

A successful collection showcasing the state of new music in New York State

'American Masters

for the 21st Century'

Alexander My Aunt Gives Me a Clarinet Lesson
Boatwright Adoration and Longing
Caltabiano Clarinet Quartet
D'Angelo Some Summer Sun
Downing Partita VI
George Arioso
Godfrey Scrimshaw. Festoons
Hodkinson Epitaph and Scherzo
Hopkins Sonatas in Dark to Light
Israel String Quartet No 2, 'Music for the Next to Die'
Keefe Riff, Variations on a Gershwin Tune (or Two)
Lewis Three Etudes for piano
Lindenfeld From the Grotte des Combarelles
Liptak Rhapsodies
Morrill Six Dark Questions
Palmer Carmina Amoris
Pellman Crane Songs
Ping Jin Yangtze! Yangtze!
Read Thomas Bells Ring Summer
Rouse The Surma Ritornelli
Sierra Cronicas del descubrimiento
Sisbee Wakings
R Smith Dance Mix
Stucky Sappho Fragments
Thomas Two Etudes
M Wagner Sextet
Wernick A Poison Tree
Willey Society Music
Wilson Dancing with the Devil
Zhuang Wind Through Pines
Society for New Music

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(6h 15' • DDD)



A perennial problem for historians tracking the influence of any given musical composition is that so few people are in attendance at any given performance.

To paraphrase Steve Reich, not only music but also its dissemination is a gradual process, which makes the millennial title of this collection rather revealing: 'American Masters for the 21st Century' – not of. A little preposition makes a big difference.

The Society for New Music, a plucky presenting organisation in upstate New York, has garnered a fairly impressive track record of presenting new works, as demonstrated and documented in this five-CD collection.

The chronology ranges as far back as the late Syracuse-based composer Earl George's highly lyrical *Arioso* for cello and piano (1949) and as recent as the Chinese-born Ping Jin's *Yangtze! Yangtze!* (2002), a piece written in response to China's controversial Three Gorges Dam project. But for the most part, these works fall within three decades of the



Members of the Society for New Music assemble for a roll-call compendium of new American music

Society's founding in 1971 and, in reference to the collection's title, reveal an amazing prescience in picking young composers destined to make a mark in the future.

For listeners who have the stamina, the range of contemporary composition featured here – nearly 30 composers writing for more than 70 musicians in various combinations – is almost mind-numbingly broad. Contrast comes not only in length – from Brian Israel's String Quartet No 2 (1976), which runs more than half an hour, to Augusta Read Thomas's *Bells Ring Summer* (2000) for

solo cello which clocks in at about two and a half minutes – but also in style, with composers mixing folk and jazz roots with European modernism in recipes that vary widely with personal taste.

For every piece that fits comfortably into the late-20th-century modernist idiom, there are the distinctive if non-literal jazz influences of Robert Keefe's 1998 *Riff, Variations on a Gershwin Tune (or Two)*, the cocktail-bar madrigals of Robert Palmer's *Carmina Amoris* (1978), the diffused funk of Rob Smith's *Dance Mix* (2000), the Latin tinges in Roberto Sierra's *Cronicas del descubrimiento* (1991-95) or the Chinese sonorities of Liu Zhuang's *Wind Through Pines* (1999).

Taking the word 'Society' at face value, many of these works evoke something of a social occasion. Many of the performances feature soprano Neva Pilgrim, a founding member of the Society and current program advisor. Other longtime members with prominent solo turns include flutist Linda Greene (most notably in Nicholas V D'Angelo's 1985 piece *Some Summer Sun*), cellist George Macero (George's *Arioso* and Thomas's *Bells Ring Summer*) and pianist Steven Heyman (Daniel S Godfrey's 1995 brief, single-movement *Festoons*). Occasionally there's a piece like Elizabeth Alexander's *My Aunt Gives Me a Clarinet Lesson* (2000) whose title alone invites the audience to the party as well.

Appraising this anthology as an art dealer would a private collection, the banner marquee items are clearly Steven Stucky's *Sappho Fragments* (1982), Christopher Rouse's *The Surma Ritornelli* (1983), and Melinda Wagner's *Sextet* (1989) – with Rouse and Wagner's pieces written exactly a decade before they won their respective Pulitzer Prizes and Stucky's more than 20 years before winning the award. Clearly, the Society has displayed a gift for spotting composers just as they discover their creative voice and commissioning them before their reputations have priced them into a different market.

Taken as a whole, however, the words 'Pulitzer' and 'Guggenheim' are not represented nearly so well as friendlier, less imposing words such as 'Syracuse' and 'Rochester', cities in upstate New York where the majority of these composers were either born, trained or for a time employed. Though it may be admirable not to feel constrained by geography, keeping one's attention focused on the bigger world at large, the Society has chosen a more manageable path. Judging from this collection, its true success has come not from scaling the mountains in the distance but from finding and polishing the gems in its own back yard.

Ken Smith