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CD Review by Colin Clarke

IYER *Trouble.* COURTNEY BRYAN *Szyzygy* • Jennifer Koh (vn); Timothy Weiss, cond; Oberlin Contemporary Music Ens • ÇEDILLE 244 (49:15)

This is, promisingly, the first volume of a series of discs entitled *The American Concerto*. Jennifer Koh has never disappointed, and this, her 16th disc for Çedille, is no exception. This recorded series is a natural offshoot of Koh's The American Concerto Project, in which she asked a number of composers to reimagine the violin concerto for the 21st century.

A piece by Vijay Iyer, *The Diamond*, appeared on Koh's Çedille twofer *Limitless*, a Buddhist-inspired piece (see my review in *Fanfare* 43:3), while one of the finest of up-and-coming pianists, Mishka Rushdie Momen, recorded his *Hallucination Party (from a theme by R. Schumann)* on a fascinatingly programmed disc, *Variations*, released on the SOMM label (reviewed by Peter Burwasser in *Fanfare* 43:4.) Parenthetically, I have been lucky enough to hear Momen live a couple of times, and both recitals I have heard live from this pianist were exceptional: one in 2024 at the Crucible Playhouse, Sheffield as part of the "Music in the Round" festival, while she entranced with music by Schubert and Byrd at Wigmore Hall a year later.

Various ECM releases of Iyer's music have been covered in *Fanfare*, too. As a musical polymath, he straddles jazz and classical easily: small wonder some of his "classical" works have been described as "Ellingtonian." His own performance style has a racy vivacity (try "Combat Breathing" from the ECM album, *Uneasy*) that can come through a sort of stuttering Minimalism ("Epistrophy"), while he is hardly less impressive in slower, lyrical mode ("Desiring": this, and "Epistrophy," are from the album *Solo* on ACT).

Although the companion Bryan piece is a world premiere recording, the same does not extend to Iyer's 2017 piece *Trouble*: Koh herself recorded it

on the BMOP Sound label; Gil Rose conducted the Boston Modern Orchestra Project there, where it was coupled with Iyer's *Crisis Modes* for percussion and strings and *Asunder*. It was those forces who premiered the work on June 8, 2017 at the Ojai Music Festival conducted by Stephen Schick.

Trouble was Iyer's first attempt at a concerto and on his website, Iyer states that this piece "uses the violin concerto format to voice our unfinished quest for equal right." While not explicitly programmatic, it does allude to some key moments, and "alludes to a few historical moments and develops some sentiments about individual and collective agency, including moments of joy, anxiety, mourning, peril, and even sarcasm."

Iyer opens with "Prelude: Erasure," highly atmospheric in its lonely flute surrounded by instrumental sounds perhaps intended to imply wind: this is more explicit in the BMOP recording, more subtle here on Çedille. "Normale" is more explicitly Minimalist in its chugging oscillations, decidedly mechanistic in the BMOP account (both soloist and instrumentalists) with a gradual introduction of a sort of "dislocated swing" before more explicit dance settles in; and I wonder if the violin's arpeggiations echoed by various parts of the orchestra are a glance back at the opening of Berg's Violin Concerto. A pity the ascending gesture on strings at 4:35 is rather scrappy. On Çedille, the Minimalism is softer but no less effective, more of a potential than explicit energy, and seems to concentrate more on how Iyer passes his two-note repeated cell between sections of the orchestra, alchemizing the sound timbrally. Against that, Koh is rawer on Çedille, deliberately I suspect setting herself against the Oberlin players, and that string ascent is far better here.

"For Vincent Chin" is the emotional focus of this work. The Chinese-American gentleman of the movement's title was beaten to death in 1982 in a case of mistaken nationality: angry unemployed car workers in Detroit murdered him because they thought he was Japanese (as Japan was the primary competition to American car manufacture at that point in time).

Given that the composer intends the soloist to evince a certain vulnerability (as opposed the hero-versus-collective narrative of the Romantic concerto), it is the new performance that embodies this to greater degree, Koh more daring in sharing her core self. “Cozening,” restless and active, is separated from the final “Assembly” by an interlude, labelled as “Accretion.” These three movements seem to act as a unit “after the event” of the central Vincent Chin movement, the interlude’s horn-then-brass call surely a nod to Americana; similarly the string sighs later. Swings and roundabouts for the two performances: the BMOP is more elusive, atmospheric, the Çedille a touch bolder, more region-specific in its musical language, the percussion more focused. The final “Assembly” begins for all the world like a jittery fugue; the violin’s skitterings seem to imply the soloist has other ideas. There’s an element of “the Devil gets all the good tunes” here, the soloist singularity foregrounded against an almost threatening orchestra. Iyer seems to write in layers that give the music an overall complexity. The new Çedille performance is a touch swifter than the BMOP when one compares the timings; it does have more urgency and more confidence at the opening, so that the unwinding into a calmer space is more effective. Koh herself is magnificent in both performances, particularly in cadenza, but it is the Çedille that pulls everything together: the music has had time to settle, the recording is finer, the music is more “inside” the orchestral players. Koh’s pizzicato dances supremely at Oberlin before embarking on more devilish (in the best way possible) escapades. The Oberlin players under Timothy Weiss are exemplary, and Weiss is at one with his soloist both in terms of ensemble and of conception.

There is a world premiere recording for Courtney Bryan’s *Szyzygy*, who here makes her *Fanfare* debut. There have been a few pieces by Bryan available previously, though: the Minimalist-driven *Carnival for Unity* and the touching, wide-ranging *Elegy* appear performed by Ensemble Pi and Raquel Aceuedo Klein on a disc entitled *Reparations NOW* on the Bright Shiny Things label, whale the jaunty *You Made My Day* appears on the Forgotten Voices docs sung by Kelley Hall-Thompkins, a sort of latter-day spiritual.

