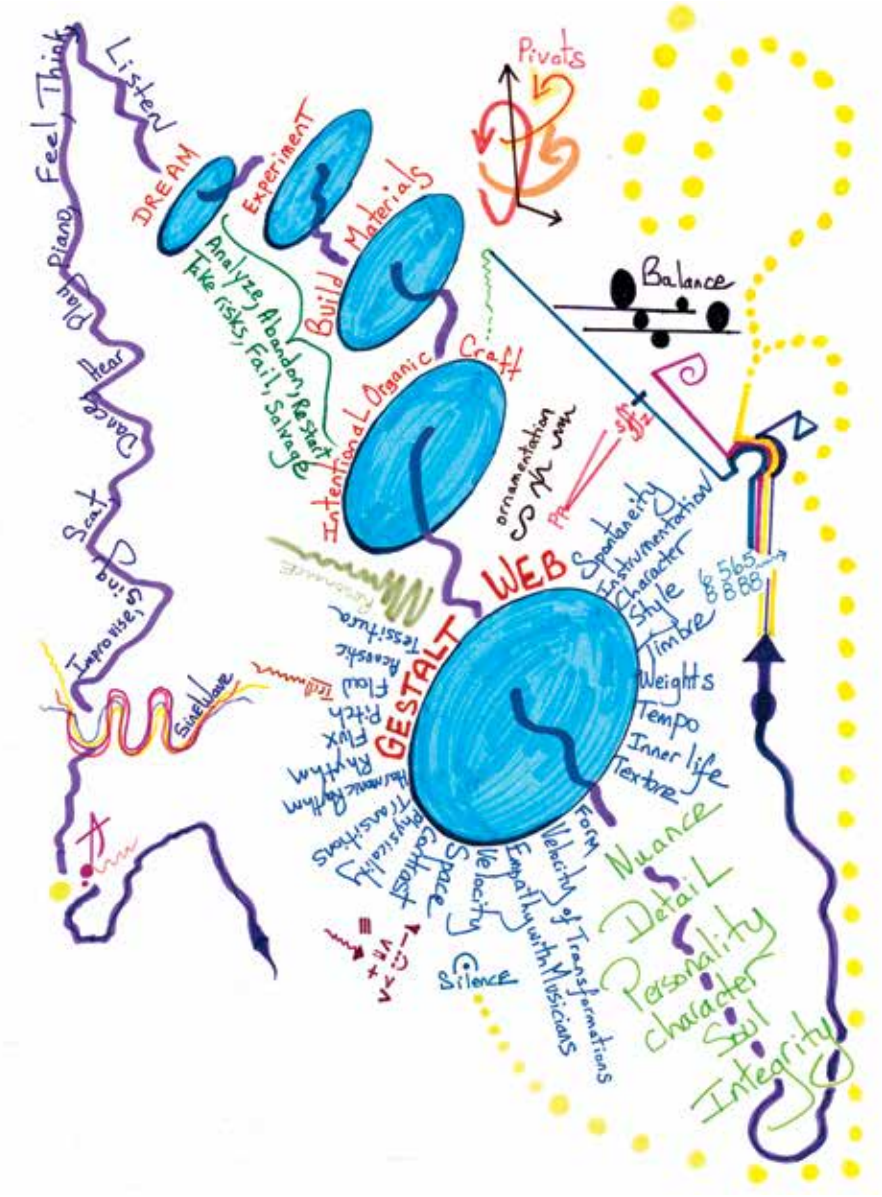
Composition in color

Text: R.J. Weick

To capture the essence of Augusta Read Thomas' extensive body of musical work is as nuanced and colorful of an endeavor as the creative and technical process behind its composition. While language is similar to music in many ways—a means of communication, a form of expression—it often lacks that which is elusive and inexplicable about the means in which orchestral sound and contrapuntal rhythm can truly move one on a visceral level.

While defined in her own words as "highly notated, precise, carefully structured, soundly proportioned" with an organic self-propulsion and vibrant inner life—as if "overhearing a captured improvisation," the nuanced work calls to mind expressive language like spontaneous, elegant, capricious, ardent, lyrical, and dynamic, informed by a process in which material and form has been sculpted, polished, chiseled, and formed.



