Augusta Read Thomas's Sun Threads for String Quartet: A Study and Performer's Guide

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AUGUSTA READ THOMAS’S SUN THREADS FOR STRING QUARTET:
A STUDY AND PERFORMER’S GUIDE

By

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ABSTRACT

This treatise provides a thorough analysis of Augusta Read Thomas’s string quartet, *Sun Threads*. The first and second chapters discuss her career background, compositional style, and chamber music. The analysis in the third chapter is divided into four large sections and nine subsections. The four main sections represent each movement in the quartet and the subsections discuss: form and phrase sections, rhythm, gestures, adjectives, harmony, texture, and timbre.

The remaining chapters conclude the treatise with a discussion of rehearsal suggestions and tempo, balance, and articulation deliberations. This treatise can be a starting point for performers into the chamber music of Augusta Read Thomas.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Augusta Read Thomas’s compositions were first introduced to me in 2007 at the Chautauqua Music Festival in Chautauqua, New York, when renowned violin teacher Almita Vamos suggested I play Thomas’s piece for solo violin, *Incantation*. *Incantation* is full of written out musical gestures, swift dynamic changes, and descriptive expressions. Instead of writing “Allegro,” Augusta Read Thomas wrote “Spirited, sempre molto rubato.” Later in my doctoral degree, I studied the other four out of five solo violin works and performed on my lecture recital the aforementioned violin repertoire by Augusta Read Thomas.

Augusta Read Thomas’s five solo violin works are only a small portion of her numerous compositions for string instruments. She has written three violin concerti, three piano trios, more than ten various combinations of ensembles that include violin, and four individual string quartet movements that can be played as a larger work, called *Sun Threads*.

Her string compositions are written with explosive musical gestures, descriptive vocabulary, and great detail to the idiosyncrasies of each instrument. Augusta Read Thomas’s music is so specific with her words for the performer that there is never a question about tempo, bow placement, articulation, and dynamics. Even though Thomas’s compositions do not reflect traditional Western forms of music, such as sonata form or rounded binary form, she always creates a melodic line throughout each work.
These melodic lines change throughout her music with the use of musical gestures and tempo changes in addition to harmony and rhythmic repetition.

This treatise provides in-depth insight for chamber musicians into Augusta Read Thomas’s compositions, and, more specifically, the string quartet, *Sun Threads*. Thomas’s chamber music compositions are full of a lifetime of inspiration from various composers, such as J.S. Bach, Edgard Varèse, Duke Ellington, and Luciano Berio, to name a few. Seth Brodsky points out Thomas’s affinity for four symbols found in her music: “voice,” “spirit,” “bell,” and “sun.”¹ These types of characteristics in Augusta Read Thomas’s musical language will be discussed in further detail in the treatise.

The second of the five chapters explores her biography, compositional style, and her chamber music. This chapter will provide insight into the energy and influence she gathers from other arts. It also explains the compositional evolution of *Sun Threads* for string quartet, and how it started as four individual commissioned compositions.

Chapter Three provides a thorough analysis of each movement of *Sun Threads*. A detailed chart is provided to show each phrase section in every movement, as well as the form. This chapter provides observations about the specific adjectives and vocabulary markings used in her music, the rhythmic structure of each movement, and the overall texture and timbre.

Chapter Four discusses performance practice and interpretation issues. This chapter indicates tempo deliberations, balance, articulation, and rehearsal suggestions, and specifically focuses on *Sun Threads* from a performer’s perspective, giving an interpretive guide to a chamber ensemble wishing to learn the quartet. The final chapter

will be a summary of *Sun Threads* and a conclusion from the results of my analysis and performer’s guide.
CHAPTER TWO

AUGUSTA READ THOMAS AND HER MUSIC

Career and Background

Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964) is one of the most successful modern American composers. With an international career and reputation, various orchestras, institutions, and organizations have commissioned her works, spanning musical genres including but not limited to solo piano, orchestra, string quartet, opera, piano trio, children’s choir, and high school band. As a teacher, Thomas has taught at Northwestern University, the Eastman School of Music, and the University of Chicago, where she teaches today.

Thomas studied composition at Tanglewood, Yale, Northwestern, and the Royal Academy of Music, and found early success at the age of twenty-four after submitting her first large-scale orchestral work to the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers’ (ASCAP) student composition contest. The New York Philharmonic’s composer-in-residence at the time, as well as one of the contest judges, David del Tredici, decided to program her piece for the New York Philharmonic’s “Horizons” series. Since her kick-start in the “Horizons” series, Thomas has had works premiered by the Chicago Symphony, the Berlin Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the London Symphony Orchestra, to name only a few.

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Thomas’s success at a young age helped her to become the Mead Composer-in-Residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1997 until 2006, where they commissioned seven of her major compositions, such as *Tangle* for orchestra (2003), *Words of the Sea* for orchestra (1995-96), and *Ceremonial* for orchestra (1999). Her abundance of compositions and constant inventiveness has led her to receive numerous awards and honors. Thomas’s compositions have been recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts (1994, 1992, 1988), the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2009, 2001, 1994, 1989), the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Koussevitzky Foundation (1988), the Naumburg Foundation, and many more. She was also one of two finalists considered for the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 2007. In addition to the numerous awards and honors, Thomas won fellowships from L’Ecole Normal in Fountainbleau, France; Tanglewood Music Center; the Wellesley Composers Conference; and the Aspen Music Festival.

In addition to her work as a composer, she also taught at the Eastman School of Music and Northwestern University. She is currently University Professor of Composition in the Department of Music and The College at The University of Chicago, alongside the renowned composers Marta Ptaszynska and Shulamit Ran.

**Compositional Style**

Augusta Read Thomas has an abundance of music in her catalogue of works. She is a modern American composer with a vast knowledge that encompasses all types and genres of music. Thomas’s compositions maintain the traditional ensemble types, such as

using string quartets or a full orchestra, but compositionally draw upon jazz influences and sound effects through the use of her musical gestures. Works like *Sun Threads* for string quartet; two of her three violin concerti, *Carillon Sky* and *Juggler in Paradise*; and her solo violin work, *Incantation*, are all examples of Thomas’s music within the parameters of common ensemble types, but use intricate musical gestures and sound effects.

She is influenced by: J.S. Bach, Gustav Mahler, William Byrd, Anton Webern, Claude Debussy, Edgard Varèse, Elliott Carter, and Luciano Berio.\(^5\) Bach is her “daily bread,” Mahler “nourishes my soul,” she loves Byrd’s vocal polyphony, Webern’s “lucent concision,” Debussy’s “gestural clarity,” and Varèse’s “explosive music, transcending from moment to moment.”\(^6\) As significant as these Western classical composers are in her compositional life, for she believes, “No one composer, style, school of thought and practice, or historical period is given a monopoly on music’s truths.”\(^7\)

Thomas’s music is packed with carefully detailed comments as well as very descriptive adjectives, and based on her descriptions, her music is edgy, complex, highly notated, dissonant, whimsical, lyrical, and jazzy, all at some point or another. Jazz influences are prevalent in a large portion of Thomas’s music. There are many musical examples where she indicates the theatrics of the particular composition through the

\(^5\) Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).


written out adjectives, such as, “Like a jazz improvisation,” “accentuate the variety of character,” and “bouncy and jumpy with a kind of jazzy swing and rhythmic punch.”