Written for Koh and the Chicago Sinfonietta, *Szyzygy* was inspired by painters Alma Thomas (1891–1978), Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), and designer, architect, and artist Maya Ying Lin (born 1959). The thread is the title as manifested in an eclipse (the term “syzygy” refers to the nearly straight-line configuration of three celestial bodies, such as the sun, moon, and earth during a solar or lunar eclipse, in a gravitational system). The first is “Alma Thomas: The Eclipse,” a sweet song in which Koh’s violin is extraordinary in its sound. The original 1970 painting is astonishingly colorful (I do recommend you look it up). Part of Thomas’s “Space” series, it currently resides at the Smithsonian Museum and was inspired by the total solar eclipse of March 7, 1970. The off-kilter aspect of the painting (perhaps suggesting movement) is well captured in Bryan’s work: there is a vivid sound imagination at work here. Dialogues between violin and woodwind are beautifully managed in Koh’s performance, but it is the pervading lyricism that is so memorable.

To my great disappointment I had to miss a viewing of the Frida Kahlo exhibition here in London recently through illness. Some compensation comes with the second movement, “Frida Kahlo: Trees of Hope, Keep Firm.” This 1946 painting is also known as “Tree of Hope, Remain Strong.” Here, the sun and moon divide the painting; to the left and behind we see Kahlo, supine on a trolley (Kahlo painted this around the time of an operation); to the right she sits, looking every inch like an echo of “The Empress” from the Rider Waite tarot deck. A sort of arty sliding- doors moment, then, which Bryan turns into an elegy (a medium in which she has already proved herself, above). The composer sets up consonances, almost saccharine sweet, only to subvert them, perhaps a reflection of the two “halves” of the painting. Again, some harmonies and melodic shapes tend toward the Spiritual.

The final movement is “Maya Ying Lin: Eclipsed Time.” This artwork could at one point be seen at Penn Station, a large metal structure whose intent was to make commuters think differently about time. At midnight every day, an

eclipse was created (I believe *Eclipsed Time* has since been de-installed). The opening of Bryan's musical response uses thematic overlap perhaps to create the effect of light shifting. Perhaps the fact that it was at midnight, the intended effect was finally created that makes the music sound so crepuscular. Bryan's melodic lines for the soloist have a tinge of regret; they circle and swoop like a bird in flight at sunset at first before encompassing the violin's range, throaty G-string set against tinnitus-high merging with silvery percussion.

More of Courtney Bryan's music needs international release, for sure. And to be honest, if this is Volume One of *The American Concerto*, I cannot wait for the next. Everything seems right about this album: the concept, the choice of music, the performances, the recording itself. Definite Want List material.

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With this disc, violinist Jennifer Koh launches a project to commission new concertos for her instrument, especially those that take their inspiration from extramusical content relating to the American identity and the American experience, coinciding with the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. In collaboration with the Oberlin Contemporary Music Ensemble and conductor Timothy Weiss, Koh (who is herself an alumna of the Oberlin Conservatory) essays two newly commissioned works by Vijay Iyer and Courtney Bryan.

Known predominantly as jazz-influenced composers, both Iyer and Bryan present us with works for violin and chamber ensemble that display a great deal of variety, as well as palpable improvisational qualities. Vijay Iyer's work, we are told, was a response to discrimination, social struggle, and the immigrant experience—all of which must also resonate strongly with Koh, whose parents emigrated to the United States from Korea in the 1960s. *Trouble*, which premiered at the 2017 Ojai Music Festival, takes its title from quotations about the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott from the late congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis: "I got in trouble. It was good trouble. It was necessary trouble." *Trouble* is not all about the struggles of the African-American community, however. The third movement is dedicated to Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man killed in Detroit in 1982 in a racially motivated assault that particularly affected Asian Americans. Unfortunately, sociopolitical content does not guarantee interesting music. (No one today would be listening to Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony if all it represented was a diatribe against Napoleon Bonaparte bereft of interesting

musical content). Segmented into six movements of disparate lengths, ranging anywhere from 2 to 12 minutes, Iyer's work concatenates a variety of musical tropes, from classical rondo to jazz to hip hop, with periodic homages to minimalism (*à la* Philip Glass) and 20th-century icons like Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Berg, and Ligeti but without, alas, any of the compositional rigor or intrinsic musical interest associated with any of those giants. Instead—and not to put too fine a point on it—we get overly repetitious, Minimalist claptrap masquerading as a violin concerto. Merely putting the violinist through her (often endlessly repetitive) paces (but, even though I lacked access to a score, to my ears this was no particular challenge to someone with Jennifer Koh's technical abilities) does not a concerto make.

The companion piece is an homage to works by three female visual artists—Alma Thomas's *Eclipse* (dating from 1970), Frida Kahlo's *Tree of Hope, Remains Firm* (dating from 1946), and Maya Lin's *Time Escaped* (dating from 1995). Courtney Bryan's *Szyzygy* (a metaphor, referring in astronomy to the alignment of three celestial bodies) celebrates these artistic achievements via three interconnected movements. Bryan's work is considerably more lyrical and concerto-like than Iyer's, with passages of great lyric beauty (particularly in the central Frida Kahlo movement). Koh most assuredly captures the passion and the occasionally quixotic aspects of this work, which I found enjoyable enough to listen to a second time.

This disc merits a recommendation, but only for the Bryan piece and/or for fans of Jennifer Koh's violin virtuosity.

Keith R. Fisher