"I think the works are colorful. I think they are clean, very intentional. You can hear that I heard every note, you can hear that every dynamic was sculpted and then I polished it some more and then I was fashioning it just right, like that one little note or this one—that is all over my pieces. The notation is extremely clear," said Augusta Read Thomas, musical composer and University Professor of Composition in the Department of Music and the College at the University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois.

"I love the sense of an inner life. I like music where you can feel that energy in it. You get taken on a journey and it feels normal, like butter melting, but technically, that is very hard to do, to be able to craft something that is so meticulous and yet on the other hand retains enormous vitality and effervescence and flow," Thomas added.

Thomas, who is also the founder and director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Composition and a member of both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has made it her life's work to listen carefully to the inspiration behind the improvisation, curating notes and chords into instrumental works that have led to being recognized as a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize of Music—for "Astral Canticle"—featured on a Grammy award-winning CD by Chanticleer, and a winner of the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, among other accolades. Throughout her professional career, she has also served as MUSICALIVE Composer-in-Residence with the New Haven Symphony, Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and has been commissioned by leading ensembles and organizations across the globe.

Inspired by prose and poem, myth and lore, philosophy and religion, modern dance and jazz improvisation, Thomas' composition is informed by layers of drawings, charts, and colorful visual artistry. It then culminates into

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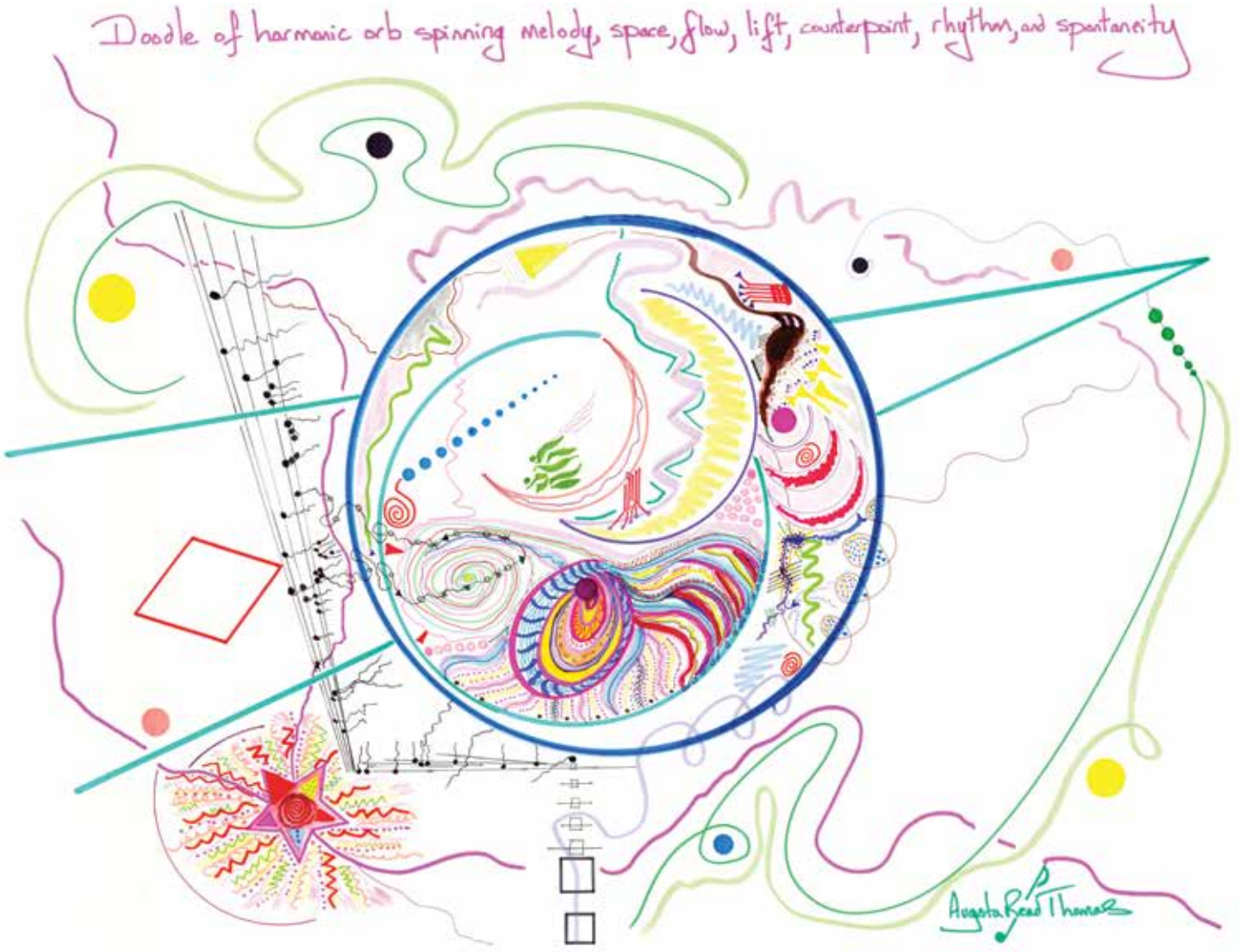

