Composer Portraits

Augusta Read Thomas
Third Coast Percussion
JACK Quartet

Thursday, March 5, 8:00 p.m.
March begins with a Portrait of Augusta Read Thomas, who brings together a selection of amazing works inspired by the sun, moon, and earth. The repertoire includes the world premiere of her new octet Selene (named after the Greek goddess of the moon), a string quartet from her Sun Threads series, and her magnificent Resounding Earth. Written for Third Coast Percussion, Resounding Earth demands a very specific and gorgeous collection of over 125 bells from around the world, which the ensemble have driven to New York from Chicago to make this performance possible. I can’t wait for these pieces to come to life on the Miller stage.

March also marks the start of this year’s Bach, Revisited series. In the first concert, Bang on a Can co-founder Michael Gordon pairs his work with Bach concertos. Gordon’s work strikes me as a natural fit with Bach: his propulsive sound is built on carefully crafted structure and formal underpinnings—and, of course, brilliance. Plus, we’re thrilled to welcome Ensemble Signal back to Miller for the series residency, along with special guest artist Kristian Bezuidenhout.

Pairing musical trailblazers across the centuries makes for a dynamic program, and a fierce challenge for performers. Gordon, Lachenmann, and Gubaidulina are all composers whose works demand the utmost skill and an intrepid spirit. To perform their works back-to-back with Bach’s masterpieces is the musical equivalent of an Ironman. We are so lucky to work with artists who embrace that challenge, and excel.

I look forward to welcoming spring with an amazing lineup of concerts at Miller. Thank you for being a part of it!

Melissa Smey
Executive Director
Composer Portraits
Thursday, March 5, 8:00 p.m.

Augusta Read Thomas

Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964)

Capricci for violin and viola (2014) world premiere
Ari Streisfeld, violin; John Pickford Richards, viola

“Invocations” from Sun Threads for string quartet (1999)
JACK Quartet

Selene for percussion quartet and string quartet (2015) world premiere
JACK Quartet and Third Coast Percussion

INTERMISSION

Onstage discussion with Augusta Read Thomas and David Skidmore

Resounding Earth for percussion quartet (2012) New York premiere
Third Coast Percussion

1. Invocation – Pulse Radiance (Homage to Olivier Messiaen and Igor Stravinsky)
2. Prayer – Star Dust Orbits (Homage to Luciano Berio and Pierre Boulez)
3. Mantra – Ceremonial Time Shapes (Homage to Lou Harrison and György Ligeti)
4. Reverie – Crystal Lattice (Homage to Edgard Varèse, Harry Partch and John Cage)

This program runs approximately two hours including intermission.

Selene was co-commissioned by the Tanglewood Music Center in honor of its 75th Anniversary Season, with generous support from Deborah and Philip Edmundson; by Miller Theatre at Columbia University; and by Third Coast Percussion with the generous support of Sidney K. Robinson.

Major support for Composer Portraits is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trusts.
About the Program

Augusta Read Thomas needs no introduction. She composes freely and generously, and her works appear on concert programs with regularity. In recent years there has been a Thomas première in New York almost annually.

This evening’s concert, however, may need a little introducing. It takes place under the sign of what we know to be three infinitesimal specks in a boundless universe, but that we know also as the site of the life of which we are a part and as the two heavenly bodies that appear to us as more than infinitesimal specks. Earth and moon and sun. Sun and moon and earth.

The earth gives us our gravity. Having been daydreaming—or listening to music—we come down to earth. The earth gives us our history. This is where virtually everything in the existence of our species has taken place, and we dig into the earth to find records of it. The earth gives us our material needs—including instruments of music.

Augusta Read Thomas has written music of the earth before—notably in Earth Echoes, in which she set words by poets from many different times and places for mezzo-soprano and baritone with chamber orchestra, for a première at Carnegie Hall two and a half years ago. “We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains,” says Li Po in the eighth century, to which Tennessee Williams, in the twentieth, responds: “The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.”

