

In the Key of E[ducation]

An interview with composer Augusta Read Thomas

By Scott Freck, Executive Director

Imagine world-famous violinist Midori reading *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin* to a small group of children at the Eugene Public Library. Or saxophone superstar Branford Marsalis providing musical feedback to the Shasta Middle School Jazz Band. Or how about Grammy-winning guitarist Sharon Isbin performing for a group of students in a packed cafeteria at Cal Young Middle School?

There's no need to stretch your imagination too far because all of those events actually happened. When we bring talented soloists and conductors to Eugene to perform with the Symphony, we ask each of them to share what they know with students in our area, most often as part of the Laura Avery Visiting Masters program of master classes. Further, almost every year of the past eight, we have invited an artist or group to invest in building relationships in the community during a residency project that unfolds over the course of a week.

This season, we are taking that idea to a deeper level. With the support of the Hult Endowment, the National Endowment for the Arts, and New Music USA, we have invited Grammy-winning composer Augusta Read Thomas to participate in a nearly season-long project that runs from September 2017 through April 2018. During her September visit, she'll establish connections with local schools including Willamette and South Eugene High Schools, the Academy of Arts and Academics in Springfield, and the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance. She'll also forge a link with Oregon Supported Living Program's Arts and Culture Program, offer a free "Inside the Composer's Studio" talk at the Eugene Public Library, and speak at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History on the UO campus.

Thomas' residency also features performances by the Symphony of two of her works—the first, *Aureole*, an orchestral work written in 2011, will open the Symphonic series concert on September 28, 2017. The second is a concerto for percussion quartet and orchestra, entitled *Sonorous Earth*, and it was co-commissioned by the Eugene Symphony and the Chicago Philharmonic. I spoke with Gusty, as she insists on being called, by phone in mid-August. I asked her about the new piece, her creative process, and the work she'll do in the Eugene community as part of the residency.

Scott Freck: You have a very interesting creative process, which includes a visual component that I haven't seen from any other composers. Can you describe it for us?

Augusta Read Thomas: When offered the wonderful opportunity of a commission to write a new work, the first thing I do is to start to imagine what I am building. Am I building a huge piece? Am I building a short piece for children's choir? Am I building a symphony? And then I start to think about what kind of materials do I want to make for that piece. It's imperative that a



Augusta Read Thomas working on music in her Chicago studio.

composition is built out of materials that are right for what you're building, because if you have a piece that's too short with way too much material in it, it doesn't work, or a long piece with basically no ideas that goes swarming around forever, it gets boring. And then the second thing I do is start improvising at the piano and scatting. I do a lot of scats and singing, and dancing actually. I'm just trying to physicalize what it is that I'm going for.

After that there are many things that I write down on paper—I'm pushing to get some sort of map for the form. Another page of sketches might include a whole progression of chords, or groups of progressions of chords, that will be the essential DNA of the harmonic fields of the piece. Another sketch might be rhythmic. And you can get a real birds-eye view of the piece...you suddenly get a real sense of where you are in it, what kind of peak, or expanse, or landscape of the piece you are at in any given moment.

SF: Talk about the new piece, *Sonorous Earth*. Where did the ideas come from, and how did they work themselves out after the piece was finished?

ART: I can't tell you how grateful I am to the Eugene Symphony for co-commissioning my

large percussion concerto, titled *Sonorous Earth*, which is for four percussionists, which in this case will be performed by Third Coast Percussion and the Eugene Symphony. This is a project I have wanted to do for a long time for many reasons, and the percussion quartet is performing only on objects made of metal, essentially bells. The piece involves bells from all around the world: Indian mill bells, Japanese Rin, spinning Burmese bells, and more. [In a way], it's a statement of interdependence and the importance of all of these places in the world ringing together. I think that's a very beautiful, positive, optimistic image.

My schedule is that I get up very early every day, usually by 4 a.m. working and then I stay up until 11 p.m. I do this 365 days a year, this is in terms of writing music, recording, touring, teaching, doing residencies, and so on. And if one is going to work that hard literally every day, why is one doing that? What kind of music do I want to write? What am I saying in my music? For me, to have music that is optimistic, and positive, and colorful, and whimsical in a certain way, or capricious, or has some sunshine and bubbles and what not in it, is very important.

SF: Tell us what's in store during your residency project?

In a way, *Sonorous Earth* is a statement of interdependence and the importance of all of these places in the world ringing together. I think that's a very beautiful, positive, optimistic image.

ART: It's such a pleasure from the composer's point of view to be invited by an orchestra to visit more than once. So often the composer flies in on the Wednesday night, one rehearsal, one concert, boom!, you leave and there really isn't a sense of building a relationship. [It's so beautiful] that the Eugene Symphony has invited me to come twice and to really be a member of their organization for the year and to get into the community.

In the "Inside the Composer's Studio" talk, I'll perhaps share fragments of lots of different works and talk about things that

are central to my work. That could cross between works—chamber works, choral works, and large ensemble pieces, showing my sketches, my maps of the form, and different things that are inspiring to me for the works that I was writing at that time.

It will be a huge thrill to be able to work with some of the area high school bands. I have a piece called *Magneticfireflies*, which is a short piece for high school band. And at the very end, lots and lots of metallic percussion instruments are struck to the extent that as the piece ends, you have about 25 seconds of resonance just hanging in the air from all of these bells ringing, all the way back to silence.

In addition, the opportunity to work at the U of O with their composition students [will] be very meaningful. They have a fabulous program there. [I'll] work with their students [on what they] are composing, hopefully offering very positive and constructive critique and positive and constructive compliments—what's really working and what really could be better. Since I spend my entire life writing music, it's a natural extension to teach. You can't really separate those two endeavors.

SF: We're very much looking forward to welcoming you into the Eugene community this season.

ART: Thank you so much. I can't wait to be with you all and I appreciate this special opportunity. 🍁

August Read Thomas Residency Public Activities in September

Oregon Composers Forum: Augusta Read Thomas

September 26, 2017 | 5:00–7:00 pm

University of Oregon School of Music and Dance, Room 142

Augusta Read Thomas will give a presentation about her music, discuss her composition process, and answer questions in an interactive dialogue.

Guild Concert Preview

September 28, 2017 | 6:30–7:00 pm

The Studio, Hult Center for the Performing Arts

To stay up to date on Augusta Read Thomas' September and April residency activities, visit eugenesymphony.org/education/students/artist-residencies

