

Augusta Read Thomas

SOLSTICE RITUAL  
Homage to Varèse and Ravel  
(for 14 virtuosi)

To be performed with dancers when feasible.



Commissioned by The Juilliard School for a world premiere performance by Jeffrey Milarsky  
conducting AXIOM in Alice Tully Hall, New York, NY on 25 November, 2024

Dedicated with admiration and gratitude to Jeffrey Milarsky and The Juilliard School

Immense thanks to 2024 summer intern from Oberlin College, Francesca Neibel-Spruill, for exceptional and invaluable help with proof-reading, editing, formatting the front matter, helping me in my home office with countless other things which then afforded me more time to compose this work, and for her friendship.

## INSTRUMENTATION

Flute  
Oboe  
Clarinet in B $\flat$   
2 Violins  
Viola  
Cello  
Celesta (5-1/2 octave, notated from C2 to F6 and sounding one octave higher)\*  
Piano  
Harp  
4 Percussion\*\*

\*Not all celestas have the same range. This work is written for a 5-1/2 octave celesta notated from C2 to F6 and sounding one octave higher than written. If your celesta does not have certain notes, please tacet those notes. Do not move any notes into a lower or higher octave. Thank you.

\*\*Four percussionists playing a variety of percussion instruments. Please see the following pages for detailed percussion instrumentation and suggested set-up.

SCORE is in C

DURATION: 18 minutes

For a *circa* 4 minute and 30 second shorter duration, you may play through measure 289 and then jump to measure 376 or 388 and play to the end of the composition.

## INSTRUMENTATION FOR PERCUSSION

### PERCUSSION 1

Vibraphone (4 mallets needed) – Motor as slow as possible for the entire composition.

2 Tom-Toms (very low & low)\* – Rim is used only on the very low drum. These tom-toms should be tuned lower than the two tom-toms of Percussion 3.

2 Wood Blocks (medium high & very high)\*\* – Please use beautiful-sounding resonant instruments.

Splash Cymbal – Should be vivid-sounding and able to make a sharp, spiky and biting sound.

Tambourine (mounted, but also able to be picked up)\*\*\* – Should sound different from the three tambourines played by the other three percussionists. Every attack is “L.V. Molto” for the entire composition unless otherwise notated.

Suspended Cymbal (very high) – Should have many high shimmering overtones in its resonances (i.e., not a low-pitched, dark cymbal).

Egg Shaker (small and egg-shaped) – Should be able to be held in one hand. Played either with open hand or with closed hand for a quasi-muted sound. Please use a very articulate instrument so that it is easy to hear “secco” rhythmic attacks “Tss, Tss, Tss”. Alternatively, use sandpaper blocks. Or, you could have both instruments and alternate between egg shaker and sandpaper blocks for what you think is the best sound for a given measure.

For the whole composition all notes on these instruments are resonant; let all notes naturally fade back to silence:

Thai Gong (F#3) (mounted)

Almglocken (A#3) (mounted)

2 Triangles (very low & very high)†

Finger Cymbal (very high; mounted to be struck easily) – Please use a resonant, pretty, mellifluous-sounding instrument.

2 Brake Drums (medium & high)†† – Both should have graceful, pretty, mellifluous resonances.

2 Anvils (or metal pipes or other resonant metals; very high & medium high)†† – Both should have many high overtones and long resonances.

Zil Bell – Rich-sounding, not tinny or thin-sounding, and with beautiful resonance.

### PERCUSSION 2

2 Bongo Drums\* – Tuned very high and tight, à la Afro-Cuban music. Tuned higher than both the bongo drums of Percussion 4 and the conga drums of Percussion 3.

4 Wood Blocks (low, medium low, medium & high)\*\* – Please use beautiful-sounding resonant instruments.

Caxixi (mounted, but also able to be picked up) – May be substituted with 1 maraca.

Tambourine (mounted, but also able to be picked up)\*\*\* – Should sound different from the three tambourines played by the other three percussionists. Every attack is “L.V. Molto” for the entire composition unless otherwise notated.

