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# STINGS

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**Augusta  
Read  
Thomas**



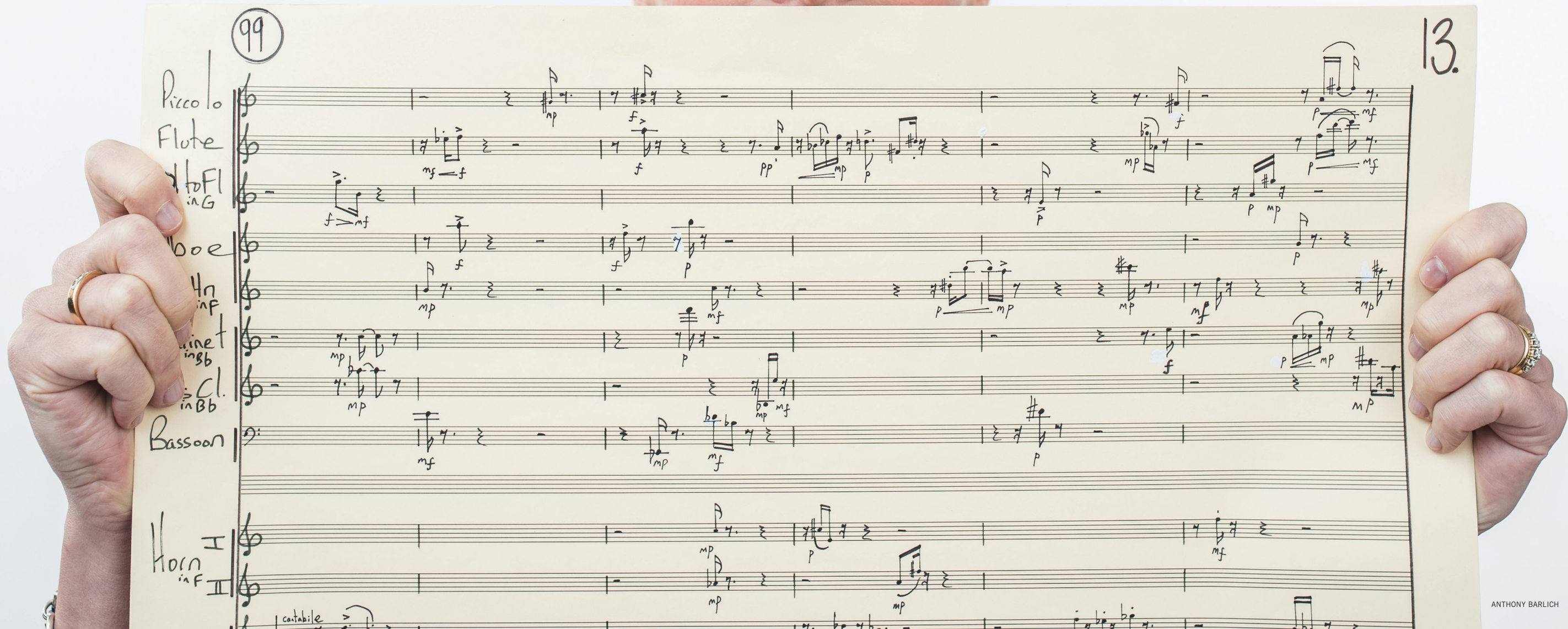


PURE

# IMAGINATION

The exuberantly prolific  
Augusta Read Thomas  
has no time for  
creative boundaries

By Thomas May





No matter how gloomy you may be feeling about the state of the world, it seems impossible to come away from an encounter with Augusta Read

Thomas without a surge of fresh hope. The Chicago-based composer radiates an exuberance about music's inexhaustible potential that is both powerful and infectious. And she has been channeling it for decades into a vast, ongoing body of compositions that represents one of the most remarkable achievements of contemporary American music: a unique vision of the poetry of sound that is at the same time anchored in an exquisite attention to craft and technique.

It's also easy to feel like a slacker when confronted with Thomas' prolific creativity.

Speaking via cellphone while en route from academic obligations—she's just given a luncheon lecture at the University of Chicago—Thomas, who turns 54 this month, says she works “365 days a year, starting at 4 in the morning. But I don't want to take a vacation. I have so much more music to write!”

She's been doing that since she was a small child in Glen Cove, New York. As the youngest of ten siblings, Thomas made a habit of lying down underneath the family piano, all the better to absorb its sounds. “One reason I love to teach is because I love to talk about sound. Any sound: something improvised on a subway, a baby crying, Beethoven quartets, African music. It doesn't matter what it is.”