From the earth, everything else is up: the sky and the stars and paradise; the sun and the moon. Angel Tears and Earth Prayers come together in a Thomas piece for organ and trumpet. There are also sky pieces in her output, and star and paradise pieces, and there are suns and moons. They appear musically in their physical beauty, but they also appear for what they have meant to generations of human beings gazing at them from the earth—for the stories, poems, and images we have used to make them ours.

Capricci for violin and viola (2014)

This five-minute divertissement, subtitled “Hummingbird Romance,” was written in 2011 as a wedding gift for musician friends and originally scored for flute and clarinet, the two instruments engaging with each other as people do in a marriage: blending
sometimes, echoing one another, and keeping their individualities while each having his or her separate self rotate around the axis of the other. Jazz duetting, Thomas has stated, was in her mind, especially the interplay of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet with Johnny Dodds’s clarinet in recordings made by the Hot Five and Hot Seven in New Orleans in the late 1920s. For this concert she has adapted the piece for string colors.

“Invocations” from Sun Threads for string quartet (1999)
Commissioned by the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, this was the first of four quartet pieces Thomas wrote to be performed either independently or together under the collective title Sun Threads. The nine-minute movement was her first for string quartet and Sun Threads was her first quartet, now joined by Helix Spirals.

There is no sign of hesitation here, though, in writing for the medium, or in bringing to it a characteristic zing, provided by taut rhythm, clarity of gesture and form, and a background glow of tonality. At the start, the shine comes from E major, behind a lively interplay from which the first violin goes forward in solo flight, high above the treble stave. Viola and second violin add comments in turn, until the first violin flies again, in a more moderate register. Further forging solos from the second violin—invocations, indeed—and clamors of repeated chords bring forth an imposing melody played by the violins and viola in unison supported by the cello a tenth below. From here the piece quickly arrives at a section marked: “Punchy—Bartók-like.” This is progressively infiltrated by motifs from the start, pressing towards the conclusion.

Selene for percussion quartet and string quartet (2015)
Selene, to the Greeks, was the goddess of the moon, which she drove in a chariot across the sky, as her brother Helios did the sun. “Hail, white-armed goddess, bright Selene, mild, bright-tressed queen!” the Homeric Hymn to Selene salutes her. White, too, were her two horses, and silver her chariot—colors Thomas’s music might evoke. They are not in this case the colors of a virgin, for Selene had a way of dipping down to earth for congress with men and demigods. That aspect of her character is perhaps also in the music, subtitled “Moon Chariot Rituals,” which is frolicsome as well as luminous. The liveliness comes first and last, in a continuous sequence of sections alternating between buoyant music and calm: fast–slow–fast–slow–fast–slow–fast, the slow passages being shorter. In total the work plays for seventeen and a half minutes.

In the fast music, the percussion group and the string quartet might be regarded as the goddess’s paired horses, pulling in the same direction but with strains between them. Opening into immediate light, the beginning has keyed instruments—a vibraphone duo
with xylophone and marimba—in tandem with the strings doubling them. Already there is a positive friction, which comes from the difference in sound: in particular, how the strings can sustain a note and increase its power in a crescendo, whereas percussion instruments can do this only by repeating their attacks. However, pizzicatos and percussive uses of the bow can bring the strings close, especially to the wood percussion (marimba, xylophone, woodblocks, claves), and bridge the divide between two instrumental families very rarely found together. As the music bounds on, through different combinations of keyed percussion with drums (bongos and congas) and chimes, the two quartets remain tied together, until the strings start to sound out from the racing brilliance with crescendo chords.

A leap from the violins and viola to a high G, just above where the vibraphones can reach, stops the movement and takes the music into the first slow section, which brings the strings to the fore in serene selenar harmonies that seem to have condensed out from what was heard before. Melodies, doubled by strings and percussion, revolve within the gleam, until intensifying repeated notes reinject energy.

The second speedy section is longer than any other, maintaining its drive for five minutes. Skidding dialogue is one mode, along with tense moments of expectation, runs of sixteenth notes (with noise instruments), exhilarating splashes from the vibraphones, strongly syncopated rhythms, and segments when the race is all or mostly in the strings.

