and write more consistently than in the past. The life of a professor necessarily involves talking and writing, and this remains true even if one pursues the career of composer simultaneously. Thus American composers as a group are somewhat more eloquent than their predecessors. A tongue-tied composer in our day finds himself at a disadvantage.

Fortunately, circumstances and natural inclination combined to lend Ross Lee Finney the capacity to express himself clearly and directly, and the opportunity to do so. As a result, there exists

a considerable body of material from which to select a representative group of essays, lectures, speeches, and other writings to support and enhance his stature as composer and teacher. The gathering of this material into a book offers those who are interested in American music, in modern music, and in the development of American musical education the perspective of one of the seminal figures in the musical life of this country in the twentieth century. In many ways, Ross Lee Finney is the quintessential American composer. His dual career as composer and developer of young composers exemplifies the ideal of the composer in the university, although Finney never was an "academic composer." He maintained a balance between creative and academic life, succeeding in a difficult enterprise that has thwarted many an American composer.

Born in Wells, Minnesota, December 23, 1906, reared in Valley City, North Dakota, and Minneapolis, where he studied under Donald N. Ferguson at the University of Minnesota, Finney received his bachelor of arts degree from Carleton College. After study with Nadia Boulanger and Alban Berg in Europe, Finney returned home to a career as composer and professor that has spanned six decades. He remains active as composer, visiting artist, member of musical and cultural organizations and boards, observer and commentator upon American music and culture. He is a continuing force in contemporary life. His vision, insight, and occasional bluntness are bracing elements in the musical world. There is no one quite like him on the American scene.

When the School of Music of The University of Alabama inaugurated its Endowed Chair in Music in the academic year 1982–83 with the intent to appoint a composer to that position, Finney's name surfaced at once. We sought an eminent American composer whose experience included success as a teacher, and no one fit that description quite so well as Finney, whose twenty-six years at the University of Michigan had placed him among the most distinguished mentors of young composers in American musical history. He seemed the logical choice to lend distinction and substance to our Chair.

During his year at Alabama, all who came into contact with Finney were warmed at the fire of his enthusiasm, as they were

inspired by his dedication to music and musical composition. Not only the young composers who studied under him, but the whole musical and academic community felt the exhilarating effect of his presence.

This volume of Finney's writings, spanning nearly fifty years, is one of the products of his year at Alabama. From among his many essays, public lectures and speeches, twenty titles have been selected to express the essence of Finney's thoughts about music and culture, some appearing here for the first time in print. Although the writings constitute a collection, there is a clear progression from an early emphasis upon distinctive Americanism in music, through the exploration of serialism in the 1950s, to the experimental radicalism of the 1960s. In the most recent decade there appear a notable serenity and a high degree of integration. Because the book is a collection, occasionally some redundancies surface, for Finney naturally returns to ideas that hold special significance for him. A particular example is his concern with what he calls "musical complementarity," the method of composing with symmetrical hexachords which he discusses in different ways in "Making Music," "Musical Complementarity," and "Landscapes Remembered."

The titles are arranged in three main groups, chosen to exhibit the extent of Finney's professional life and interests. Within a group, titles are ordered chronologically, each date noted at the end. This organization enables readers interested in principal topics to find their way, while following the development of Finney's thinking. Those who prefer a chronology of the whole are referred to Appendix A, where the dates of all titles are given. The collection ends with a "coda," the lecture "Landscapes Remembered: Memory and Musical Continuity," delivered without notes at Alabama and transcribed from tape recording by the editor. Such materials as I deemed essential to understanding or elucidating Finney's meaning, along with the sources of his references to writers of many eras, are collected in the Notes.

Part I: On Learning and Teaching, presents Finney's ideas about musical education in the American university. He accepts the concept of music as an integral part of education, recognizing the difference between American policy and the separation of music

as a profession from music as a scholarly pursuit characteristically European. He argues in favor of placing the composer, and creative imagination, at the center of musical education. Such an idea flies in the face of American practice, where music as performance and recreation plays a dominant role, but it suggests why Finney was a "pied piper" to generations of young composers during his tenure at Michigan. He is a natural leader.

Finney's teaching must have been compelling, if "The Uniqueness of Musical Craft" can serve as an example. In discussing Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* Symphony, he explains how a composer might translate extra-musical suggestion into musical terms, basing his exposition on Hindemith's tonal theories. His analysis is technical, never deviating from the musical text.