Rubato is a common word found throughout her music, in conjunction with her specific rhythmic motives. The rhythmic motives are constantly expanding and contracting by the addition of a few notes, syncopation, or altering intervals, especially because of her rubato markings. The indication of rubato over repeated rhythmic motives will result in a different sound each time, sounding improvised. This is how Augusta Read Thomas describes her improvisatory musical style:

Although highly notated, precise, carefully structured, soundly proportioned, and while musicians are elegantly working from a nuanced, specific text, I like my music to have the feeling that it is organically being self-propelled on the spot. As if we listeners are overhearing a captured improvisation.

Thomas’s markings in her compositions are meant to help musicians play the piece of music just as it is heard in her head. Even though much of Thomas’s music feels improvisatory, she leaves the interpretation of her music to the performers and gives the in-depth descriptions as a guide to assembling her music. The precise vocabulary and attention to detail on irregular accents, grace notes, and various ornamentations, help create the gestures that piece together the abstractness of her music.

Although Thomas is not a programmatic composer, she does set an individual, abstract scene through the titles of her music. They are often images without a story, as to not allude to programmatic elements or tone poems. Seth Brodsky states that W.B. Yeats

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8 Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the scores of Caprice and Dream Catcher (New York: Schirmer, 2005, 2009).
10 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
had a set of metaphorical images, among them the Sword, the Tower, the Moon, and the Rose, similar to images found in Augusta Read Thomas’s compositions.\textsuperscript{11} Brodsky’s essay exposes four perpetual symbols that appear in her titles, as well as the vocabulary within her music.

The Bell, the Sun, the Spirit, and the Voice return over and over again as metaphors. The Bell symbol is used throughout the vocabulary markings in her works as well as throughout the rhythmic motives. The Bell image is written into the lines of her music, for example, “bell-like” is labeled on an accented strike to a note with decay to a decrescendo.\textsuperscript{12} Thomas is fascinated by the Sun because it gives energy and life to all living beings.\textsuperscript{13} To her, the Sun and other cosmic bodies are wondrous, just like the Spirit. The Spirit symbol is representative of a deity, an awesome thing larger than human life, although, she never makes reference to religion or God in her compositions.\textsuperscript{14} The Voice symbol is all-encompassing for Augusta Read Thomas because so much of her music is inspired by poetry as well as roused by the clarity of the human voice. Her piece \textit{Chanting to Paradise} for solo soprano, SATB chorus and orchestra, includes five selected poems by Emily Dickinson. The short, concise words of Emily Dickinson provides for Thomas’s lyrical and precise rhythmic motives. In a way, Thomas’s compositions are concise and powerful like poetry.

\textsuperscript{12} Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of \textit{Eagle at Sunrise} (New York: Schirmer, 2002)
\textsuperscript{13} Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
Thomas also says a lot through the use of descriptive words in her music. She wants every player to know exactly what she means, and sometimes words can pick up where a musical notation has left off.\textsuperscript{15} The descriptive words are written in English, except for the traditional Italian musical terms. Thomas explains her vocabulary in the music as if she was giving a “personal coaching.”\textsuperscript{16} The words written in her music are exactly what she would have to say to a musician in person.

**Thomas’s Chamber Music**

Augusta Read Thomas has written over twenty pieces of chamber music for various traditional and non-traditional ensembles. Much of her chamber music is written for specific instruments, but is also interchangeable with other instruments of the same timbre. For example, *Capricious Angels* for eight players (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, three violins, and one viola) can be rearranged so that a bassoon or cello can play the horn part. The jazzy piece, *Scat*, for flute, violin, viola, cello, and piano can be rearranged with an oboe in place of the flute line. Both of the aforementioned pieces are examples of some of her non-traditional ensemble combinations. There is also a large selection of pieces for traditional ensembles such as, various duets, two piano trios, and one string quartet.

Almost all of her chamber works have a symbiotic relationship with one or more of her four images. Stylistically, her chamber music with voice is generally atonal with leaping intervals, open vowels, and melismas. The voice is presented in a clairvoyant way, showcasing the text taken from poetry. The works containing strings sound very

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with composer (December 19, 2012)

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
similar, with quick dynamic changes and irregular accents that can only be accomplished by using very fast bow speed. All of Thomas’s four symbols are used in her string compositions, but one of the most prevalent symbols used to acquire a specific bow technique in her quartet is the striking, decaying bell effect. The “bell-like” description that Thomas describes throughout *Sun Threads* is effective when marked above specific musical gestures. These gestural motives will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

**Sun Threads for String Quartet**

*Sun Threads* is a grouping of four single movement string quartets that were written between 1999-2002. The Avalon String Quartet premiered the entire work (approximately 35 minutes) on April 30, 2003. Each movement was commissioned separately with the idea that the movements would become an entire string quartet some day.

*Eagle at Sunrise* (Movement I) was commissioned for the Ying Quartet in an Americana-themed program supported by the Koussevitzky Foundation, and dedicated to the memory of Serge and Natalie Koussevitzky.\(^\text{17}\) The eagle image was used in the title of the movement to represent the emblem of the United States of America, portraying great strength and majesty.\(^\text{18}\) When the movement was commissioned, Augusta Read Thomas had specific guidelines and parameters to follow, specifically, to follow the theme of “America.” She is not one to borrow or quote from another composer, instead, she chose

\(^{17}\) Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
a more abstract route by incorporating her own symbols with one of America’s
metaphorical images, the Eagle.¹⁹

The two inner movements of the quartet, Invocations (Movement II) and Fugitive
Star (Movement III), were both commissioned for music festivals. The Miami String
Quartet, with support from Chamber Music America, premiered the movement,
Invocations, at the Santa Fe International Chamber Music Festival. Invocations is a
highly musically gestural movement with a great deal of motivic bursts of energy,
requiring agile bow technique, and planned bow placement speed from the musicians.
Thomas gives a nod to a great composer of string quartets in her “athletic and punchy,
Bartók-like” section.²⁰ Her careful use of meter changes in 5/8, 6/8, and 3/8 help to bring
out the emphasis of the horizontal chromatic line in the first violin. The second violin,
viola, and cello create vertical movement underneath the first violin, using similar
rhythmic motives.²¹ Augusta Read Thomas uses the marking “…Bartók-like…” to help
the performer create a new character, rather than actually borrowing from the composer.

The Avalon String Quartet, with support from Chamber Music America,
premiered the movement Fugitive Star at the Caramoor International Chamber Music
Festival. Fugitive Star has a cyclical viola solo that returns at the end of the movement,
accompanied by the rest of the quartet with sounds reminiscent of the great Impressionist
composers, such as Debussy or Ravel.

¹⁹ Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
²⁰ Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of Invocations (New York: Schirmer, 2002).
The final movement of the quartet, *Rise Chanting*, was commissioned by the Krannert Center and composed for the Alexander String Quartet. The commission required Thomas to compose a work in relation to the late Beethoven String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135, which encodes the text, “must it be? it must be.” She chose to encode the text from Emily Dickinson’s poem #1005 into *Rise Chanting*. Other works by Thomas that incorporate text from Emily Dickinson poems include *Chanting to Paradise* (2002) for solo soprano, SATB chorus and orchestra; *Juggler of Day* (2007) for female chorus; *Gathering Paradise* (2004) for solo soprano and orchestra; and *Purple Syllables* (2004) for SATB chorus.

