Examining the Appeal of Schubert’s Sonata for a Bygone Instrument

Gautier Capuçon Assembles an Album of Musical Souvenirs

A Violin Maker Explores a Bow Maker’s World

ENTER THE LIMITLESS SOUND WORLD OF COMPOSER Augusta Read Thomas
The exuberantly prolific Augusta Read Thomas has no time for creative boundaries

By Thomas May
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 lunch-hour 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, an organic fit with my musical ideas. I like music that is multidimensional”—which helps explain why J.S. Bach is one of her idols. “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.”

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.”

—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 Danton-Downer (her librettist for Ligeia as well) to premiere in the fall of 2019.

Thomas has written extensively for orchestras 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.

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Augusta Read Thomas’ “map of form” for ‘Selene,’ her octet for percussion quartet and string quartet.

Selene
(Moon Chariot Rituals)

Percussion Quartet & String Quartet

Co-commissioned by the Tanglewood Music Center
in honor of its 75th anniversary season
with generous support from Deborah and Philip
Edmundson, and by Miller Theatre at Columbia
University and Third Coast Percussion
with generous support of Sidney K. Robinson.

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 Hargreaves, Melissa Smey, Deborah and Philip Edmundson, and Sidney K. Robinson.

FORMAL CONCERNS:
Braiding, twining, twisting
encircling, interlacing....
Take Holy Sprits, 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—episcopal composition prompted still another recent string work: Plan 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 something more holistic than just composition and then play a piece and then: It’s done. Instead, I’ve just integrated an 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 locally for percussion and who influenced Thomas’ distinctive sound world:

“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 enjoy it.” Thomas mentions Selvage 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 other players and music students. “They wanted to do something more holistic than just composition and then play a piece and then: It’s done. Instead, I’ve just integrated an approach that involves having a composer in the community.”

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 music and write my own music. But that would be 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 Ohlen, “honors the city’s largest-ever festival of contemporary classical music . . . a grand idea in a grand city at a grand time.”

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“Thomas’ distinctive sound world: Olivier Messiaen, Igor Stravinsky, Boulez, Lou Harrison, Edgard Varèse.”

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