Ribbon Crasher

For the whole composition all notes on these instruments are resonant; let all notes naturally fade back to silence:

Crotales (2 complete octaves; 4 brass mallets needed)

Thai Gong (A $\flat$ 3) (mounted)

2 Almglocken (A3, C4) (mounted)

2 Finger Cymbals (one pair, high; mounted to be struck easily) – Please use resonant, pretty, mellifluous-sounding instruments.

2 Opera Gongs (up)††† – One gong should be pitched higher than the other. Both should be vivid and almost raucous, and have excellent long glissandi-effects when struck.

2 Triangles (low & high)†

2 Anvils (or metal pipes or other resonant metals; medium & high)†† – Both should have many high overtones and long resonances.

2 Cowbells (medium & high) – Please use resonant, pretty, mellifluous-sounding instruments (i.e., not low-pitched, dark, harsh-sounding instruments).

Vibraslap that rings for at least four seconds (high; mounted, but also able to be picked up) – Tuned noticeably higher than the vibraslap of Percussion 4.

### PERCUSSION 3

2 Tom-Toms (medium & medium high)\* – Rim is used only on the medium high drum. These tom-toms should be tuned higher than the two tom-toms of Percussion 1 and lower than your conga drums.

2 Conga Drums\* – Lower in pitch than the bongo drums of Percussion 2 & 4.

2 Suspended Cymbals (high & medium high) – Both should have many high shimmering overtones in their resonances (i.e., not low-pitched, dark cymbals).

Elephant Bell (high) (mounted) – Bell should have many high overtones in its resonances (i.e., bright and radiant).

2 Wood Blocks (medium low & high)\*\* – Please use beautiful-sounding resonant instruments.

Tambourine (mounted, but also able to be picked up)\*\*\* – Should sound different from the three tambourines played by the other three percussionists. Every attack is “L.V. Molto” for the entire composition unless otherwise notated.

For the whole composition all notes on these instruments are resonant; let all notes naturally fade back to silence:

Glockenspiel (4 mallets needed)

Thai Gong (G3) (mounted)

Almglocken (B3) (mounted)

2 Brake Drums (medium & high)†† – Both should have graceful, pretty, mellifluous resonances.

2 Triangles (medium low & medium high)†

2 Anvils (or metal pipes or other resonant metals; medium & high)†† – Both should have many high overtones and long resonances.

Bell Tree – Circa three feet tall or larger, with a very long sustaining resonance.

1 Finger Cymbal (medium high) – Rich-sounding, not tinny or thin-sounding, and with beautiful resonance.

## PERCUSSION 4

Vibraphone (4 mallets needed) – Motor as slow as possible for the entire composition.

2 Bongo Drums (medium & medium high)\* – Tuned lower than the bongo drums of Percussion 2 and higher than the conga drums of Percussion 3.

Sleigh Bells

Tambourine (mounted, but also able to be picked up)\*\*\* – Should sound different from the three tambourines played by the other three percussionists. Every attack is “L.V. Molto” for the entire composition unless otherwise notated.

Egg Shaker (small and egg-shaped) – Should be able to be held in one hand. Played either with open hand or with closed hand for a quasi-muted sound. Please use a very articulate instrument so that it is easy to hear “secco” rhythmic attacks “Tss, Tss, Tss”. Alternatively, use sandpaper blocks. Or, you could have both instruments and alternate between egg shaker and sandpaper blocks for what you think is the best sound for a given measure.

1 Maraca (mounted, but also able to be picked up)

Ribbon Crasher

Wood Block (high)\*\* – Please use a beautiful-sounding resonant instrument.

For the whole composition all notes on these instruments are resonant; let all notes naturally fade back to silence:

Thai Gong (F3) (mounted)

Almglocken (E4) (mounted)

2 Triangles (low & medium high)†

2 Finger Cymbals (one pair, mounted to be struck easily) – Please use very high, resonant, pretty, mellifluous-sounding instruments.