The movement *Rise Chanting* encodes the entire Dickinson poem like an “instrumental” declamatory melody. There is a chord, note, and/or motive for each word of her poem.22 The inflections and accents of the words in the poem are turned into pitches that “pack a punch.”23 Unlike how Beethoven used texture within the string quartet to emphasize the text, “must it be? it must be,” Augusta Read Thomas uses specificity of bow articulations and dynamic contrasts to emphasize the text of Dickinson’s poem #1005.

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22 Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of *Rise Chanting* (New York: Schirmer, 2002).
23 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
CHAPTER THREE

ANALYSIS OF SUN THREADS FOR STRING QUARTET

As previously mentioned, Augusta Read Thomas’s compositional style is highly notated, rhythmically complex, motivic, and full of musical gestures and sound effects. The following musical examples for each movement are specific examples of her form, phrase sections, harmony, gestures, rhythm, musical markings, vocabulary, texture, and timbre. These categories apply to each movement but will be presented in this chapter with specific musical examples from each movement of Sun Threads.

Eagle at Sunrise - Movement I

Form and Phrase Sections

The form of the first movement of the quartet, Eagle at Sunrise, can be translated into a loose ABA form, with the A section beginning in the first measure at quarter note 60-66. The B section starts around measure 32 with the marking “steadfast, unwavering,” at quarter note 76-84. There are two more tempo changes within the B section, thus making the form of this movement a loose ABA form. In measure 88, the A section returns with a very similar solo melody in the cello line, finishing the movement at a calmer tempo of quarter note 60. Although Augusta Read Thomas does not try to compose her music within standard musical forms, such as ternary, binary, sonata, etc., this movement flows as if it was in ternary form because of the distinctions of the ABA
These distinctions in *Eagle at Sunrise* develop and progress with sudden tempo changes, meter changes, and character changes.

The movement begins and ends with a similar tempo of quarter note = 60-66 as well as a cello solo that soars into the upper register of the instrument, never playing the same melodic sequence twice. Within the loose ABA form, the movement is divided into eleven different asymmetrical phrase sections. While some sections transition and react to the previous sections, others interrupt and abruptly cut into new sections. The phrase sections do not always define the form, but are interconnected within the form. The arch of the loose ABA form fits into the phrase sections because the phrase sections are more often than not, defined by the tempo changes. The following chart provides an overview of the phrase sections and form of *Eagle at Sunrise*:

Table 3.1: Chart of the phrase structure of *Eagle at Sunrise*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Measure number</th>
<th>Phrase section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-11</td>
<td><em>A section</em> begins. “Majestic.” Quarter note = 60-66. The first phrase opens with solo cello. End of the phrase transitions with a new major third arpeggiation. Phrase length - 11 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12-17</td>
<td>First violin takes the same gesture as the cello, with different intervals. Phrase ends with intensity and a strong tri-tone in the first violin. Phrase length - 6 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Phrase section begins with an extended 11th chord. First use of planing between viola and cello. Many transitions occur with “bell-like” decay from violins and an “ardent” interruption from the viola. Phrase length - 8 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>26-31</td>
<td>“Lyric” character change; chromatic planing in m. 29. Fermata transition into the next phrase section. Phrase length - 6 measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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24 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
Table 3.1 continued

| 5   | 32-45 | **B section** begins. “Steadfast, unwavering.” Quarter note = 76-84. Suddenly faster tempo and rit. in mm. 44-45 in preparation for transition. Phrase length - 14 measures |
| 6   | 46-49 | Return to the tempo of phrase section 5, quarter note = 76-84. Transition starts in m. 47 with broad triplets in violins. The cello leads the transitional rit. Phrase length - 4 measures |
| 7   | 50-60 | Return to original tempo (Quarter note = 60-66). “Rhapsodic” solo cello material is weaved into gestural, ringing pizzicato in violins and viola. The transition starts in m. 59 with an accelerando. Phrase length - 11 measures |
| 8   | 61-71 | Section begins with sudden “driving forward” tempo change. Quarter note = 76-84. An extended 11th chord and chromatic planing transitions to the next phrase section. Phrase length - 11 measures |
| 9   | 72-77 | Section begins with thin texture and brittle tremolos. The dynamics are very specific. Transition occurs in m. 77 in upper strings with a decay and crescendo to ff. Phrase length - 6 measures |
| 10  | 78-88 | Phrase section begins with thin texture in the first measure. The violins and viola finish the phrase with a fermata as the cello begins the last phrase. Phrase length - 11 measures |
| 11  | 89-103 | Return of the **A section**. “Spacious.” Quarter note = 60. Recapitulation of cello solo material from the beginning of the movement. Movement ends with an extended chromatic tone cluster. Phrase length - 15 measures |

As explained in the table, this movement is propelled forward with the use of clear and succinct tempo changes, swift transitions, and the use of recurring musical gestures. The robust dynamic contrasts in the opening cello solo give the sense of free
improvisation. Thomas indicates significant changes in tempo, articulation, and mood with specific and descriptive directions throughout the score, creating an improvisatory effect. The combination of her descriptive directions and repetition of specific musical gestures sets the scene into the whole first movement. More discussion on her musical gestures will be addressed in the next section.

Thomas uses a B major arpeggio in the first transition in measure 11, from phrase section one to phrase section two, passing the gestural cello solo to the first violin. The major third brings a welcomed consonance from the previous intervals, compared to the intervals of mainly sevenths and sixths. The arpeggio leads into the second phrase section with an added tritone for color, thus beginning a new version of the original solo cello melody.

Example 3.1: mm. 11-12, Transition to phrase section 2, *Eagle at Sunrise*

The third phrase section begins in measure 18 with an extended-tertian sonority. All instruments in the string quartet are finally playing together for one measure on an expansive eleventh chord. The accented *fortissimo* to *subito piano*, with a crescendo back
to fortissimo, provides a wall of sound and texture for one measure, until the quartet is divided into pairs in measure 19.

Example 3.2: mm. 18-19, beginning of phrase section 3, *Eagle at Sunrise*

Most of the phrase sections in the middle part of this movement, starting in measure 32 at the *B section*, are either in or meandering back to the steady tempo of quarter note = 76-84. The recurrence of the solo cello at quarter note = 60 at the end of the movement is preceded by the transition of the upper strings, holding “energized” upper registered notes under a fermata.\(^{26}\) The cello interrupts the transition and begins phrase section 11 with a similar, but more relaxed solo melody, as the beginning. Thomas refers to her symbol, the Spirit by suggesting the cellist to play “cantabile” and “prayerful, intimate.”\(^{27}\) The upper strings simply enhance the cello melody with ethereal harmonics in measures 93 and 102. Just like in *Dream Catcher* (2008) for violin and

\(^{26}\) Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of *Eagle at Sunrise* (New York; Schirmer, 2002).

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
She uses an elaborate layered sound effect in *Eagle at Sunrise* to create a spiritual effect that seemingly echoes chant with blocked chords and a cluster of sound.

**Harmony and Gestures**

Because analyzing a movement such as *Eagle at Sunrise* is quite difficult, a musician looking to perform this work can use the aforementioned phrase sections for a more horizontal approach to analysis. Analyzing vertically will conclude in the discovery of polychords and harmonic parallelism, since most of her phrase sections contain all twelve chromatic pitches. She also uses multiple extended tertian chords to create a thick texture.

