

Dr. André J. Thomas

(b. 1952)

Born in Wichita, Kansas, USA

Education

B.M. – Friends University, Wichita, KS

M.M. – Northwestern University, Evanston, IL

D.M.A. – University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, IL

2017 Robert Shaw Choral Award recipient (ACDA)

André Thomas was born in Wichita, on August 15, 1952, where he was raised by his mother and grew up with his two sisters. While his mother cleaned buses for Continental Trailways, she also sang in church, and her music-making initiated and fueled young André's own fascination with music.

Thomas was born to be a musician, playing familiar “church songs” on a toy piano at age 4. During his junior high school years, he had the daunting privilege of being part of the system where schools were racially integrating in Wichita, during the beginning of the end of segregation in America. He was 1 of 2,000 students bused to a different school, outside of his neighborhood. For him, the most important music at this time was the secular music he heard on the radio, and the “church music” he heard at his family’s Black Baptist Church. Some of the music he was learning in public school—gospel music and spirituals—was uncomfortable to him:

“As a young black man, I really didn’t identify. This was not the black music that I knew, and it certainly wasn’t the music that I experienced at my church! The text utilized dialect and it made me feel as if performing this music gave white people a chance to make fun of black people. I never really heard the message in the text; I only heard the way it sounded.” [Excerpted from André J. Thomas’s book *Way Over in Beulah Lan’: Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH: Heritage Music Press, 2007), xiii.]

However, André found the music room at his junior high school to be his haven of safety and solace, as he often performed and accompanied others on piano. He was studying piano privately during this time, and by eighth grade he had won the Federated Music Clubs Piano Competition. He was 14 years old when he became the Director of Choirs at his hometown Baptist church, and at the age of 16, he accepted the position Minister of Music at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Wichita where he began arranging music to meet the needs of the choir.

The racial landscape did not change for him in college—at Friends University in Wichita—but he continued arranging music, singing in and conducting choirs, and winning piano competitions.

André Thomas received his degrees from Friends University (BA), Northwestern University (MM), and the University of Illinois (DMA). His career has included work as a choral music adjudicator, clinician, and director of Honor/All-State Choirs throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, New Zealand, and Australia. He retired in 2019 as the Owen F. Sellers Professor of Music, Director of Choral Activities, and Professor of Choral Music Education at Florida State University. Before teaching at Florida State University, Thomas served on faculty at the University of Texas at Austin. Not long after his retirement, he was appointed Visiting Professor of Choral Conducting and Interim Conductor of Yale Camerata for 2020-2021.

André Thomas has conducted choirs at the state, division, and national conventions of the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) and the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA). His international conducting credits are extensive. They include conductor/clinician for the International Federation of Choral Musicians, summer residency of the World Youth Choir in the Republic of China and the Philippines, winter residency of the World Youth Choir in Europe, and a premier performance by an American choir (Florida State University Singers) in Vietnam. He has been the guest conductor of orchestras and choirs such as the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in England, the Berlin Radio Choir and the North German Radio Choir in Germany, the Netherlands Radio Choir, The Bulgarian Radio Choir and Orchestra, Charlotte Symphony, Tallahassee Symphony, China's People's Liberation Orchestra, and Czech National Symphony Orchestra. Since 1988, he has also served as Artistic Director of the Tallahassee Community Chorus.

Dr. Thomas has also distinguished himself as a composer/arranger. Hinshaw Music Company, Mark Foster Music Company, Fitzsimons Music Company, Lawson Gould, Earthsongs, Choristers Guild, and Heritage Music Company publish his compositions and arrangements. He has produced two instructional videos: *What They See Is What You Get* on choral conducting, with Rodney Eichenberger; and *Body, Mind, Spirit, Voice* on adolescent voices, with Anton Armstrong. His recent book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual*, has quickly become a major research source in the study of Spirituals.

In 2011, Chorus America presented Dr. Thomas with its Distinguished Service Award; in 2017, the American Choral Directors Association honored him with the prestigious *Robert Shaw Choral Award*. That same year, the National Collegiate Choral Organization presented him with their Lifetime Achievement Award. Additionally, The African Diaspora Sacred Music and Musicians (ADSMM) honored Dr. Thomas as a Living Legend.

André Thomas is past president of the Florida ACDA, past president of the Southern Division of ACDA, and past Vice President and President of National ACDA. He is married to Portia Russell Thomas and they have two children, Jordan and Taylor.