Large Tam-Tam

2 Opera Gongs (down)††† – One gong should be pitched higher than the other. Both should be vivid and almost raucous, and have excellent long glissandi-effects when struck.

2 Anvils (or metal pipes or other resonant metals; medium high & high)†† – Both should have many high overtones and long resonances.

Cowbell (medium high) – Please use a resonant, pretty, mellifluous-sounding instrument (i.e., not a low-pitched, dark, harsh-sounding instrument).

Vibraslap that rings for at least four seconds (medium high; mounted, but also able to be picked up) – Tuned noticeably lower than the vibraslap of Percussion 2.

\* The score calls for 10 membranophones in total, composed of 4 tom-toms, 2 congas and 4 bongos. Care should be given to ensure that each of these drums is tuned differently from the others. In addition, the 4 tom-toms should be the lowest in pitch, with the 2 congas higher than those, and the 4 bongos highest of all. All together, the 10 membranophones in this order should form a large gradation in pitch without any pitch repetitions.

\*\* The score calls for 9 wood blocks. Care should be given to ensure that each of them has a slightly different pitch and color from the others.

\*\*\* The score calls for 4 tambourines. Care should given to ensure that each of them has a slightly different pitch and color from the others.

† The score calls for 8 triangles of differing pitches. Care should be given to ensure that each of the triangles has a different pitch and timbre from the others, so that each has a unique contribution to the overall sonic palette and so they blend elegantly with the crotales, vibraphone, finger cymbals, anvils (or metal pipes or other resonant metals), brake drums and other bell-like sounds. In order to bring forth from the triangles a kaleidoscope range of colors, please vary the beaters used to play them (heavy, medium & light triangle beaters, rattan, etc.). The idea is to build an amalgam sound palette: 8 triangles of various pitches, in addition to the finger cymbals, crotales & vibraphone.

†† The score calls for 8 anvils (or metal pipes or other resonant metals) and 4 brake drums. Care should be given to ensure that each of these has a slightly different pitch and color from the others, so that each of them has a unique contribution to the overall sonic palette and so they blend elegantly with the other bell-like sounds. If necessary, in order to ensure the most resonant possible instruments, it is the composer's hope that the length of the ring/resonance and the amount of “ping” one can get from the anvils, brake drums and metal pipes is radiant, akin to – for instance – a crotale.

††† The score calls for 4 opera gongs, two of which have pitches bending up, and two of which have pitches bending down. Care should be given to ensure that each of them has a slightly different pitch and color from the others, with a distinct “high” and “low” gong of each variety.

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Unless otherwise specified above or on the score, use the most common beater or mallet.

Gongs and Almglocken should be mounted for maximum resonance.

“C.M.” means “change mallet” so as to ensure a kaleidoscope of colors between, for instance, two attacks that are close together in time.

"Rim" indicates that a note should be played only on the rim of a drum, rather than on both the rim and the drumhead.