One of these brings the music into its second slow section, a pool of held tones and chords into which fall cascades from marimba and vibraphone. Then the rush is on again, with greater force and often with the strings more exposed, until the moon shows its glowing harmonies one last time before careering on to the further horizon.

Resounding Earth (2012)
Writing for this evening’s performers, and devoting more than a year to a work of profound importance to her, Thomas created a percussion symphony whose title can be understood in at least two ways. Everything we hear in the piece is resounding earth, for all the instruments have been forged or molded from materials contained in the planet’s mineral substance, with several hundred objects of steel or bronze or brass used over the four movements. But also, this metal instrumentarium has been assembled from around the globe, embracing Asian ritual instruments alongside standard western percussion. Different tuning systems are in operation—but not in conflict, for this is music that delights in diversity. Everything is in tune: an optimistic metaphor for coexistence.
Many of the instruments are bells of one sort or another: hand bells and suspended bells, cup-shaped and flat, singing bowls and orchestral tubular bells. “Bells,” Thomas remarks, “can be used to celebrate grand occasions, hold sacrificial rites, keep a record of events, give the correct time, celebrate births and weddings, mark funerals, caution a community, enhance any number of religious ceremonies, and are even hung around the necks of animals.” From within this composition they echo with such uses and meanings—with such resonances. At the same time, with its four musicians operating on a panoply of instruments set out on the stage, the work becomes itself a ritual.

Thomas allows the performers to change the order of the movements, all of which carry multiple homages to composers who, in the twentieth century, enlarged the scope of percussion instruments. The movements may also be interspersed with other music, perhaps by these composers. Third Coast this evening, however, play through the succession given in the score.

The first movement, after a short, quiet scene-setting, exults in dynamic, syncopated pulsation, oscillating in spirit between jazz brilliance (a sense of “now,” of immediacy) and darker processional (a sense of “then,” of deep time). At the climax, hosts of instruments ring together—though some are held in reserve for the next two movements.

“Prayer,” the second movement, concentrates on just the one type, twenty-six Tibetan temple bowls, which may be struck or rubbed to elicit their resonances. Their sounds—like those of the bells, gongs, cymbals, triangles, and keyed percussion stacked behind them—are complex, each rich in overtones that stick out from the harmonic spectrum of the fundamental tone; hence the clangor. In this movement, moments of inactivity on the part of the performers, of waiting reverberation, are paradoxically activated by beat effects—quicker or slower oscillations in the sound—produced by overtones.

Next comes “Mantra,” played on other Asian instruments: pre-eminently eighteen Burmese spinning gongs (flat and bell-shaped), along with Indian Noah bells and gongs. Faster, higher patterns seem to be grounded in and by the low and solemn more regular gongs, as if all were partials of a single elemental resonator.

The finale brings in the full array of instruments, every piece of metal on stage being struck, though with particular attention to intricate interlockings of higher tones that make the subtitle “Crystal Lattice” very appropriate. Pulse, again, is the driving force, and ceremonial the character.

Program notes by Paul Griffiths
About the Artists

Third Coast Percussion
Sean Connors
Robert Dillon
Peter Martin
David Skidmore

Hailed by *The New Yorker* as “vibrant” and “superb,” Third Coast Percussion explores and expands the extraordinary sonic possibilities of the percussion repertoire, delivering exciting performances for audiences of all kinds. Since its formation in 2005, Third Coast Percussion has gained national attention with concerts and recordings that meld the energy of rock music with the precision and nuance of classical chamber works.

These “hard-grooving” musicians (*The New York Times*) have become known for ground-breaking collaborations across a wide range of disciplines, including concerts and residency projects with engineers at the University of Notre Dame, architects at the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture, astronomers at the Adler Planetarium, and more. The ensemble enhances the performances it offers with cutting edge new media, including free iPhone and iPad apps that allow audience members to create their own musical performances and take a deeper look at the music performed by Third Coast Percussion.