Thomas went on to study with Oliver Knussen at Tanglewood and Jacob Druckman, who was spearheading the wave of “Neo-Romanticism” at Yale. Thomas herself now ranks as a leading compositional mentor; she is one of only 21 individuals from the entire University of Chicago faculty to hold the position of “university professor.” Thomas was the Chicago Symphony's longest-serving resident composer (1997–2006), where Daniel Barenboim and Pierre Boulez championed her work—and this is only one of her many residencies.

“Each piece in my catalogue is its own adventure. I'm not a composer who rewrites the same work over and over,” says Thomas. Her publisher, G. Schirmer, currently lists a total of 158 titles (ranging from 1½ to 45 minutes); excluded are hundreds of earlier pieces

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—Augusta Read Thomas

she withdrew because she felt they failed to meet her standards.

The early Edgar Allan Poe-inspired opera *Ligeia* (1994), for example, was commissioned by Mstislav Rostropovich for the Evian-les-bains Spring Festival in France, and was produced multiple times in Europe and the United States back in the 1990s, but Thomas withdrew it “because I'm a perfectionist and I was so young when I wrote it.” Currently, for Santa Fe Opera's new initiative Opera for All Voices: Stories of our Time, Thomas is at work on an (as yet unnamed) one-act opera with the writer and literary scholar Leslie Dunton-Downer (her librettist for *Ligeia* as well) to premiere in the fall of 2019.

Thomas has written extensively for orchestra and for chamber configurations, including a wide spectrum of pieces for strings. Her approach to stringed instruments in particular can be seen as a microcosm reflecting her overall aesthetic outlook as well as her sense of mission as a composer.

“I've been writing for strings my whole life and find endless inspiration here because there is so much expressiveness and humanity and singing that comes straight through the instrument. It's just natural for me to write for strings, even though my own instrument is the trumpet. My husband tells me that I have a ‘string soul,’” Thomas says, referring to British-American Bernard Rands, a fellow composer she married in 1994.

“But along with that natural, organic expressiveness, my love of counterpoint and sense of compound-melody and harmony also make me gravitate toward strings. A solo violin can be like an orchestra in a certain way. Strings can be flexible and sonorous in so many different dimensions that they're a natural fit with my musical ideas. I like music that is multidimensional”—which helps explain why J.S. Bach is one of her idols.

In lieu of the common designation “String Quartet No. X,” Thomas' works for string quartet characteristically bear such evocative titles as *Sun Threads* (1999–2002) and *Helix Spirals* (2015). “That's because I'm dealing with a different purpose and different material for each piece,” Thomas explains—indeed, sometimes for each section of a larger work. “So a composition is *a priori* its own individual vision that has to be organically related to the material. I'm constantly going on a new adventure of my own.”

ANTHONY BARLICH





Premieres: March 5, 2015-Miller Theatre; June 25, 2015 Tanglewood Music Center Fellows

5 min. and 30 seconds

2 min.

5 minutes

2 min.

5 min. and 30 seconds

Slow

Slow

# FAS

Resonant  
+  
Spacious

Light + Bouncy  
Scrummy  
Bright + lively

# Animated + Dynamic Dancing in tip-tees

Resonant + Spacious + flexible + punchy

- Animated + Dynamic

Ritualistic  
Twinkling

Groovy

## How Driving

- performed with dancers when feasible.

Inter lock lines

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**Fals**

17  
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18

1=76 ----7

son.



# Braiding, twining, twisting

encircling, interplaiting...

In Greek mythology, Selene, goddess of the moon, drives her moon Chariot across the sky and the heavens. She is the sister of Sun-god Helios and of Eos, goddess of the dawn.

Dedicated with admiration and gratitude to JACK Quartet, Third Coast Percussion,  
Ellen Highstein, Melissa Smey, Deborah and Philip Edmundson, and Sidney K. Robinson



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Take *Helix Spirals*, a three-movement quartet composed to celebrate what has been called “the most beautiful experiment in biology” (the Meselson-Stahl DNA replication experiment of 1957–8 that supported the Watson-Crick hypothesis). “I used a whole palette of pizzicatos and Bartók snaps and double-stops based on what I was saying in that piece, inspired by this scientific experiment.”

A very different—and more ominous—epochal experiment prompted still another recent string work: *Plea for Peace*, which adds a wordless soprano soloist to the quartet texture (available, as many of Thomas’ pieces are, on YouTube). This brief composition was commissioned to commemorate the 75th anniversary, in 2017, of the world’s first artificial nuclear reactor, which was developed at the University of Chicago as part of the World War II Manhattan Project.