PERCUSSION KEY & LAYOUT

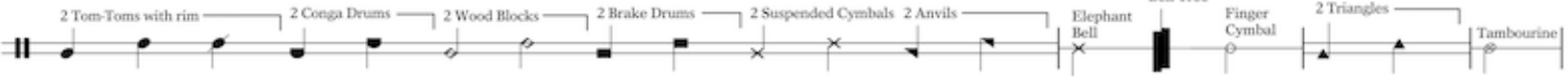
PERCUSSION 1



PERCUSSION 2



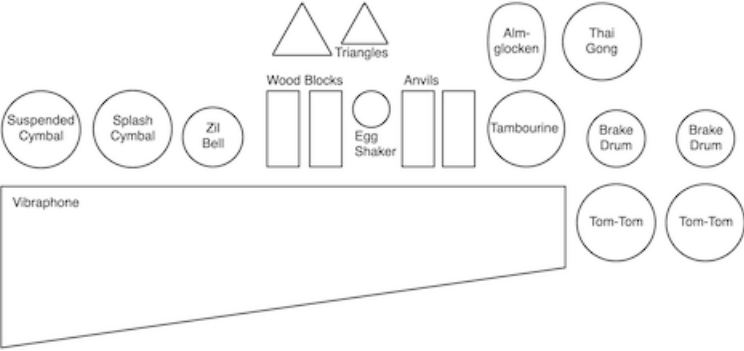
PERCUSSION 3



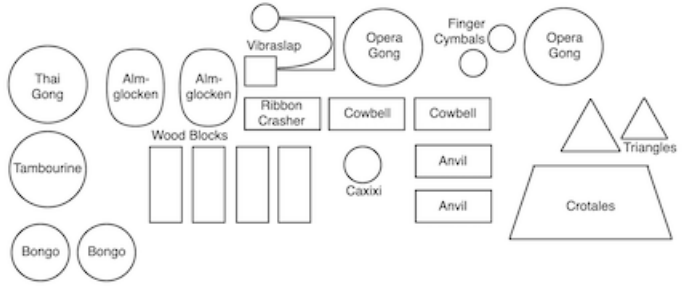
PERCUSSION 4



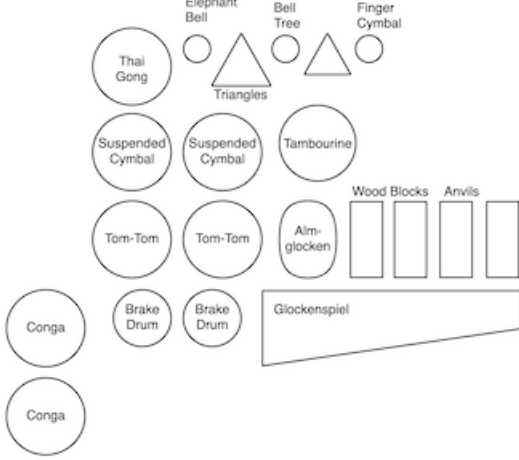
PERCUSSION 1



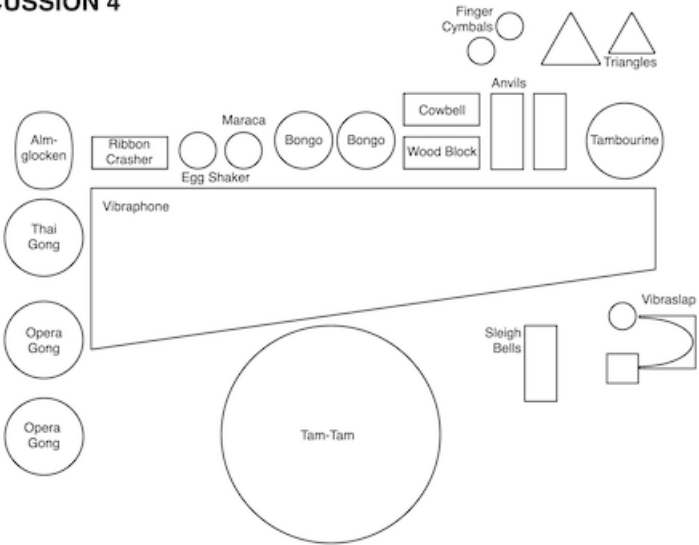
PERCUSSION 2



PERCUSSION 3



PERCUSSION 4



## PERFORMANCE NOTES

### TEMPO

When feasible, it is important that the tempi be performed as notated in the score.

### RESONANCE

For the entire composition, even when vibraphones lift pedals, always let all other ringing instruments continue to ring naturally back to silence unless “secco” or a dampen sign is explicitly notated. Both vibraphones should have their motors on slow for the entire composition to enhance the duration of their resonances. All metals should be selected for maximum pretty and elegant resonance. For example, the anvils (or metal pipes or resonant metals), brake drums and cowbells should be resounding, not clanky or dry.