The opening cello solo in the first phrase section is carefully organized using two symmetrical scales, diminished and whole tone, concurrently. Within Thomas’s harmonic color and organization, she uses repeated intervals, such as sevenths, sixths, fourths, and thirds to create the opening melody. The first extended eleventh chord is used in measure 18 and one of the most effective uses of the extended tertian chord is in measure 25. Thomas uses an extended ninth chord at the transition into phrase section 4, in addition to a huge “bell-like” decay from fortissimo to mezzo forte.29

This movement serves as a medium for Thomas to establish her harmonic identity within the string quartet. In addition to using symmetrical scales and polychords, she plays with the groupings of instruments in the string quartet. Chromatic planing is used in

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28 Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of *Dream Catcher* (New York: Schirmer, 2009).
29 Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of *Eagle at Sunrise* (New York: Schirmer, 2002).
pairs throughout the movement and continually followed by the opposite pair of instruments.

Example 3.3: mm. 19-20, chromatic planing in pairs, *Eagle at Sunrise*

Many of the same intervals occur in repetition because of four gestural motives. The first and most common gesture is a grace-note motive, introduced by the cello in the beginning of the movement. The grace-note has a slash through the little superscripted note, making it a true grace-note and not an appoggiatura. The appoggiatura is the second
most common gesture within the movement. Thomas took careful consideration to place
accents on most of the grace-note and appoggiatura gestures. Only one appoggiatura
gesture in the opening cello solo is without an accent.

Example 3.4: mm 1-6, grace-note and appoggiatura gestures in opening cello solo,
_Eagle at Sunrise_

Because there are not many instances where these two gestural motives are played
in unison, they serve as a call and response within the quartet. One example of the grace-
note gesture used in unison between two or more instruments is in measure 29. The cello
and viola both hold a major second grace-note. Thomas creates a stinging attack from the
cello and viola by writing their notes in high registers as well as writing a sudden “bell-
like” decay. She orchestrates the decay from the lower strings to make way for more
chromatic planing in the violins for the latter half of the measure.
Example 3.5: m. 29, unison grace-note gesture in viola and cello; chromatic planing, *Eagle at Sunrise*

The “leaping” gesture is the third gesture, including larger than a fifth interval. This gesture sounds very disjunct and interrupted because of the technical aspect of playing an interval larger than a fifth on a string instrument. The “leaping” gesture is most prominent in the violin parts and the solo cello part at the beginning and end of the movement.

Example 3.6: m. 85, “leaping” gesture in second violin, *Eagle at Sunrise*

The fourth gesture is the “bell-like” gesture, frequently occurring when Thomas uses the adjective, “bell-like.” The gesture tends to happen over the span of only one or
two beats, creating an impulsive decrescendo. The “bell-like” gesture is evocative of light, sunrise, and blossoming sounds and can be found throughout *Sun Threads*.³⁰

*Invocations* - Movement II

**Form and Phrase Sections**

In the second movement, *Invocations*, Thomas has developed each section to be evolved and very different from the previous section. The title of this movement is suggestive of prayer, meditation, and words of wisdom, which is evocative of the different moods within each different section.

The *Introduction* of the movement begins with the cello playing pianissimo, without vibrato, juxtaposed with the second violin’s fortissimo molto vibrato and pizzicato quarter note. Within seven measures, Thomas introduces the four voices of the quartet and transitions to the *A section*, in measure 8. This section uses a lot of grace-note and appoggiatura gestures, as well as decaying “bell-like” gestures, leading into the *B section* in measure 34. As each section develops into the next, so does the intensity, through the use of accumulation of independent, rhythmic units and sharp dynamic contrasts. The “Majestic” *C section* begins in measure 63 as Thomas introduces a homophonic structure with rhythmic unity throughout the quartet, until the transition into the “Bartók-like” *D section* in measure 85. This climactic section is supposed to be “as fast as you can play it,” with no discernible pattern within the frequent meter changes. The last major section in this movement, starting in measure 141, serves as a *Coda* to the end of the movement.

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³⁰ Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
The phrase sections in this movement are more like sub-phrases that correlate to the larger sections. Phrase sections are very helpful, as they make it easier to sift through each layer of the movement in an organized way. Here is a chart of the phrase sections for *Invocations*:

Table 3.2: Chart of the phrase structure of *Invocations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Measure number</th>
<th>Phrase section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-2</td>
<td><strong>Introduction.</strong> “Spirited, sempre molto rubato.” Quarter note = 69. Juxtaposition of dynamics, articulation, and vibrato. Phrase length - 2 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3-7</td>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong> continued. Dramatic dynamic contrasts and grace-note/appoggiatura gestures. Extended tertian sonority with added second. Phrase length - 5 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8-28</td>
<td><strong>A section.</strong> “Intense.” Huge dynamic contrasts with crescendos and decrescendos. Soaring, virtuosic first violin melody. Transition starts in m. 24 with a flowing viola line that passes to the second violin in m. 27. Phrase length - 21 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>29-33</td>
<td>“Majestic.” Quarter note = 76-84. “Bell-like” gesture in two violins and grace-note gesture in the viola line. Ringing pizzicati viola line. Phrase length - 5 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>34-41</td>
<td><strong>B section.</strong> “Molto intenso.” Almost recitative-like first violin melody. Sustained and supportive roles in the rest of the quartet with added “bell-like” gestures. The double bar ends the phrase. Phrase length - 8 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>42-46</td>
<td>Quarter note = 80-88. Quintuplets against triplets in violins. Very independent dynamics in m. 43. Phrase length - 5 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>47-62</td>
<td>Fragments from previous phrase sections. Ringing pizzicati surrounding the solo second violin melody. Phrase length - 16 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>63-79</td>
<td><strong>C section.</strong> “Majestic.” Quartet is in rhythmic unity. Grace-note gesture returns. Chromatic planing in mm. 68-73. Transition to a new phrase section in m. 78 via second violin. Phrase length - 17 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>79-84</td>
<td>Quarter note = 66. Call and response in violins, including clashing minor second intervals. “Rubato” transition in second violin part. Phrase length - 6 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>85-91</td>
<td><em>D</em> section. “Punchy---Bartók-like, athletic.” Quarter note = 184 or “as fast as you can play it.” Use of compound meters. Phrase length - 7 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>92-98</td>
<td>Continuation of compound meters without a set pattern. Phrase length - 7 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>99-104</td>
<td>Chromatic planing and rhythmic unity occur in mm. 99-100. Phrase length - 6 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>104-111</td>
<td>Eight bars are repeated. Continued rhythmic unity amongst at least two members of the quartet at all times. Moving viola line transitions in a high register. Phrase length - 8 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>112-122</td>
<td>Break in rhythmic unity with first violin’s “rubato and passionate interruption.” First violin provides a moving line to transition to the next phrase section. Phrase length - 11 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>123-133</td>
<td>Return of ringing pizzicati. “Solo” labeled in m. 128 for second violin. First violin takes the melody in m. 131. Staggered entrances between the violins and viola into the transition. Phrase length - 11 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>134-140</td>
<td>Divisive, dance-like, and compound triple meter in mm. 134-136. Augmentation occurs in m. 139 when the rhythm changes to a compound quadruple meter of 12/8. Phrase length - 7 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>141-147</td>
<td><em>Coda.</em> Quarter note = 84. The melody weaves in and out of the violins, juxtaposed to the articulate pizzicati in the viola and cello lines. Phrase length - 7 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>148-150</td>
<td>Quarter note = 60. The movement ends on a C Mm7 chord with a lowered fifth. Phrase length - 3 measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Rhythm**

Rhythm is an important aspect in each movement of *Sun Threads* because the individual parts of the string quartet share a balance of rhythmic dependence and interdependence with each other. Thomas uses the traditional string quartet medium to her advantage by pairing and grouping the ensemble to create various examples of vertical and horizontal rhythmic structures. For example, in the *Introduction* of *Invocations*, Thomas staggers two pairs of instruments at a time, over the span of the first four bars. The use of “sempre molto rubato” in this introduction generates a sense of horizontal movement.

