

Dancing Helix Rituals (2006)

Augusta Read Thomas

“Somewhat of a cross between ‘Jazz’ (Monk, Coltrane, Tatum, Miles, etc.) and ‘Classical’ (Bartok, Stravinsky, Varèse, Berio, Boulez, etc.), *Dancing Helix Rituals* can be heard as a lively dance made up of a series of outgrowths and variations which are organic and, at every level, concerned with transformations and connections. Each player serves as a protagonist as well as a fulcrum point on and around which all others’ musical force fields rotate, bloom, and proliferate. There is refined logic to every nuance which stems from the sound, in context, on its own terms and the form is that of an eight-minute crescendo.

Although *Dancing Helix Rituals* stands fully on its own as art music, it can be performed along with dancers. The early Stravinsky ballets are works I hold in great reverence, have studied, love, and embrace as models in my inner ear. As a result, I tend to hear and feel all of my music, in particular my orchestral works, as music suitable for dance. As I compose, I sing, dance, move, and conduct at my drafting table. The process is visceral. My ears and mind are both analytical as well as intuitive and I ‘feel’ and ‘hear’ every note and rhythm and color clearly. (I hope you can sense that precision.)

This is music composed with the whole ear and whole body, not a cerebral, overly analytical exercise in pushing twelve-tone rows—or spectra—or rearranged quotes of borrowed ethnic phrases around a computer screen, for instance! The sounds are varied, colorful, crosscut, unexpected, and yet hopefully sound inevitable in the way that a jazz improvisation sounds spontaneous and unpreventable.

This eight-minute trio was inspired by the generosity of spirit, energy, and dedication of the Verdehr Trio. The score is marked with words including: passionate, bright, driving, with flair and ritualistic energy, clock-like and mechanical, scurrying and playful, majestic and stately, funky, syncopated, jazzy, colorful, fanfare-like, romp-like, light and bouncy. It required a great deal of energy to compose this piece because it is basically eight minutes of fast music. (Lots of notes! No ‘Largo’ chorales.) And it requires the same force of the virtuoso players today, to which I offer my heartfelt gratitude. *Dancing Helix Rituals* was commissioned by the Verdehr Trio and Michigan State University and is dedicated to the Verdehr Trio with admiration.”

—Augusta Read Thomas

The world premiere of *Dancing Helix Rituals* was on October 21, 2007 in the Music Room, The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Augusta Read Thomas (born 1964, Glen Cove, New York) began piano lessons as a young child and started playing the trumpet in the third grade, continuing with the instrument through her undergraduate years at Northwestern University. Her study in composition began with Alan Stout and Bill Karlins at Northwestern and was followed by study with Oliver Knussen at Tanglewood, Jacob Druckman at Yale University, and at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

Thomas has composed over one hundred fifty works which have been commissioned and performed by major orchestras and chamber ensembles throughout the world. Her orchestral music has been acclaimed by many well-known conductors: Daniel Barenboim, Sir Andrew Davis, Mstislav Rostropovich, Pierre Boulez, Seiji Ozawa, Esa-Pekka Salonen, David Robertson, Lorin Maazel, Christoph Eschenbach, Marin Alsop, Oliver Knussen, Leonard Slatkin, John Nelson, Markus Stenz, Gerard Schwarz, Jeffrey Kahane, Andrey Boreyko, Hannu Lintu, and Manfred Honeck among others.

In February, 2015, music critic Edward Reichel wrote, “Augusta Read Thomas has secured for herself a permanent place in the pantheon of American composers of the twentieth and twenty-

first centuries. She is without question one of the best and most important composers that this country has today.”

Thomas was a MUSICALIVE Composer-in Residence with the New Haven Symphony and the longest-serving Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (1997–2006). In Chicago, she premiered nine commissioned orchestral works culminating in the premiere of *Astral Canticle*, one of two finalists for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize in Music. She was also central in establishing the MusicNOW series.

Thomas has received fellowships from the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, Rockefeller Foundation, International Rotary Foundation, Gaudeamus Foundation, Wellesley Composers Conference, Atlantic Center for the Arts, Tanglewood Music Center, Aspen Music Festival, and L’Ecole Normal in Fontainebleau, France. She was a Junior Fellow in the prestigious Society of Fellows at Harvard University between 1991 and 1994.

She has won numerous prizes and awards including ones from the National Endowment for the Arts, BMI, the French International Competition of Henri Dutilleux, and the Massachusetts Artists Fellowship Program. She received the Rudolph Nissim Award from ASCAP, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Indiana State University Orchestral Music Prize, the Third Century Award from the Office of Copyrights and Patents in Washington, D.C., and the Lancaster Symphony Orchestra’s Composer Award, the oldest award of its kind in the nation. The Sovereign Prince of Monaco awarded her Chevalier of the Order of Cultural Merit in 2015. In 2016, she was named Chicagoan of the Year.

Additional awards are those from the Siemens Foundation in Munich, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, Koussevitzky Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, John W. Hechinger Foundation, Kate Neal Kinley Foundation, Debussy Trio Music Foundation, Fromm Foundation, Barlow Endowment, Harriett Eckstein, New York State Council for the Arts, and Chamber Music America.

Thomas has been on the Board of Directors of the American Music Center since 2000 and has served as Chair of the Board. She has also been on the Board of the International Contemporary Ensemble, the Advisory Committee of the Alice M. Ditson Fund, the Board of Trustees of the American Society for the Royal Academy of Music, a member of the Conseil Musical de la Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco, and the Eastman School of Music National Council. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

An influential teacher at Eastman, Northwestern, Tanglewood, and the Aspen Music Festival, Thomas is the sixteenth person ever to be designated University Professor at the University of Chicago, and one of only seven currently holding the title. In 2016, she envisioned, spearheaded and led Ear Taxi Festival, a six-day event celebrating the vital new music scene in Chicago. In 2017, she was named Composer-in-Residence with the Eugene (Oregon) Symphony.

Additional information may be found at www.augustareadthomas.com.