

The Boston Globe

An A-list composer, an off-the-beaten-track premiere

By David Weinger
Globe Correspondent / November 9, 2007

The Chicago-based composer Augusta Read Thomas writes precisely calibrated music of refined beauty. Her works are in the repertory of several A-list players and ensembles, including the cellist Matt Haimovitz, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the chorus Chanticleer. The Boston Symphony Orchestra is scheduled to premiere a new piece of hers next season.

Her latest work is the chamber piece “Scat,” composed for the Walden Chamber Players. And it’s having its official world premiere Sunday morning at a pretty non-A-list site: the Hampshire Jail and House of Correction in Northampton. By now it’s become common to hear classical music in lounges and bars, but even by those standards, having a premiere in a prison is a distinctly atypical gambit.

Strictly speaking, the first performance is tonight at Smith College, but Christof Huebner, the Chamber Players’ artistic director, notes that concert came together after the premiere had been planned. “Scat” will also be played Sunday afternoon at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown.

Speaking by phone from her home, Thomas says she and the Walden group had originally discussed premiering the piece at Smith. “We started talking about the fact that there was this prison right there in Northampton,” about a mile from the campus, she says. It seemed like a chance to expand the idea of musical outreach. “Instead of just going to nursing homes or hospitals or into kindergarten classes and things of that kind,” she says, why not work with a different segment of society?

It’s an undertaking with which Thomas was already familiar. Years ago, while teaching at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., she made several visits to the nearby Albion Correctional Facility, a women’s prison. “I was talking about contemporary women composers,” she says. “This is not a subject people would know a lot about. But I remember the incredible eagerness - they wanted to talk and listen and learn. Here they are sitting in a prison, but you play them some music and it ignites that same spark we all have.”

“Scat” was written for harpsichord, oboe, and three strings. It performs a curious inversion on the idea of scat singing, in which the singer’s voice mimics an instrumental improvisation. “I got the idea, why not reverse that?” Thomas says. “Why not just have straight instruments, in a sense, trying to sound like scat?” The resulting piece is light on its feet, with the strings and oboe twirling around the brittle, tick-tack sound of the harpsichord. “It sounds like it’s bouncing along the surface of the water, like a stone skipping.”

Thomas thought that the jazz element might make the piece accessible to a broad audience. At the prison, she and the musicians intend to talk about the piece, demonstrate how it’s put together, and answer questions. “I’d love to hear what they want to know - what interests them about the instruments or the orchestration or the jazz history or what it’s like to be a woman composer,” she says. Continued...

Some who think prisons should have a punitive role, rather than a rehabilitative one, might question whether inmates should have the benefit of music performances. Huebner strongly believes they should. “I think we all know how quickly a wrong decision in each of our lives can result in circumstances such as some of these inmates have found themselves in and now pay the price for,” he writes in an e-mail. He notes that attending the concert is a privilege inmates have to earn. “We believe that music, and art in general, has a positive message to convey.”

He also quotes something said to him by Patrick Cahillane, the prison’s deputy superintendent: “Some day these prisoners might be our neighbors again. So it makes sense to educate, enlighten, and expose them to interesting and thought-provoking - maybe even attitude-changing? - ideas.”

Cahillane amplifies the point by phone, noting that most people incarcerated in the United States go back into society. “The goal of people who run correctional facilities should be to help people do so in a positive way. And this project is of a piece with that aim.”

Thomas hopes the encounter benefits all the participants: “It’s all of us together sharing a couple of hours over a new piece,” she says. “I’m hoping it’ll be more like a seminar and less like a concert.”



Augusta Read Thomas composed the work ‘Scat.’

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