![Spirited, sempre molto rubato](image)

Example 3.7: mm. 1-4, horizontal, rhythmic movement, *Invocations*

The first example of vertical rhythm and rhythmic unity is introduced with all four instruments together in measure 7.
Example 3.8: m. 7, rhythmic unity in the ensemble, *Invocations*

Another example of horizontal, rhythmic movement is in the **B section**. The first violin has a virtuosic and almost recitative-like solo. With different elaborate combinations of rhythms, such as quintuplets, triplets, and tied-over notes, Thomas gives the first violin part a sense of rhythmic ambiguity. Frequent tempo changes give a sense of a floating, horizontal rhythm, and the only sense of stability comes from the accented and “bell-like” whole notes in the second violin and viola parts. These pointillistic, “bell-like” gestures occur in juxtaposition to a horizontal and floating melody. These colotomic-like signs imitate the strike and decay of a bell or gong underneath a “spirit”-invoking melody.
Example 3.9: mm. 33-36, horizontal, recitative-like violin solo and vertical “bell-like” gestures, *Invocations*

Thomas uses almost an entirely homophonic texture in section C, through the use of rhythmic unity in all four parts, as well as chromatic planing in thirds, through measure 79. The combination of rhythmic unity, chromatic planing in thirds, and accents on almost every downbeat of each new measure, creates a strong vertical and angular texture. Another unifying constant in the rhythm of this movement is the way Thomas groups each section into irregular and regular meters.

The D section is labeled “Punchy—Bartók-like, athletic,” and incorporates small, independent quantities of rhythm with no pattern for switching meter. This very additive, rhythmic section switches back and forth between strong, vertical, and horizontal rhythm until the Coda section changes abruptly with a floating and interweaving violin melody.

*Fugitive Star - Movement III*

**Form, Phrase Sections, and Gestures**

The arch form in the third movement of *Sun Threads* is deeply related to its fifteen phrase sections as well as the specific tempo markings made by Augusta Read Thomas. The A section begins with a “rubato e cantabile” viola solo in the upper register.
Thomas chose the viola timbre to represent her “runaway, cosmic body.”\textsuperscript{31} The movement starts at quarter note = 63, but makes a sweeping accelerando as the rest of the quartet joins in at measure 8. The rest of the phrase sections in section \textit{A} stay at a steady quarter note = 72, with a transitional accelerando into the \textbf{B} section at measure 38.

A robust “Bartók” pizzicato in the first violin begins the \textbf{B} section at a faster tempo, quarter note = 80-88. In addition to numerous indications for “Bartók” pizzicati, Thomas also asks for “molto ponticello,” ordinary pizzicato, and to play the melodic passages sul D and sul G. The \textbf{B} section is much more present because of the newly incorporated techniques and the texture they provide throughout the string quartet.

This movement keeps moving forward with another transitional accelerando into the \textbf{C} section. The fiery and “explosive” \textbf{C} section interrupts the previous transition with an “improvisatory and chaotic sound for 6 beats at the frog of the bow.”\textsuperscript{32} Serving as the pinnacle section of the movement, a lot of vertical and rhythmic unity, as well as burgeoning crescendos, propel the music forward. The only release comes when similar motives return from the previous \textbf{B} section.

Many of the vertical, striking attacks remain in the \textbf{B'} section, even throughout rhythmic augmentation, with more frequent fermatas in all four string parts. Though the viola solo returns in the \textbf{A'} section, Thomas passes around the solo line to incorporate a written-out ritardando until the solo is passed back to the viola.

The fifteen phrase sections of this movement help define the transitional tempo changes as well as link together the larger sections to make the arch form.

\textsuperscript{31} Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
\textsuperscript{32} Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of \textit{Fugitive Star}, (New York: Schirmer, 2002).
Table 3.3: Chart of the phrase structure of *Fugitive Star*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Measure number</th>
<th>Phrase section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-10</td>
<td><em>A section.</em> “Cantabile” throughout the entire section. “Elegant, mysterious, and spacious.” Quarter note = 63. Distant viola solo begins the movement. Cello and violin 1 join and violin 2 joins in m. 8 with a declamatory, “bell-like” gesture. Con sordino for violin 1 and cello only. Phrase length - 10 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10-18</td>
<td>Quarter note = 72. Trills in violin 1 and “Bartók” pizzicati in viola line. Phrase length - 9 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>Trio, without cello until m. 24 downbeat. Phrase length - 6 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>25-37</td>
<td>Cello comes in after a strong downbeat in m. 25. Appoggiatura gestures return in the viola line in mm. 26-27. Ponticello in m. 28. Accelerando starts in m. 34. Phrase length - 13 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>38-56</td>
<td><em>B section.</em> “Bartók” pizzicati in violin 1. Viola is still marked “solo” and “cantabile.” The viola solo is very improvisatory, with syncopation and triplets. Sul G and D in the violins helps add to the intensity of the phrase. Phrase length - 19 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>57-66</td>
<td>Violin 2 has an appoggiatura gesture in m. 57 and throughout the rest of the phrase. Left hand pizzicato in violin 1 in m. 59. Phrase length - 10 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>Thomas explains the 7/8 bar in m. 66 as (3+2+2); 5/8 is (2+3). Accelerando starts in m. 72 as a transition to the next phrase. Phrase length - 10 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>76-84</td>
<td><em>C section.</em> Explosive tempo at quarter note = 104. Note from Thomas to improvise for the first 6 beats with a chaotic sound at the frog. Molto ponticello in m. 77 on the last two beats. Moving dialogue occurs between violins and viola through m. 84. Phrase length - 9 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>85-91</td>
<td>Rhythmic unity in upper strings starting in m. 85, with leaping gestures. Cello is in a dialogue with the upper strings. Phrase length - 7 measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.3 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10</th>
<th>92-101</th>
<th>Augmentation in the rhythm occurs with half note trills. Violins pass quintuplets and sextuplets back and forth. Rhythmic diminution occurs in m. 97, creating movement for the transition into the next phrase. Phrase length - 10 measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>101-119</td>
<td>Leaps of fifths are frequent. Rubato is marked in all parts of the transition in m. 119. Phrase length - 19 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>120-134</td>
<td><strong>B1 section.</strong> Adagio. Quarter note = 84. Unison in rhythm and notes in upper strings for the first two measures. Phrase length - 15 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>134-141</td>
<td><strong>A1 section.</strong> Viola solo returns. Tempo slows down to quarter note = 72. Phrase length - 8 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>142-143</td>
<td>Larghetto. Quarter note = 63. Violin 1 takes the descending melody. Phrase length - 2 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>143-155</td>
<td>Largo. Quarter note = 48. Non vibrato in violin 1, viola, and cello. Violin 2 has appoggiatura gesture and normal vibrato. Movement ends with leaping and appoggiatura gestures in the viola line. Phrase length - 13 measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All four gestures (grace-note, appoggiatura, “leaping,” and “bell-like”) are present throughout this movement, but one gesture, the “leaping” gesture, is used more often. Thomas creates a characteristic “leaping” sound by using consecutive leaps of more than a fifth. The hollow and spacious sound that develops from the “leaping” gesture stops any kind of linear or scalar motion. Often a leap will occur on a bow change, making a greater delay in the continuity of the music.
Constructive Adjectives and Vocabulary

Thomas not only depicts her music through the use of abundant markings and strict tempo changes, but also through the vast amount of adjectives she meticulously places in order to describe each next section, character change, mood, various technique, and so forth. There are more than thirty adjectives in *Fugitive Star*, and many are used more than once.

