

FORBES CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY®

School of Music

presents the doctoral lecture recital of

Gianne Ge Zhu, *piano*

Sunday, December 13, 2020

1 pm

Recital Hall



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Program

Six Piano Etudes

Augusta Read Thomas

(b. 1964)

- I. Orbital Beacons – Homage to Luciano Berio
- II. Fire Waltz – Homage to Béla Bartók
- III. Cathedral Waterfall – Homage to Olivier Messiaen
- IV. On Twilight – Homage to Pierre Boulez
- V. Rain at Funeral – Homage to Morton Feldman
- VI. Twitter-Machines – Homage to David Rakowski

Traces

Augusta Read Thomas

(b. 1964)

- I. Reverie:
Like Robert Schumann (The Poet Speaks) crossed with George Crumb
- II. Caprice:
Like Scarlatti's Baroque Ornamentation crossed with Art Tatum
- III. Tango:
Like Astor Piazzolla crossed with John Coltrane
- IV. Impromptu:
Like Thelonious Monk crossed with Chopin
- V. Toccata:
Like J.S Bach crossed with Bebop

*This recital is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts.
Gianne Zhu is from the studio of Dr. Eric Ruple.*

Composer's Note for Six Piano Etudes

The aim of my piano etudes, which are composed in pairs, is to create drastically different sonic effects for each, using musical material identical to both. They should be like looking at two sides of a coin or examining both a photograph and its negative. These six small pieces were carefully heard, built, and refined, and as a result took a long time to compose.

- I. *Orbital Beacons* is about rotating harmonies and glow. The work juxtaposes very loud notes with very soft ones, making a counterpoint of layers and implied voice leading in which at first there are more soft notes than loud ones; by the end of the piece, this has been reversed. The work, which should sound clean, natural, and colorful, is highly organized. It is about the beauty of resonance, echo, decay, and luminosity.

- II. *Fire Waltz* is a variation on Etude No.1, in which the notes that were loud are strung together, exactly in order, lowered by two octaves, and turned into a boogie-woogie bass line. The notes that were soft in Etude N°1 form Bartok-like, jazzy chords. Although I think it is easy to hear the many references to perfumes of jazz in all my music, here is a work where the scents are more explicit. All the influences in my music are highly digested and personalized; for instance in these first two etudes we can sense Debussy, Ravel, Webern, and Berio, in addition to jazz, but hopefully the music is "all Thomas," and not stolen Debussy for instance, nor a display of simpleminded piano clichés.

- III. *Cathedral Waterfall* is a slow unfolding of the series of rich chords of an extended jazz harmony idiom. The color of each chord is precise and individual. One can imagine a huge, dramatic cathedral carillon where many bells are being rung at once, making beautiful complex chords that hang in the air, and echo, while at the same time, there is one lone bell ringer who is out of synchronization with the tutti chords. In the end

the chord rolls slowly downward, like a waterfall of chimes, and fades away, leaving only the ringing of two last bells.

IV. *On Twilight* is two and a half minutes of high energy. The three distinct layers crosscut one another in unpredictable, edgy, hiccup-like fits and starts, like a jazz improvisation that gets "out of the box." Yet, there is always the central "on twilight" layer flickering along, like the sun beaming, glowing, bursting, and then setting slowly into twilight. The outer two layers, in the two most extreme registers of the piano suggest the emergence of everything else in the evening cosmos (stars, planets, galaxies, black holes, etc.), which come into view only at twilight, as the sun sets and fades over the horizon.

V. *Rain at Funeral* is an impressionist miniature funeral march, which requires very subtle shadings in quiet dynamics as well as in timbre and reverberation. It uses the exact same chords as Etude N°·VI and is purposely a very intricate, delicate, private etude, in contrast to the bravura flair of its surrounding etudes, No. IV and VI.

VI. *Twitter-Machines* was composed in homage to David Rakowski, a world-class composer, who has written a large number of stellar piano etudes. *Twitter-Machines* responds to Rakowski's first etude, *E-Machines*, in which single notes are repeated very quickly. My etude repeats chords of various shapes and sizes as quickly as possible and these twittering chords are often interrupted by grace-note figures (anywhere from one to nine grace notes), which are played on the beat and which "mess-up the pulse," thus forcing the pianist to be slightly late for the main notes that follow. As the repeated chords delineate a certain tight bandwidth of pitch, florid arabesques that cover the entire range of the piano are set in relief against those oscillating machinelike harmonies.

Composer's Note for Traces

"My works are organic and, at every level, concerned with transformations and connections. While my music is highly notated, precise, carefully structured, thoughtfully proportioned and so forth... and although the pianist is playing from a very specific text, I like my music to have the feeling that it is organically being self-propelled - on the spot! As if we listeners, the audience, are overhearing a captured improvisation.

I like my music to be played so that the "inner-life" of the different rhythmic syntaxes is specific, with characterized phrasing of the colors, harmonies, and the like - keeping it ultra alive - such that it always sounds spontaneous.

For their sublime, precision and technical mastery, I deeply thank pianists who play TRACES in this fashion."

- Augusta Read Thomas

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