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

'American Masters for the 21st Century'

(6h 15m • 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 Yangzte! Yangzte! (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 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-literary jazz influences of Robert Keefe's 1998 Riff, Variations on a Gershwin Tune (or Two), the cocktail-bar madrigals of Robert Palmer's Carmina Amorissellman Crane Songs, the diffused funk of Rob Smith's Dance Mix (2000), the Latin tinges in Roberto Sierra's Chroniclas del discurbimento (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 (1989), Christopher Rouse's The Surma Ritrornelli (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 be 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 from scaling back in the distance but from finding and polishing the gems in its own back yard.

Ken Smith