Since English is her native language, most of the vocabulary she uses in her compositions is in English, as well as many common Italian musical terms. Some adjectives are simply used to describe a specific tempo change, while more constructive and complex adjectives are meant to help coach the musician to achieve her ideal vision. For example, at the beginning of the *C* section in measure 76, Thomas writes underneath “Explosive” and quarter note=104, “Tutti: improvise a chaotic sound for 6 beats at frog.” Thomas has published her words in the score to coach the quartet members on how to play the section.

In order to fulfill the composer’s expectations, the string quartet performers must be patient and willing to decipher her ideas individually, as well as together as a group. The ever-changing tempo markings, characters, and expressions must be exaggerated in order for the audience to hear the quick and precise changes. The previous chart that provides the phrase sections will help map out rehearsal sections. More about rehearsal technique of this piece will be discussed in the next chapter.

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33 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012.)
34 Ibid.
Rise Chanting - Movement IV

Form and Phrase Sections

*Rise Chanting* was commissioned by the Alexander String Quartet and the Krannert Center, with specific guidelines for Augusta Read Thomas. As stated in the first chapter, she was asked to write a piece inspired by the famous Beethoven String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135. Thomas chose to encode the poem #1005 by Emily Dickinson into the last movement of *Sun Threads*.

The beginning of the movement follows the rhythmic and percussive nature of the poem. Thomas captures the intensity of #1005 by starting with rhythmic unity throughout the ensemble, thus following the syllables of the words.

Example 3.10: mm. 1-5, encoded text of Emily Dickinson’s #1005, *Rise Chanting*

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35 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
Example 3.10 continued

The middle sections of the movement are percussive, energetic, and the texture is thick with extended tertian sonorities and chromatic planing. Many of the units of rhythm in these middle phrase sections are not symmetrical and lack a strong traditional harmonic function. All of the resolutions to phrase sections occur at or around a tempo change, and the last two phrase sections of the movement contain a written-out ritard, generated by ease in the tempo and a change in vocabulary. Previously described as, “determined, energetic, bold, brash, and punchy,” Augusta Read Thomas finishes the movement with “sublime, elevated, glowing, and shimmering.”

The ten phrase sections in Rise Chanting are conceived from the vocabulary of Emily Dickinson’s poem, in addition to the detailed adjectives of Augusta Read Thomas. This movement is the most rhythmically challenging for the musicians because each new phrase section brings a mixture of new rhythmical patterns paired with advanced string

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36 Augusta Read Thomas, program note to the score of Rise Chanting (New York: Schirmer, 2002).
techniques, such as consecutive double stops, agile bow control, and fast pizzicato passages that go on for multiple measures at a time.

**Harmony**

Thomas uses extended tertian sonorities in the middle sections of *Rise Chanting*. The second phrase section begins with a drastic change of texture, density, and chordal sonorities, as she incorporates various seventh and extended tertian chords, including dominant ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords.

Table 3.4: Chart of the phrase structure of *Rise Chanting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Measure number</th>
<th>Phrase section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-9</td>
<td>Quarter note = 66-69. Intense unison opening. Thomas is specific about having a resonant, pizzicato. Bell-like strikes. Phrase starts and ends with the same chord intervals in each instrument. Phrase ends with a fermata, without a clear transition into the next phrase section. Phrase length - 9 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10-33</td>
<td>“Aggressive and percussive.” Quarter note = 88-92. Rhythmic unity and extended tertian sonorities. Very detailed dynamic and articulation markings on almost every beat. Subphrase material in m. 23. New subphrase includes “leaping” gesture in all four parts. Phrase length - 24 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>34-44</td>
<td>“Playful, but serious and earnest.” Quarter note remains at 88-92. Additive rhythm occurs and notes progress from triplets to sixteenths, and quintuplets. Fast sixteenth note pizzicati. Violin 2 leads the transition to the next phrase section. Phrase length - 11 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>45-53</td>
<td>Texture thins out. “Leaping” gesture is passed around in m. 45. Violin 2 and viola pair off in m. 46 until they lead the quintuplet transition into phrase section 5. Phrase length - 9 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>54-62</td>
<td>“Determined and energetic.” Quarter note remains at 88-92. Dense texture returns with two unison figures in m. 54. Phrase length - 9 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>63-77</td>
<td>“Like a wild harp or mandolin.” Unison in three of the four instruments and continues in mm. 63-64. Chromatic scalar section throughout. Absence of chord resolution. Phrase length - 15 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>78-86</td>
<td>“Animated.” Quarter note remains at 88-92. Texture thins out. Violin 2, viola, and cello become accompaniment to the violin 1 melody. Rhythmic unity in m. 85 brings the quartet together for one beat. Violin 1 transitions into the next phrase. Phrase length - 9 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>87-101</td>
<td>“Bold, brash, and punchy.” Dotted quarter note = 66-69. Mm. 87-95 is monorhythmic. Frequent bell-like gestures occur in mm. 97-101. Thomas uses fermatas to change the character and transition into phrase section 9. Phrase length - 15 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>102-116</td>
<td>“Sublime, elevated.” Quarter note = 52-56. Rhythms are simplified. The penultimate stanza of the poem is encoded in mm. 105-106. Viola passes a “leaping” gesture melody to violin 1 in mm. 114-116. Phrase length - 15 measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>117-119</td>
<td>“Glowing, shimmering.” Quarter note = 52. The last stanza of the poem is encoded in these two measures. Violin 2 begins a series of four chords, adding a member of the quartet for each new chord. Phrase length - 3 measures</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thomas is prone to augmenting intervals to create tritones as well as using a specific pattern of intervals multiple times. In phrase section six, the quartet plays a very chromatic, scalar section that returns every few measures within the phrase. In the first two beats of measure 63, the first violin, second violin, and viola are exactly unison in
notes, intervals, and rhythm. They play the pitches: F#, G, E, D, C, Db, and F. Even though the cello is starting on an A instead of an F#, like the rest of the quartet, the cello plays the exact same intervals. The cello plays: A, Bb, G, F, Eb, E, and G#. The intervals for each instrumental line are a major seventh, major sixth, major second, major second, minor second, and major third.

Example 3.11: m. 63, unison in intervals, horizontally, *Rise Chanting*

**Texture and Timbre**

Thomas works with the string quartet medium in a balanced way. In the first three movements of *Sun Threads*, she shapes and moves around beautiful melodies and thematic material with accompaniment. In *Rise Chanting*, the thematic material is the poem. Since it has already been conceived, the quartet is playing expressionistic music in
reaction to the words of Emily Dickinson. Thomas transforms the four-part texture of the string quartet into powerful sections of proclamatory vignettes.