Throughout Part I, Finney emphasizes that music is essential to a humanistic education, its creative element is fundamental to such an education, the university is responsible to nurture the creative imaginations of its students, such nurture should begin in infancy, and the study of music as a serious art and discipline need not be confined to those who intend to pursue it professionally. His intent always is to understand music as one of the great symbolic languages of humankind and to present it in that light.

In Part II: On Music and Culture, Finney appears as commentator on a wider range of subjects. He is unselfconsciously American, unsentimental in his understanding of the difficulties American society has experienced in coming to terms with the fine arts, impatient with the ivory-towerism that so often has impeded the development of serious music in this country, insistent that music be valued for its intrinsic worth, and perceptive in his recognition of the potential of composers whose later work was to validate his judgment.

Finney demonstrates his belief that the education of a composer should not be confined to professional training by the wide range of references to writers as different as Descartes and Lewis Mumford. Part II closes with "America Goes West," in the course of which Finney refers approvingly to composers as diverse as Roger Sessions, Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Milton Babbitt, Andrew Imbrie, Leon Kirchner, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Roger Reynolds. Not many commen-

tators in 1967 would have been able to see merit in the work of everyone on that list.

Because Ross Lee Finney has kept his original dedication to composition at the center of his life, Part III: On Composing, is the culmination of this book. It is a series of musings on the elusive subject of what composing is and how one does it. Composers, never the most articulate of artists, are especially reticent when discussing how they work. Finney himself notes this tendency in the first sentence of "The Composer Speaks."

Nevertheless, he here offers insight into the germination, development, and realization of musical compositions. He makes no claim that his way is the only way, although his confidence in his methods and their outcome is apparent everywhere, and the rich musical results do, indeed, speak for themselves.

Part III of the book covers some thirty-five years of the composer's life. Of particular interest are "Analysis and the Creative Process," and "Musical Complementarity." Each is devoted to painstaking discussion of some of the most intimate and intriguing aspects of the process of composing. In the first of these Finney describes the genesis of two different works, both derived from the same source. His conviction that composing is the indivisible combination of reason and emotion serves as the basis for explaining the process that produced his String Quintet and Second Symphony.

In "Musical Complementarity," Finney discusses his method, developed over nearly forty years, of reconciling total chromaticism with tonality. He traces his belief in the compatibility of chromaticism with a sense of tonal center, or "pitch polarity," back to his studies with Alban Berg in the 1930s. Berg was the only one of Arnold Schoenberg's early associates who refused to abandon tonality despite adopting chromatic serialism. His teaching, in Finney's memory, connected serialism firmly with tonality.

Finney states that his own music is not serial, but that it is tonal. It is based on his system of symmetrical hexachords, which governs the microcosmic order. The larger structural order is founded on tonality, a system of principal pitches that provides the "polar" points of the design. This "complementarity" between the two levels of

musical order lends tension and articulation to the form. It is notable that none of Part III requires sophisticated technical knowledge for comprehension. Finney explains complex musical concepts so that the interested nonprofessional can grasp them.

The book closes with "Landscapes Remembered: Memory and Musical Continuity." In transcribing this lecture I have kept as much of the spontaneity of the moment as was appropriate to a printed text. Finney likes to lecture without notes, and what may sometimes be lost in conventional exposition is more than compensated for by the mercurial weavings of an original and fascinating mind. One of Finney's chief interests in the past few years has centered upon memory and the ways in which it can be exploited to achieve coherence in musical compositions. This lecture deals with that question by way of his work for small orchestra, *Landscapes Remembered*, among his most poignant and beautiful scores. It seemed a fitting envoi to the book.

No artist, and no artist's work, can be summed up in a simple statement. Still, every artist of consequence projects a definite profile. The elements of Finney's personality that dominate are intelligence, lucidity, ebullience, optimism, and determination. He has worked for the better part of a century to produce music of a high order, a body of work that looms large on the American musical horizon with growing influence and prestige a certainty. Some of the sources of that music are revealed and discussed in the pages of this book. The essential characteristics of its creator's mind and sensibility are displayed here clearly and uncompromisingly.