Third Coast Percussion has been the Ensemble-in-Residence at the University of Notre Dame’s DeBartolo Performing Arts Center since 2013. They have the honor of being the first ensemble at the University of Notre Dame to create a permanent and progressive ensemble residency program at the center. The ensemble performs multiple recitals annually as part of the DeBartolo Performing Arts Center’s Presenting Series season.

*Resounding Earth* was commissioned by The University of Notre Dame’s DeBartolo Performing Arts Center, with additional funding from The Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts, Department of Music, and the Chamber Music America Classical Commissioning Program, with generous funding provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Chamber Music America Endowment Fund.
**JACK Quartet**

Christopher Otto, *violin*
Ari Streisfeld, *violin*
John Pickford Richards, *viola*
Kevin McFarland, *cello*

The JACK Quartet electrifies audiences worldwide with “explosive virtuosity” (*Boston Globe*) and “viscerally exciting performances” (*The New York Times*). The recipient of Lincoln Center’s Martin E. Segal Award, New Music USA’s Trailblazer Award, and the CMA/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming, JACK has performed to critical acclaim at venues such as Carnegie Hall (USA), Lincoln Center (USA), Wigmore Hall (United Kingdom), Suntory Hall (Japan), Salle Pleyel (France), La Biennale di Venezia (Italy), the Lucerne Festival (Switzerland), Bali Arts Festival (Indonesia), and the Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik (Germany).

Comprising violinists Christopher Otto and Ari Streisfeld, violist John Pickford Richards, and cellist Kevin McFarland, JACK is focused on the commissioning and performance of new works, leading them to work closely with composers John Luther Adams, Chaya Czernowin, James Dillon, Brian Ferneyhough, Beat Furrer, Vijay Iyer, György Kurtág, Helmut Lachenmann, Steve Mackey, Matthias Pintscher, Steve Reich, Roger Reynolds, Wolfgang Rihm, Salvatore Sciarrino, and John Zorn. Upcoming and recent premieres include works by Wolfgang von Schweinitz, Toby Twining, Georg Friedrich Haas, Simon Holt, Kevin Ernste, and Simon Bainbridge.

The quartet has led workshops with young performers and composers at institutions including Princeton University, Yale University, Columbia University, the Eastman School of Music, Oberlin Conservatory, Manhattan School of Music, and at the Darmstadt Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik.

The members of the quartet met while attending the Eastman School of Music and studied closely with the Arditti Quartet, Kronos Quartet, Muir String Quartet, and members of the Ensemble Intercontemporain.

Previous appearances at Miller Theatre include Composer Portraits of Enno Poppe (2012-13) and Helmut Lachenmann (2009-10), the SONiC Festival (2011-12), and Pop-Up Concerts.
About Miller Theatre

**Miller Theatre at Columbia University** is the leading presenter of new music in New York City and one of the most vital forces nationwide for innovative programming. In partnership with Columbia University School of the Arts, Miller is dedicated to producing and presenting unique events, with a focus on contemporary and early music, jazz, and multimedia. Founded in 1988, Miller has helped launch the careers of myriad composers and ensembles, serving as an incubator for emerging artists and a champion of those not yet well known in the U.S. A four-time recipient of the ASCAP/Chamber Music America Award for Adventurous Programming, Miller continues to meet the high expectations set forth by its founders—to present innovative programs, support new work, and connect creative artists with adventurous audiences.

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as of January 20, 2015
Upcoming Events

Saturday, March 7, 8:00 p.m.
JAZZ
Aaron Diehl Quartet

Thursday, March 12, 8:00 p.m.
BACH, REVISITED
Michael Gordon + Bach

Tuesday, March 24
doors at 5:30 p.m., music at 6:00 p.m.
POP-UP CONCERTS
Yarn/Wire

Saturday, March 28, 8:00 p.m.
EARLY MUSIC
Myths and Allegories
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Thursday, April 9, 8:00 p.m.
BACH, REVISITED
Helmut Lachenmann + Bach

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