detailed notation and form that leaves few questions left unanswered for both conductor and musician. In "Brio," commissioned by Ann Bucksbaum Friedman and John Bucksbaum and premiered by the Des Moines Symphony with Joseph Giunta conducting, Thomas outlines the 11-minute composition braiding harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal elements in illustrative map form, capturing the gradual crescendo and sparkling intensity in artful design. For others, like "Selene (Moon Chariot Rituals)" and "EOS," rendered illustrations of mythological figures like Eos, Helios, and Selene decorate the page, joining articulations, musical narratives, and construction arcs.

"It starts as improvisation, but every piece starts differently. One piece might start with a harmonic improv like chords, another piece might be a tune, another piece might be a rhythmic groove—some kind of syncopated three-and-twos—or another piece might start with a timbre, like there is the idea of high, delicate string harmonics. So, on one hand, all start as improvs, but there is no cookie-cutter," Thomas said.

"Even from section to section of a piece, let's say there is a fast movement and a slow movement: those would be built differently and also differently from how other pieces were built. Each one is their own adventure, such that you don't get the sense that all five orchestra pieces are all five versions of the same. Each one is its own special, little magic box full of its own invention and its own sparkle and its own sunshine," Thomas added.

It is also a process that self-admittedly keeps her interested, noting the flexibility in the composition, in the very measures and bars, keeps her from resting "on any laurels" or any of her habits. In a graphic, titled "Gestalt Web," Thomas depicts her creative process in a playful illustration complete with purple lines, yellow dots, and twists and turns, as a single idea can percolate through progressive stages of dreaming, experimentation, building materials, and intentional organic crafting to a gestalt web of musical parameters. The latter of which, considered holistically interdependent, range from tempo, rhythm, texture, and physicality, to velocity of transformations and empathy with musicians.

"You improvise, you sing, you scat, you dance, you hear, you play piano, and you feel, you think, and you listen. You follow the purple line and then you start dreaming about your piece—and then you throw it all out. You analyze it and abandon it. You take risks. And then you go back to the beginning, back to the start, and then you try again and finally you get a little further and you start to experiment and then build material and have an organic craft and from there it goes into this gestalt web where you can't separate character from pitch or flow from timbre or weight of a note from tessitura or texture from space," Thomas said.

The result of the journey, both intentionally designed and artistically creative, is a composition of meticulous balance, intentionality, and dimension, where nuance, detail, personality, character, soul, and integrity are integrated into a given piece.

"That is how I write music. To a certain extent, the design is imperative to understand how to build something where that whole gestalt comes together and then within that, to take that so the form and the material are in ex-

PHOTOGRAPHY: AUGUSTA READ THOMAS

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cellent balance and proportion in a ying-yang relation—they fold together in just the right way. It's hard," Thomas said. "It's really hard. I can spend 20 hours on four bars and then sometimes I can write two bars very quickly, it just depends. I think a lot about design and contrast, sort of architecturally, poetically, in terms of the natural world. I think it's fair to say composers are designers in many ways."

While title names like "Astral Canticle," "Avian Escapades," "Canticle Weaving," "Dream Threads," "Helios Choros," "Words of the Sea," "Cello Concerto #3: Legend of the Phoenix," "Terpsichore's Dream," and "Clara's Ascent," capture the imagination, each composition is highly notated. As one example of many music parameters, Thomas is precise about tempo.