The homorhythmic texture in phrase sections two, five, six, and eight generates an abundance of large chords and similar reoccurring intervals. The texture of this movement also plays a role in the quality of sound that is produced. Thomas coaches the musicians through her specific emotional terms and markings at the beginning of every section and it is up to the group to then decide how to musically depict the desired emotional content.

Table 3.5: Chart of adjectives labeled in bold at the beginning of each phrase section, 
*Rise Chanting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section number</th>
<th>Measure number</th>
<th>Tempo marking</th>
<th>Constructive adjectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>mm. 1-9</td>
<td>66-69</td>
<td>Intense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>mm. 10-33</td>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>Aggressive and percussive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>mm. 34-44</td>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>Playful, but serious and earnest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>mm. 45-53</td>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>Sempre, fiery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>mm. 54-62</td>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>Determined and energetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>mm. 63-77</td>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>Like a wild harp or mandolin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>mm. 78-86</td>
<td>88-92</td>
<td>Animated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>mm. 87-101</td>
<td>66-69</td>
<td>Bold, brash, and punchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>mm. 102-116</td>
<td>52-56</td>
<td>Sublime, elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>mm. 117-119</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Glowing, shimmering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER FOUR

INTERPRETATION AND REHEARSAL SUGGESTIONS
FOR SUN THREADS

Rehearsal Suggestions, Tempo Deliberations

In Sun Threads, many of the transitions into new phrases are marked by tempo changes which are used as structural boundaries in the movements. These tempo changes also help build and resolve musical tension throughout each movement. As discussed earlier, Thomas uses relatively ambiguous harmonic functions and indistinct chord resolutions so that her music is created from her four gestures, strict tempo indications, and constructive adjectives and vocabulary markings. Her objective is for her compositions to sound created and improvised on the spot, not to restrict the freedom and expression of the players.37

The ensemble has numerous opportunities for expressiveness within each phrase section. Thomas writes “rubato,” attaching it to various adjectives in a melodic or moving solo line. In the first movement, Eagle at Sunrise, Thomas puts “rubato” over the sextuplets in the first violin solo line, in measure 14, as the first violin is playing in response to the opening solo cello melody. The rubato expression marking differentiates the first violin melody from the similar cello line, as do the differences in articulations and register.

Another example of rubato is in the second movement, Invocations. The first two phrase sections consist of a fragmented melody, split up within the quartet, at a tempo of quarter note = 69. The melody is additive and accumulates with independent quantities of

37 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
quintuplets, triplets, and sixteenths. In addition to the rhythmic quality within these phrase sections, there are also quite a few technical challenges. The second violin and cello start the movement with opposite articulations: the second violin plays pizzicato with molto vibrato while the cello plays arco, without vibrato. The loose accumulation of these phrase sections eventually resolves with the quartet, essentially “finding” one another in the homorhythmic transition to the third phrase section. Knowing and having the score readily available is useful when playing these two phrase sections with “sempre molto rubato.” The quartet will be able to take time at each new entrance in these phrase sections if the ensemble knows the order in which the entrances occur.

Example 4.1: mm. 1-6, order of entrances, *Invocations*

Establishing a solid tempo at the beginning of each movement can be just as challenging with the abruptly changing tempos within the movements. Every ensemble should make appropriate decisions about leadership within the group according to what makes the most sense musically. It is clear that the cello is going to set the tempo in the first movement, *Eagle at Sunrise*, since the cello plays the solo melody for the entire first
phrase section. A challenge comes in measure 18 at the first measure of the third phrase section as the quartet lands on a $ffp$ with a crescendo on a whole note. The viola and cello must coordinate with each other because they have the first five moving notes. The blessing in disguise is the $ffp$ that Thomas wrote on the unison whole note. Coming out of the $ffp$ is a crescendo to help stagger the dynamics, thereby helping to plan out the first beat of the next measure.

Example 4.2: mm. 18-19, viola and cello reestablish the tempo, *Eagle at Sunrise*

In the second movement, *Invocations*, the tempo is quite tricky because of the fragmented melody in the first two phrase sections, as stated earlier. The tempo in the first phrase section has to be established by the quintuplet in the viola line. Because of the pairings between the cello and viola, and between the violins in phrase section one and two, the violins reestablish the original tempo. With the given constructive adjectives, “Spirited, sempre molto rubato,” it is up to the musicians to decide the degree of rubato between phrase sections.
Example 4.3: mm. 1-3, viola establishes tempo m. 1, vlns reestablish tempo in m. 3, *Invocations*

The viola sets up the tempo in the third movement, *Fugitive Star*. Thomas gives a “rubato e cantabile” solo to the viola for the first six measures of the movement until the other members of the quartet join in with an accelerando to the second phrase section. Even in the second phrase section, the viola has the moving line and establishes the new tempo of quarter note=72.

The final movement, *Rise Chanting*, is very different from the other movements in many ways. Unlike the other movements, most phrase sections begin with at least two or more instruments with a homorhythmic texture. The tempo is established at the beginning of the movement by the encoded text of Emily Dickinson’s poem, #1005.
Deciding on the opening tempo in each movement seems easier than following the strict tempo changes within the movements, but the phrase sections charted out in Chapter Two identifies the transitions before each new phrase section. Thomas is very helpful with her transitions before new phrase sections and especially before new tempo changes. For example, in the transition from phrase section seven to section eight of *Rise Chanting*, Thomas eases the transition from 4/4 to 6/8 by adding a triplet to the last beat of the first violin part, creating subdivision through metric modulation. The first violin can easily establish a new tempo and meter in 6/8 because of the smooth transition.
Rehearsal Suggestions, Balance and Texture

When considering the balance of a string quartet, we often think of the most melodic voice leading, or emerging out of the ensemble texture. *Sun Threads* is composed so that the melodic voice has no trouble being heard because of the texture and use of the upper register. In fact, many times the melody is played without accompaniment from the rest of the quartet. One issue that does need consideration is when the second violin is in a higher register than the first violin. The second violin is usually at a disadvantage in the string quartet ensemble because of the seating arrangement. Many times the second violin is placed almost parallel to the first violin, making it difficult for the middle range of the violin to come out of the quartet texture. Two examples of this issue are found in the second movement, *Invocations*, in measures 80-84 and also in the third movement, *Fugitive Star*, in measures 61-63.
The first example in *Invocations* is an issue because both violins are in relatively the same range throughout the ninth phrase section. Both melodies intertwine with each other to make one line that sounds like one instrument. If the second violin plays even slightly less in dynamics than the first violin, one section of the melody will be lost. Therefore, the second violin has to play a little louder than the first violin, and the first violin should pay careful attention to the *fp* to a crescendo marking, throughout the passage.