### GRADUAL ACCELERANDO NOTATION

There are several places in the composition that involve gradual accelerandi. All accelerandi should be gradual (not notched) with energized musical flow. For instance, measures 148-165 should be an enthralling and rip-roaring gradual accelerando made together by the fourteen artists. Intended as helpful guideposts, new tempi are notated throughout the accelerando.

### DYNAMICS

There are only six dynamics used in this score (*pp*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*) so that each “level” of volume has a clear meaning and sound. Very often dynamics are staggered and layered; thus it is especially important that each musician play their individual dynamics and not be swayed to change their dynamic if someone else is playing a great deal quieter or louder. The words *sempre* and *subito* are often used to help clarify the layered, cross-fading dynamic textures. One of the central attributes of this composition is a kaleidoscopic use of hocketing, dovetailing and cross-fading dynamics, which occur on almost every page of the score.

### “SOLO” AND “PRIMARY LINE” INDICATIONS

The word “solo” is used to indicate to the player that their note or phrase is a solo and that no one else plays on that exact same beat of a bar. “Primary line” is used to indicate that, within a larger texture, players' notes or phrases are part of the foreground energy of the phrase. This notation helps to clarify the hocketing between instruments.

### HOCKETING AND DOVETAILING

Many hockets take place between instruments, resulting in spatial timbral-ping-pong, contrapuntal effects throughout the score.

### RUBATO

Where there are short soli, “rubato” is indicated and means that it is not necessary to mechanically play the exact rhythm (sextuplet, quintuplet, small triplet, etc.) but rather that you can consider those rhythms more gesturally. “Rubato” does not mean to drastically slow down the tempo.

### ARTICULATIONS

Nuanced articulations are notated to indicate phrasing, voicing and character of lines.

### PERCUSSION ROLLS AND VERY FAST SUCCESSIONS OF NOTES THAT CAN BE PLAYED LIKE A ROLL

The composition is notated, from time to time, with a specific fast rhythm. These can be played as rolls when necessary. Examples of these include: Percussion 1, measure 247, and Percussion 3, measures 236 & 237.

### O.T. and C.M.

“O.T.” means “optional tacet” for the notes under the bracket. Each individual player may opt to take or not take the tacet, and can do so for some or all of the notes. “C.M.” means to “change mallet”.

### CLEAN CUT-OFF NOTATION

Please do not “overthink” or “over analyze” the notations where a note is held over for a 16th note (for example, beat three of measure three in winds and strings). These are notated, from time to time, to try to ensure a very clean ensemble cut-off. In all cases, they should sound natural and utterly musical.

### CAUTIONARY ACCIDENTALS

Cautionary accidentals are notated for both vertical and horizontal spelling reasons. For example, when there is both a C and a C-sharp in a *vertical* chord, the C will be given a natural sign as a precautionary helpful reference even though, in a *horizontal* part, the C-natural reminder might seem unnecessary.

### WINDS

Optional to play with the instruments' bells up at any time in the composition.

### STRINGS

All bowings and string allocations (sul C, sul G, etc.) marked by the composer are suggestions and do not need to be followed.

### VIBRAPHONE PEDALING

The durations of the resonances of vibraphone notes are carefully sculpted for a specific harmonic rhythm. Thus, detailed pedaling indications are notated in the score and parts.

### VIBRAPHONE MOTOR

Both vibraphones should have their motors on the slowest possible setting for the entire composition to enhance the duration of their resonances.

### PIANO, CELESTA & HARP

Freely divide the notes and chords between the hands, especially when all the notes are on one staff. All harp harmonics are notated at *sounding* pitch.

### 8VA, 8VB & 15MA

Temporary transpositions are never corrected by “loco” to avoid visual clutter.

PROGRAM BOOK LISTING

Dedicated with admiration and gratitude to Jeffrey Milarsky and The Juilliard School

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|---|-------------------------------|
| Solstice Ritual – Homage to Varèse and Ravel (for 14 virtuosi) (2025) | Augusta Read Thomas (b. 1964) |
|---|-------------------------------|

PROGRAM NOTE

Over the past forty-five years, I have composed many works whose titles point to natural and celestial radiances: galaxy, star, sun, earth, moon, sky, light, dawn, illumination, equinox, summer, etc. One central metaphor of my life’s creative work is that of light refracting. Of interest to me, for my work, is to build, sculpt, and compose clean, clear, transparent, translucent, luminous, radiant, shining, resounding and resonant musical materials.