These essays and lectures, in their concern for musical learning and teaching, for music rooted in our culture yet making no compromises, and for the development of individual style based on complete mastery of craft together with reliance upon intuition, are the work and thought of an artist whose contribution to American music is exemplary. In his life and in his work, Ross Lee Finney is an American original.

Frederic Goossen
Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Acknowledgments

Among the pleasures of preparing a manuscript for publication is the recognition of those who have provided help along the way. Research on this book proved to be more demanding and frequently more elusive than I had expected. Without the aid of the friends and colleagues noted here, the book would not have reached completion.

I wish to thank in particular Ross Lee and Gretchen Ludke Finney for their patient and cheerful advice and assistance at every stage of the project, and for the use of photographs from their private collection. They went far out of their way to help.

Especially helpful in locating obscure pieces of information for the Notes were Charles Sems, Music Specialist, Library of Congress; Howard Boatwright, Professor Emeritus, Syracuse University; Rosemary Cullen, Curator of the Harris Collection in the John Hay Library, Brown University; and Barbara Filipac, Senior Library Associate Specialist in Manuscripts, also of the John Hay Library at Brown; Corey Field, Director of Publications and Marketing, European-American Music Distributors Corporation; Leslie C. McCall, Reference/Music Librarian, Amelia Gayle Gorgas Library, The University of Alabama; Angela Jenkins Wright, Supervisor/Librarian, Interlibrary Loan Office, University Libraries, The

University of Alabama; and Christel A. Bell, The University of Alabama.

Also to be noted for aid in verifying circumstances surrounding the original presentation of many parts of the book are Ann Flowers, Assistant Archivist, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Library, University of Michigan; Sandra Garstang, Library Assistant, Robert Millikan Library, California Institute of Technology; William McClellan, Music Librarian, School of Music, University of Illinois; Judy Harvey Sahak, Librarian of the Denison Library, Scripps College; and Jerry Thornton, Technical Library Assistant, Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, University of Michigan. To my editor, Eunice H. Payne, I owe special thanks for her sharp eyes and skilled professional advice. And I thank Gary R. Smoke, who prepared the musical examples.

Finally, I offer my thanks to my wife, Shirley Reed Goossen, whose indefatigable aid and good humor kept the project firmly on track. Her research for the Notes, her preparation of the typescript, and above all her many intelligent and thoughtful suggestions combined to improve the book immeasurably.

Whatever faults remain are my responsibility.

Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xv

Part I: **On Learning and Teaching**

1. The Composer and the University 3
2. The Uniqueness of Musical Craft 12
3. The Value of the Abstract 31
4. Education and the Creative Imagination in Music 47
5. Employ the Composer 56
6. The Artist Must Rebel 62
7. Making Music 70

Part II: **On Music and Culture**

8. Modern Chamber Music in American Culture 83
9. The Relation of the Performer to the American Composer 91
10. The Composer and Society: The Composer's Unique Relation to His Culture 96
11. Music and the Human Need 103
12. America Goes West 119

Part III: **On Composing**

13. The Composer Speaks: The Piano Quintet 127
14. Analysis and the Creative Process 130
15. Problems and Issues Facing American Music Today 147
16. The Diversity of Inculturation 152
17. Composing Music for Dance 158
18. A Composer's Perception of Time 163
19. Musical Complementarity 169

Part IV: **Coda**

20. Landscapes Remembered: Memory and Musical Continuity 177
Notes 187
Appendix A 199
Appendix B 202

Part I

On Learning and Teaching

1

The Composer and the University

It is the common belief of musicians that their art should hold a larger place in the humanities than it does. The high position that music held in the medieval university is misleading, but it is true that music, as an art, has lost status in modern society. Music as an accomplishment and a recreation is greatly valued, and we feel no real antagonism from our colleagues in the humanities as long as we remain within those limits. But such a position frustrates scholarship, belittles performance, and mocks the importance of a creative environment in the university. It is only natural, therefore, that scholar, performer, and composer should seek in common to raise the esteem in which their art is held.

This common purpose should unify those musicians who find themselves sheltered by the academic environment, but in fact it does not. The musicologist asserts that only through the discipline of scholarship can a level of musical integrity be achieved which will meet the requirements for learning in a great university. This position follows Matthew Arnold's dictum that "all learning is scientific which is systematically laid out and followed up to its original sources, and that a genuine humanism is scientific."[1]