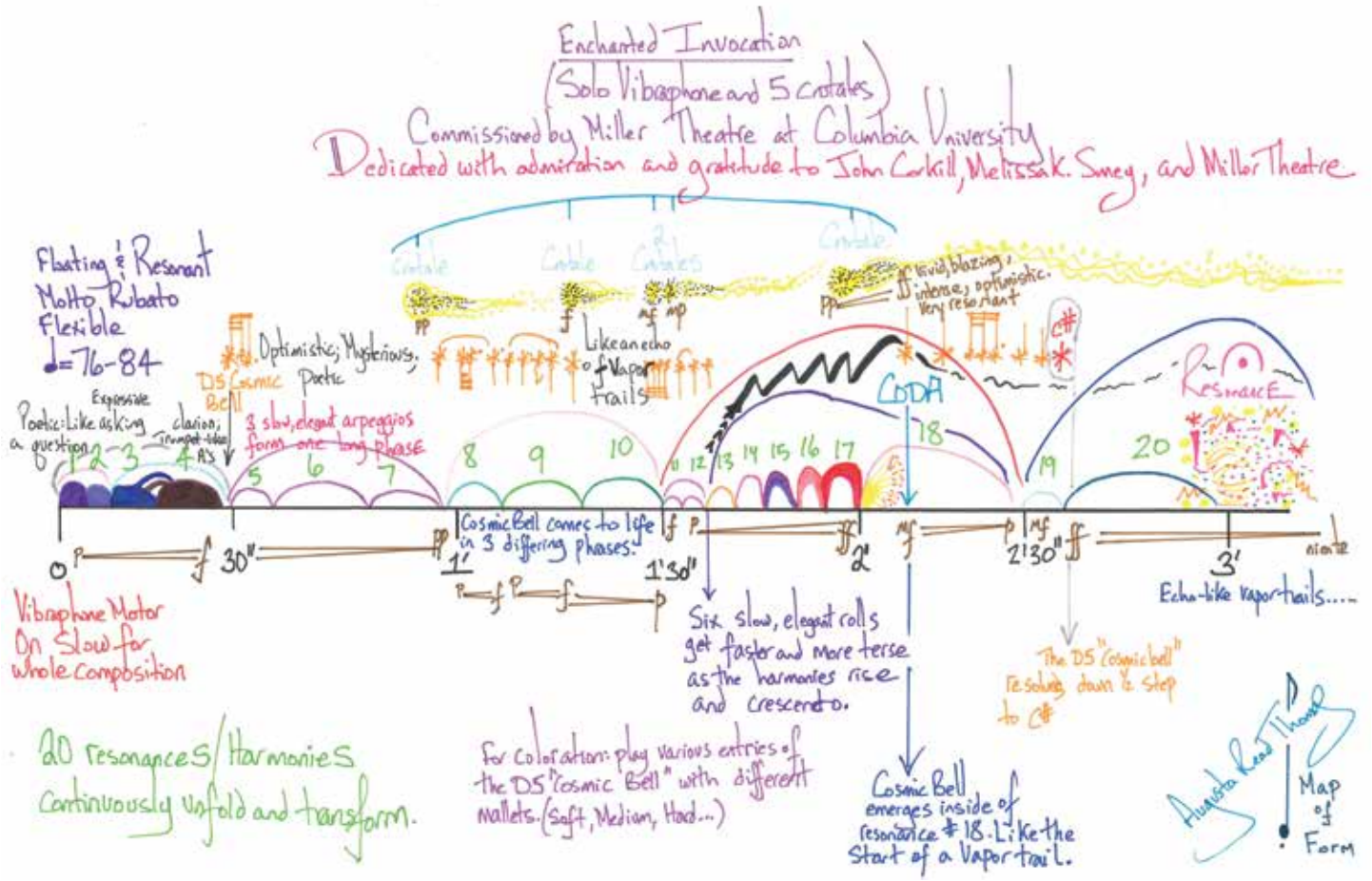
"That is a tricky one, because Beethoven can work at a lot of different tempos as has been proven and so can Mozart and a lot of composers. But, with me, I usually have a tempo in ear and mind, and I craft all of my forms and relationships—the proportions, the relationship between material and form—on particular tempos and so I just really love it when everybody plays my tempos," Thomas said.

