

# Reviews

Recordings and books rated by expert critics

## Welcome



Can it be the June issue already? I'm delighted to be back in the Reviews Editor's chair, which has been kept warm by Steve Wright. My thanks to him for keeping these pages full of great music, too, this issue included. You'll be dazzled by the latest works by Augusta Read Thomas (our Recording of the Month) and Dani Howard, captivated by a final turn from Mark Elder at the helm of the Hallé and entranced (or perhaps unnerved) by an operatic take on Stephen King's *The Shining*.

It's always interesting to hear what film composers do when freed from the bounds of the cinema screen, so I was delighted to see James Ehnes's view of John Williams's First Violin Concerto in the mix here, not to mention Rachel Portman's new concerto, *Tipping Points*.  
**Michael Beek** *Reviews editor*

### This month's critics

Nicholas Anderson, Michael Beek, Terry Blain, Kate Bolton-Porciatti, Geoff Brown, Michael Church, Christopher Cook, Martin Cotton, Christopher Dingle, Misha Donat, Jessica Duchon, Rebecca Franks, Andrew Green, George Hall, Claire Jackson, Michael Jameson, John-Pierre Joyce, Nicholas Kenyon, Ashutosh Khandekar, Erik Levi, Natasha Loges, Andrew McGregor, David Nice, Steph Power, Paul Riley, Jan Smaczny, Jo Talbot, Roger Thomas, Sarah Urwin Jones, Kate Wakeling, Alexandra Wilson

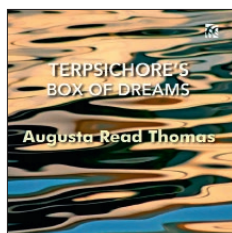
#### KEY TO STAR RATINGS

★★★★★ Outstanding  
★★★★ Excellent  
★★★ Good  
★★ Disappointing  
★ Poor

## RECORDING OF THE MONTH

# A box of resplendent musical treasures

*Kate Wakeling* basks in the glow of this shimmering collection of recent works by US composer Augusta Read Thomas



## Augusta Read Thomas

*Terpsichore's Box of Dreams\**; *Carnival for Bassoon and Wind Ensemble*; *Star Box*; *Dance Mobile* etc

\*Grossman Ensemble/  
Tim Weiss et al

*Nimbus NI 6445* 69:26 mins

For composer Augusta Read Thomas, the arrival of a new musical idea often feels 'like a spark or lightning bolt – like lighting a match – and suddenly, poof, there's an illumination, an inspiration, if you will.' Thomas's music itself fizzes with this same vivid sense of energy; her complex, imaginative scores verily zing with life and colour, while readily charting profound emotional depths. As such, Thomas is well-established

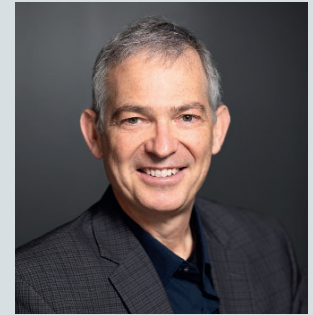
as one of America's most accomplished and inventive contemporary composers.

This outstanding release from Nimbus forms part of a long-running survey of Thomas's work spanning some 30 years of music, but this album focuses on relatively recent work (the earliest piece included dates from 2018). The selection nonetheless showcases the breadth of her composition, both in its varied sonorities and creative subject matter.

*Terpsichore's Box of Dreams* (2023) for chamber ensemble is the album's most substantial work. Devised as a sequence of seven dances, the piece explores the sensibilities of the muse Terpsichore, 'goddess of dance and delight', and imagines her 'box of dreams', out of which tumble a 'kaleidoscopic profusion [of] ideas and colours'. It is a remarkable score: mercurial in its wit and beauty with moments of shimmering poignancy (the third dance also receives this top-notch title: 'Pointillistic Groove Flutter Pirouettes') and it here receives an aptly pliant and sparky



## Performer's notes Tim Weiss



### What were your impressions of *Terpsichore's Box of Dreams*?

Gusty knows the players extremely well as colleagues and friends, so she was able to write for their musical personalities. It has this virtuosity and this brilliance to it that exploits each player's unique gifts. I think the slow music is so beautiful; and she has a really great sense for timing, how long she holds tension and how she releases it. Some of those moments that are very static feel so right in the way that they contrast with periods of incredible activity. It dances and it's light on its feet.

### Tell us about the incredible Grossman Ensemble...

It gives roughly four concerts a year, at least three of which are dedicated to premieres. Gusty created it as a special ensemble that exists uniquely to work directly with composers. The first rehearsal can be anything – it can be a piece mostly fleshed out, or it can literally be guided improvisation. Over the course of four rehearsals the composer then creates a finished piece, so there's a little bit more opportunity for workshopping.

### How did *Terpsichore's Box of Dreams* develop?

We had the piece mapped out, but in the first rehearsal we only dealt with the first four minutes. Gusty had a multitude of little tweaks or revisions, things she wanted to experiment with and try. So it was a little experimental in a way, which was good, and then the ensemble and I were able to give her feedback. It was a great collaboration process; I think the ensemble always feels like it has a real stamp on the final product, and that's very nice.



Pliant and sparky reading: Tim Weiss and the Grossman Ensemble lift the lid of *Terpsichore's Box of Dreams*

reading from the Grossman Ensemble under Tim Weiss.

Among many highlights, *Carnival* (2022) also stands out, framed here as a concerto for bassoon 'locking horns' with a wind ensemble. Soloist Nadina Mackie Jackson gives an especially rollicking performance and her strident solo line is met with stinging retorts from SUNY Fredonia Wind Ensemble (conducted with flair by Paula Holcomb) in this exhilaratingly spiky work.

*Dance Mobile* (2021) for chamber orchestra also lands with particular power. The work was composed to commemorate Oliver Knussen, one of Thomas's composition teachers and a longstanding friend, and conveys more of a sense of celebration than memorial.

Combining a marvellous agility and a certain steely beauty, the work is formed from three interconnected dances, which Thomas conceived of 'as if [each] hanging on an Alexander Calder-like mobile, suspended so as to turn freely in the air'.

### Thomas's remarkable score is mercurial in its wit and beauty with moments of poignancy

Thomas's smaller-scale works are no less delightful. *Laetitia's Caprice* (2023) is a graceful 'fanfare' for solo soprano saxophone (exquisitely performed by Phil Pierick) while *Bebop Riddle II* (2022) showcases Thomas's longstanding devotion to jazz in

a wonderfully tricky musical conversation for piano and cello (marked *pizzicato* throughout). Two pieces for percussion quartet complete the selection. *Con Moto* (2018) has the feel of an intricate musical jigsaw, the four musical lines interlocking with arresting precision, while the deft and glimmering *Star Box* (2020) is another affectingly unsentimental musical memorial, this time written for composer Jacob Druckman, who taught Thomas at Yale in the 1980s.

Beautifully performed and recorded, the whole selection has the feeling of a musical treasure trove, resplendent in its sense of vitality, beauty and imaginative possibility.

**PERFORMANCE** ★★★★★  
**RECORDING** ★★★★★