Example 4.6: mm. 80-84, violin 1 and violin 2 melodic line, *Invocations*

The second example, in *Fugitive Star*, involves the second violin cultivating a growing melody out of the dense texture of sustained, ponticello notes from the first violin, and ponticello trills in the cello line. It is also very easy for the first violin and cello to play louder than the written *mf* because of the effort needed to make the ponticello speak. The second violin has a contrasting, lyrical, and *ff* melody in measure 61, bringing attention away from the raspy, ponticello color.
When there is not a solo melody or dialogue within the ensemble, Thomas puts one instrument against an intense, chordal “wall” of sound. In the third phrase section of *Invocations*, the first violin has a melodic line against chordal, whole notes from the rest of the quartet. There are essentially six voices of double stops underneath the *ff* line of the first violin. The *ffp* in the second violin, viola, and cello lines provide a slight interruption and decay to the sostenuto first violin line.
Rehearsal Suggestions, Articulation

Producing the correct articulations can be just as important as the balance and texture in a string quartet. There is only one edition of *Sun Threads* at this time and Thomas has worked very closely with the editor to provide detailed commentary that helps musicians perform her works more accurately. In order to carry out the composer’s ideas, the musicians must be precise with accents, dynamics, gestures, adjectives, and other emphatic markings.

The bowings and articulations in *Sun Threads* were carefully planned out during the writing process, in collaboration with the string quartets who premiered each movement. Thomas’s well-defined bowings are often very helpful for the clarity of her gestures. In the first movement, *Eagle at Sunrise*, measures 1-11, Thomas marks specific bowings over most of the solo cello melody. The planned bowings give the musicians a starting point, especially if they have never played any works by Augusta Read Thomas. Because of the planned bowings, the cello will easily be able to bring out the “leaping,” grace-note, and appoggiatura gestures of the melody. Also, the bowings are worked out so that the cello can play an accented *sffz* on a down-bow at the frog of the bow.

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38 Interview with composer (December 19, 2012).
Example 4.9: mm. 1-9, bowings by Augusta Read Thomas, *Eagle at Sunrise*

Addressing articulation is particularly important for the last movement, *Rise Chanting*. It is very percussive, with a dense, chromatic texture. The percussive rhythm is enhanced with the printed bowings, included by the composer. This movement is homorhythmic, with many fast dynamic changes and carefully placed accents. Since the tempo is fairly swift at quarter note=88-92, the quartet may decide as a group to stay close to the frog of the bow in order to execute the tempo more easily. All of the carefully marked accents, *ffp’s*, ponticello, and pizzicati help create a rise and fall to the phrase section.

Example 4.10: mm. 10-13, unified bowings throughout the ensemble, *Rise Chanting*
Whenever Thomas uses an adjective to enhance her musical markings, the articulations and bowings work in a symbiotic way with her words. In the second movement, *Invocations*, Thomas defines the word she is using through music, in measure 83. The selected adjective in this example is “biting.” Harmonically speaking, Thomas uses the two violins on the E string, only a minor second apart from one another, creating “biting” overtones. It is implied that the accented and fortissimo notes start down-bow to create an accent at the weighty frog, but one could also start with a rearticulated up-bow, as long as it creates the same articulation.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

This treatise provides a thorough analysis and performance guide to *Sun Threads*. It examines Augusta Read Thomas’s biography, compositional style, commissioning process, and serves as a starting point for performers looking for solutions to several challenges posed by this difficult work.

The string quartet, *Sun Threads*, exhibits Augusta Read Thomas’s compositional chamber music style along with showcasing her compositional style, through her use of repetitive rhythmic motives, descriptive markings, and four abstract symbols. Each movement was commissioned separately and later all four movements were premiered as an entire work by The Avalon String Quartet. Because Thomas is influenced by a variety of composers, musical styles, and periods, the harmonic and rhythmic integration from various genres of music results in the “captured improvisation” sound in her compositions.\(^{39}\)

Chapter Three includes a detailed analysis of *Sun Threads* with subsections on each movement. The first subsection, *Eagle at Sunrise* (Movement I), includes a complete table of the phrase structure, descriptive markings, tempo markings, use of her four abstract symbols, and an introduction to the four compositional gestures found throughout the work. The subsequent subsections in Chapter Three discuss Thomas’s use

of rhythm, constructive adjectives and vocabulary markings, harmony, texture, and timbre.

Chapter Four provides an interpretation and rehearsal suggestions for *Sun Threads*. A string quartet wishing to perform *Sun Threads* should first discuss the phrase sections and transitions to new sections, often structured by tempo changes. Frequently occurring rhythmic motives provide numerous opportunities for expressiveness from the individual performers, especially when the rhythmic motive is paired with *rubato*.

The balance and texture of the different voices in the string quartet also have to be considered in each movement. Thomas writes frequent solo lines in each part, often in a high register on the instrument. Producing the correct articulations often coincides with balance and texture. If the performers follow Thomas’s carefully planned bowings they will achieve the highest level of clarity of accents, *sforzandi*, and “bell-like” decays, as well as her other gestures.

Thomas provides the performers with everything they need to know. The expression in her music is carefully marked through the use of her gestures, chromatic planing, and rapid movement from very thick texture to immediate whispers. Thomas’s carefully notated scores give a sense of improvisation and is a defining characteristic of Thomas’s musical language. Her modern compositional style is ubiquitous in her use of musical form, and the influence of jazz in Thomas’s gestures and rhythmic figures shapes the “melodies,” just as much as the use of her four symbols: the Bell, the Sun, the Spirit, and the Voice. The culmination of all of these compositional techniques contributes to the musical language of Augusta Read Thomas. Her music is complex and full of organized
phrase structures, complex homophonic rhythms, and precise gestural motives that are continuously changing.
September 25, 2013

Kristin Pfeifer

RE: SUN THREADS from STRING QUARTET, by Augusta Read Thomas

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APPENDIX B

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW

Human Subjects Application - For Full IRB and Expedited Exempt Review

PI Name: Kristin Ann Pfeifer
Project Title: Augusta Read Thomas's "Sun Threads" for String Quartet: A Study and Performer's Guide

HSC Number: 2012.9534

Your application has been received by our office. Upon review, it has been determined that your protocol is an oral history, which in general, does not fit the definition of "research" pursuant to the federal regulations governing the protection of research subjects. Please be mindful that there may be other requirements such as releases, copyright issues, etc. that may impact your oral history endeavor, but are beyond the purview of this office.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kristin Pfeifer, originally from Louisville, Kentucky, received both her Bachelor and Master’s degrees in violin performance from the University of Kentucky. She received her Doctor of Music from the Florida State University in December of 2013. Her main violin instructors have included Michael Davis, Daniel Mason, and Eliot Chapo. She has performed in masterclasses with Nathan Cole, Almita Vamos, Rachel Barton Pine, Brian Lewis, and Frank Almond.

As an avid chamber and orchestral musician, Ms. Pfeifer has participated at the Colorado College Summer Music Festival, Chautauqua Music Festival, Brevard Music Center Festival, and Domaine Forget Music Festival (Québec). Additionally, she has performed with many orchestras, including the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra, the Valdosta Symphony Orchestra, the Sinfonia Gulf Coast, the Pensacola Symphony Orchestra, and the Mobile Symphony Orchestra.

As an educator, Kristin is a registered Suzuki instructor and has worked with notable Suzuki teachers such as Hiroko Driver-Lippman, Joanne Bath, Ed Kreitman, Nancy Lokken, Susan Baer, and Timothy Durbin. Furthermore, Ms. Pfeifer has worked as an instructor at the University of Kentucky String Project and is currently a Master Teacher at The Character Center, an after-school enrichment program geared towards grade school students in Tallahassee, FL, while maintaining a full private Suzuki violin studio.