

GRAMOPHONE

US SOUNDS OF AMERICA

A special eight-page section focusing on recent recordings from the US and Canada



Bryan • Iyer



'The American Concerto, Vol 1'

Bryan Syzygy Iyer Trouble

Jennifer Koh *vn* Oberlin Contemporary

Music Ensemble / Timothy Weiss

Cedille (CDR90000 244  • 49')

Jennifer Koh has always been an intrepid musician who savours the unknown as she illuminates the familiar. She is focusing on the former with a new project titled 'The American Concerto', which begins with a recording of two recent works that take flexible views of the term 'concerto'. Rather than the traditional format featuring the soloist as dominant figure, these pieces give Koh the opportunity to stand out, add colour and extend ideas conveyed by the orchestra.

The six movements of Vijay Iyer's *Trouble* (2017) for violin and chamber orchestra draw inspiration from the activist US Congressman John Lewis's quote, 'I got trouble. It was good trouble. It was necessary trouble.' Iyer's *Trouble* is better than good; it is a series of expressive and colourful encounters in which solo violin and ensemble share material, evoke sonic images suggested by their titles and engage in vibrant interactions. The soloist employs techniques that draw attention not to themselves but to the narratives Iyer conjures with deft subtlety and animation. In the third movement, which pays eloquent tribute to Vincent Chin, an American of Chinese descent who was the victim of a hate crime in 1982, the violin is a soul of lamentation and solemnity.

Iyer's score is varied in atmosphere and instrumental texture, calling upon the musicians to travel a vast dynamic range and clarify telling details. Koh, a 1997 graduate of Oberlin College, is reunited here with conductor Timothy Weiss and the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble, who provide exceptional delicacy, point and power to everything the album's composers request.

Courtney Bryan's *Syzygy*, in its premiere recording, comes closer to a conventional definition of concerto, with three movements of eclectic material. Like Iyer's work, it reflects the composer's admiration for specific sources, in this case three artists linked by the title's reference to celestial bodies: Alma Thomas, Frida Kahlo and Maya Lin.

The solo violin shimmers and yearns, like an American lark ascending. Bryan is at her compassionate peak in the second movement, a tender ode to Kahlo that places violin and ensemble in luminous, time-

suspending space. Wood rustlings, serene and boisterous violin flights and a final sense of quietude make the tribute to Lin an affecting conclusion to this inaugural entry in a project whose next iterations will be eagerly anticipated.

Donald Rosenberg