"I guess pretty much any composer would say that, that is not the most unique thing to say, but in my case, because it is such sculpted music, it really matters. I need it at the tempo, because the inner life of the object works at my tempo," Thomas added.

For Thomas, who has a deep appreciation for both the conductors and the players who perform her music, the proofreading and editing phase is an integral component of the process to ensure the score is extremely articulate and organized.

"I try to make my scores incredibly organized, with clean and clear notation, so there are no questions. Nobody has to call me up and say, 'what did you mean in bar 32?' I am constantly proofreading and shaving and editing, so the idea is they can just play it. They can make even more out of it, they don't have to fight the notation, they can say, 'okay, now let's go deeper,'" Thomas said. "I love when conductors and performers do that. They really bring the inner life out, not just play the notes, but bring the dynamics alive and bring the articulations alive and use all the right percussion mallets."

Long before she dedicated her life's work to composition, Thomas honed a passion and affinity for all things music at a young age. As the 10th child of 10 children—and a twin—Thomas noted she can remember lying under the piano listening to her mother—a kindergarten teacher and amateur pianist—perform as a three- or four-year-old, playing with the pedals



and listening to all the sounds envelope her. It wasn't long after, she started to make up short songs roughly a bar long around the time she was able to take piano lessons.

"I played piano for a long time and then I took up the trumpet and then I played trumpet all the way through college," Thomas said. "I was a trumpet performance major and I was also in choir and I played the guitar, so I think it goes all the way back to this little girl, just finding music as my place. It was just one of those natural things and I feel very fortunate that I've been able to pursue it and be able to learn very young how to read music."

It was through piano, trumpet, and choir, Thomas noted she was able to really experience music from a lot of different places, from performing as a soloist, in an ensemble, in an orchestra, in a brass quintet, and in a large chorus—an insight that would ultimately inform her work years later. While she attended Northwestern University as a trumpet performance major, and later attended Yale University and the Royal Academy of Music in London, she noted she was writing music long before.

"I mean you can't call that juvenilia music. Let me be clear. I was writing notes on paper, but I was getting used to making up sounds, so I was composing all the way through that. So, here I am, 58-years-old. I think the transformation of the little girl to the composer was like a 20-year-morph. It wasn't that one day I woke up and thought, 'I'm a composer!' It wasn't like that. I had been writing, it was natural, and then all of a sudden, I had this body of work and fortunately I could pursue it," Thomas said.

"I have such an empathy for players, because I was one. I care about them and that is why I try to support them so much and other composers. What does the rehearsal feel like, what does the paper look like, what does the notation look like, is it fun to play, is it fun to hang out with this composer—just the whole package about what it feels like from the other side of the stage. Some of my best friends—or maybe even possibly all of my best friends aside from family—are performing musicians and composers," Thomas added.

In addition to work as an active composer creating commissioned pieces for organizations like Radio France, BBC Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, and Santa Fe Opera, Thomas is also an active educator and mentor, working at the University of Chicago as well as Tanglewood Music Center, the Aspen Music Festival, and festivals in Europe and Asia. Thomas has roughly 30 years of experience teaching at the university level, beginning as an assistant and associate professor of composition at the Eastman School of Music in 1993 until 2001 when she took on the role as the Wyatt Professor of Music at Northwestern University until 2006. In 2010, Thomas joined the University of Chicago faculty.

"I love to teach. I see it as I'm the composer and I'm making music all day and then I'm with my students and I have some experience I can share while they make their music and then I also try to form festivals and centers and raise money and serve on boards to help everybody get their pieces played, recorded, and commissioned," Thomas said.

"I see it as three overlapping circles. It is a natural extension to teach and then you want to help the people you are working with and so you do a lot of citizenship work. I adore thinking and talking about music. I could talk about music for the rest of my life, I just love it," Thomas added.

For Thomas, who can often be found studying balletic scores by Stravinsky and Debussy long-since memorized, sculpting pieces from Emily Dickinson poems, or sharing her insight about how form conserves energy in music, there is no separation between her and musical composition.

"I'm just obsessed with it. I don't really know how to say it. I love it. I can't separate from it. I want to do it all day long, I want to talk about it and try to help others. I think I would be the saddest person if I lost my ears," Thomas said. "Just leave my ears and my brain and something I can write music down with on a piece of paper—maybe that is the clearest way to say it, because it is such a deep truth in my life."

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