“I was asked to write this for a day that would be devoted to lectures about this legacy of the atomic age,” she says. “At first I didn’t want to, since I worried it would be strange to have music amid these panels and discussions—and my pieces tend to be spiritual or about universal themes. I can only accept commissions when they feel natural. With all of my works, it has to be from my heart: If I can *feel* something then I can do it. But then I realized I care about world peace profoundly, and I wanted something with universal meaning that would be felt by listeners whether in Korea, Australia, or Chicago. So I came up with the idea of setting not a text, but wordless vocalise: a pure voice from the heart. The string quartet and the voice braid in and out of each other.”

Thomas’ most recent string quartet, *CHI* (2017), refers to the Chinese concept of “the vital life force energy of the universe present within every living thing.” Commissioned by the Rockefeller Memorial Chapel and the Spektral Quartet, *CHI* is being toured around the United States this spring by the Argos Quartet and will receive its New York premiere at Alice Tully Hall in early May.

**T**hat’s merely one among numerous concerts of Thomas’ work that have been crowding her event calendar for just the first half of 2018. At press time, the world premiere

of *BRIO*, a compact new orchestral piece commissioned by the Des Moines Symphony, is scheduled for late March. In April, Thomas undertakes the second part of her composer residency with the Eugene Symphony Orchestra, which culminates on April 19 with a performance of *Sonorous Earth* (featuring Third Coast Percussion) for percussion quartet and chamber orchestra.

Given Thomas’ experimentalism and imagination, it’s not surprising that Third Coast Percussion and the JACK Quartet are frequent collaborators. Indeed, she wrote an octet combining both in her 2015 work *Selene* (*Moon Chariot Rituals*), which is being featured as part of another residency (at the University of Michigan School of Music) and which receives its Canadian premiere in late May at the Open Ears Festival in Kitchener, Ontario (with different ensembles).

Much as Thomas shapes the character and formal design of each composition according to the relevant musical materials, she tailormakes her work for specific musicians. In view of the scope of her commissions, that entails a lot of flexibility. “I try to get into the mood or the vibe of a particular player for whom I’ve been commissioned by going to as many of their concerts and listening to as many of their recordings as possible.”

The paradox is that, once the initial collaboration is over, the piece can go on to have an afterlife with different musicians who contribute an entirely new outlook. “If I can bring my humanity to a piece and sculpt it for the humanity of someone I am writing for, it can have a universality so someone else can play it.” Thomas mentions *Selene* as an example. “Here, I already knew Third Coast and JACK, since we have done many things together. I sculpted it on these eight world-class virtuosi, but it has been played a lot by now, and other musicians can pick up on the energy.”

Jennifer Koh, for example, took up Thomas’ Third Violin Concerto (titled *Juggler in Paradise*), which had been introduced in 2009 by Frank Peter Zimmermann. Koh went on to give the London and US premieres. A viola version of the same work has been created and still awaits its premiere. Thomas later wrote the solo violin piece *Venus Enchanted* for Koh, who premiered it as part of her Shared Madness program at National Sawdust Brooklyn in 2016.

Thomas is especially thrilled to be returning to the Eugene Symphony in April for her ongoing composer residency, since the program is structured to combine her love of writing music with mentorship of performers and music students. “They wanted to do something more holistic than just commission and then play a piece and then: It’s done. Instead, Eugene has an integrated approach that involves having a composer in the community.”

The culminating project will be a new orchestral version of her frequently performed *Resounding Earth* (2012) for percussion quartet. Titled *Sonorous Earth* and calling for about 300 pieces of metal, it pays homage to a panoply of other composers who wrote heavily for percussion who have influenced Thomas’ distinctive sound world: Olivier Messiaen, Igor Stravinsky, Boulez, Lou Harrison, Edgard Varèse.

While each of her pieces is custom-tailored to create its own world, there are recurrent signatures, such as the composer’s obsession with bell sounds, which here runs riot. “I’ve always loved bells, and there really is nothing like *Sonorous Earth*. I use spinning Burmese bells, Indian Noah bells, Thai gongs, Japanese singing gongs—such a unique palette!”

The interface with the public that is part of Thomas’ residency fits in with her ongoing sense of what it should mean to be a composer. “It would be very easy to just do me and write my own music. But that would be so selfish, and I have been so fortunate. Even though I am very busy as a composer, I love teaching, and I also volunteer time to be a stalwart supporter of other peoples’ music.” In October 2016, for example, Thomas organized and executed the Ear Taxi Festival, an ambitious new-music celebration in Chicago, which, according to *Chicago Tribune* critic John von Rhein, was the city’s “largest-ever festival of contemporary classical music . . . a grand idea in a grand city at a grand time.”

“The reason I spend time on these projects is just a natural gestalt,” Thomas says. “If you love this music, you want to help to get it played. I don’t separate the teacher from the composer. It feels like the right spirit in life to take leadership and make things better for the field and for other artists.” ■