*Solstice Ritual* for 14 virtuosi shares many of these preoccupations. The two solstices happen in June (the 20th or 21st) and December (the 21st or 22nd). These are the days when the sun’s path in the sky is the farthest north or south from the Equator. A hemisphere’s winter solstice is the shortest day of each year, and its summer solstice the longest of each year. In the Northern Hemisphere the June solstice marks the start of summer: this is when the North Pole is tilted closest to the sun, and the sun’s rays are directly overhead at the Tropic of Cancer. The December solstice marks the start of winter: at this point the South Pole is tilted closest to the sun, and the sun’s rays are directly overhead at the Tropic of Capricorn. In the Southern Hemisphere, the seasons are reversed.

Cultures throughout the epochs, and in all corners of planet Earth, have performed a multitude of rituals to celebrate and mark the solstices. As I composed *Solstice Ritual*, in my mind’s ear and eye were sonic and visual images of fourteen musicians, a conductor and dancers, performing outdoors (if feasible) during the precise moment of a solstice. For this reason, when it is also feasible, *Solstice Ritual* is to be performed with dancers. Although the score took most of its inspiration from the vivid illuminations and dazzling rays of the summer solstice, at times *Solstice Ritual* explores contrasting materials whose shadowy character may also suggest the relative absence of light that marks the winter solstice.

A related sonic and balletic image I had when composing this composition was that of a kaleidoscopically radiant light refracting with vibrant and multi-shaped energies in a constant state of transformation. The music’s energy-flows vary and braid together musical materials that are blazing, radiant, kinetic, ritualistic, resonant, lyrical, rhythmic, reflective, fiery, avid, dynamic, effervescent and, at times, harmonically jazz-like. The resulting labyrinth of musical interrelationships showcases the world-class musicians of AXIOM and superstar conductor Jeffrey Milarsky. Importantly, *Solstice Ritual* was not conceived of as an ensemble piece. Rather, it is a score for fourteen highly virtuosic soloists.

*Solstice Ritual* also pays homage to the composers Edgard Varèse and Maurice Ravel, and it celebrates their imagination, joy, love, vitality, soul, energy, great chords and rich chord progressions, resonant orchestrations, tight big-band-like splash-chords and the sheer beating-heart inner life of their music. I love all of their compositions and to give just two examples among many, Varèse’s percussion writing and Ravel’s gorgeous orchestrations have been longstanding sources of inspiration.

The eighteen-minute composition is in three parts played without a pause. The first part, “Reaching Skyward,” unfolds bell-like fanfares—with outgrowths and transformations and lasts five minutes and thirty seconds. The second part, “Solstice Rites,” consists of a series of shorter sections entitled “Drumming Ritual 1,” “Bells Recap,” “Cosmic Clock 1,” “Drumming Ritual 2,” and “Cosmic Clock 2.” These sections last six minutes and thirty seconds. The third and concluding part, “Bell Prayers,” lasts seven minutes.

Although my music is meticulously notated in every detail, I like it to sound like it was spontaneously invented—always in the act of becoming. The creative journey—not a predictable or fixed point of arrival—is, for me, essential. I dance while I compose, hoping that my music will feel organic and self-propelled. I work hard to ensure that my music, too, dances; I often create in my mind and ear imaginary flexible dances and ballets, poems, visual art doodles, lighting or animations, and I love virtuosic performances that percolate and spiral with natural musicality. I draw maps of form and never follow them! Rather, I follow the music where it needs to go and then redraw the maps of form over and over and over.

*Solstice Ritual* is dedicated with admiration and gratitude to Jeffrey Milarsky and The Juilliard School.