



The Pacifica Quartet look forward to the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence with 'American Voices', celebrating the breadth and diversity of American music

the culmination of an intense collaborative process with the commissioning artists who are featured on the album. One immediately gleans this by perusing the scores. In *Between Breath*, for example, trombonist William Lang provides a detailed preface explaining his extended performance techniques of 'overpressure', 'split tones' and 'dirty split tones', which Wollschleger incorporates into the notated part with surgical precision. Similar attention to detail applies to the various piano preparations and the harmonics that ensue; the final section requires nothing less than two small battery-operated vibrators wrapped in Blu-Tack. By contrast, *Violain* (written for and performed by violinist Maya Bennardo and viola player Hannah Levinson) offers the performers *ad lib* opportunities at certain junctures, yet these, too, are subject to painstaking directives on the composer's part.

So what does the music sound like? *Violain's* first part begins with rapid *flautando* passages that quickly give way to slow-moving muted lines spiced with pizzicato punctuations. These gestures walk a thin line between slow and static, perhaps intentionally slow. However, the piece's second part proves far more varied and rhythmically engaging.

Happily, the elaborate notated blueprints laying out *Between Breath's* extended techniques translate into fascinating sonorities, especially where the trombone's

gritty low-register long tones support harp-like plucked single notes from inside the piano, sometimes giving the impression of an electronic soundtrack. For all the ingenious sound design, the fleeting moments when Anne Rainwater goes into 'unprepared' piano mode to play sparse single notes and chords move me the most.

I like the subtle alternations and interactions between voice and pitchpipe throughout *Anyway, where threads go, it all goes well*. Soprano Lucy Dhegrae is largely limited to fragmented phrases within a constricted range of notes (Morton Feldman's *Three Voices* somehow comes to mind), but her impeccable intonation and word-colouring more than compensate, not to mention Nathaniel LaNasa's supple handling of the piano part.

Finally, *Secret Machine No 7* for violin solo serves up a boundless portfolio of extended techniques, sophisticated harmonics, threadbare double-stops, wispy glissandos and simultaneous arco/pizzicato passages. Frankly the piece goes on twice as long as necessary for what it has to express. On the other hand, Miranda Cuckson's astonishing technique, pinpoint control and impeccable intonation enable her to convey a convincing sense of narrative and continuity; no wonder she's been a new-music violinist of choice for decades. Indeed, all the performances on this album define world-class, and so does the engineering. **Jed Distler**

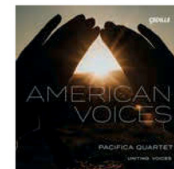
'American Voices'

Dvořák String Quartet No 12 in F, 'American', Op 96 Gruenberg Four Diversions, Op 32

Lee Pitch In^a Price String Quartet in G Pacifica Quartet with

^aUniting Voices / Josephine Lee

Cedille (CDR90000 228 • 65')



This is the second instalment in the Pacifica Quartet's three-disc project

exploring the 'sounds of America' in anticipation of the 250th anniversary in 2026 of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Pacifica's commitment to representing the diversity of American voices is reflected by the selection of composers on each release.

The inclusion of a repertoire staple as ubiquitous as Dvořák's Op 96 to begin the album is intended to sound the theme of American folk music as a fertile source for composers – more specifically, in the form of the African American Spiritual, which the visiting Czech composer famously praised as the most authentic foundation for 'future music in [America]'. The claim that Dvořák actually derived some of his material from such sources is a matter of dispute – violinist Austin Hartman's booklet notes take this assertion at face value – but what matters here is the validation to do so that he was



perceived to have given to American composers who heeded his advice.

The Pacifica's warmth of phrasing, dynamic control and superbly coordinated ensemble balance make for a pleasurablely engaging account that accentuates the work's unfeigned simplicity and even homespun aspects. Yet what illuminates Dvořák's familiar score is the context in which Pacifica embed it by juxtaposing three later works that blend the American vernacular with the string quartet idiom. Florence Price's String Quartet in G from 1929, which preceded her increasingly recognised orchestral oeuvre, has survived

in only two movements. Hartman, who takes no position on whether this is an unfinished torso, suggests that its folk-like aspects draw on the music Price knew from her native Little Rock.

The most interesting discovery on the album is the music of Louis Gruenberg, the son of Russian immigrants who studied piano as a boy at the National Conservatory in New York while Dvořák served as its director. Remarkably versatile, Gruenberg found success composing for Hollywood but also produced a prolific catalogue of operas and concert music. The Pacifica's account of *Four Diversions* from 1930 brings out his

savvy assimilation of dance, jazz and folk elements of the era with electrifying vitality.

Commissioned specifically for 'American Voices', James Lee III's *Pitch In* is the most recent of the Michigan-born composer's several collaborations with the Pacifica Quartet. Lee sets a text by the poet Sylvia Dianne Beverly ('Lady Di') that calls attention to food insecurity. His well-intentioned score conveys its social justice message through an expansion of the string quartet medium to include a children's choir, the Chicago-based Uniting Voices (beautifully prepared here by their president, Josephine Lee). **Thomas May**

Music of the Baroque

Our monthly guide to North American ensembles

Founded: 1971

Home: Multiple venues

Uncounted ensembles have come and gone in Chicago during the past half century, but Music of the Baroque never seems to flag.

Come September, the nationally admired institution will launch its 54th season, quite a feat in a city where behemoths such as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Lyric Opera of Chicago command the lion's share of funding, audience support and media attention. Why has Music of the Baroque flourished where others have fallen?

For starters, since its inception Music of the Baroque has found a sweet spot where modern instruments embrace some early-music practices. So though the ensemble's personnel are drawn from the ranks of the CSO, Lyric Opera and other groups whose musicians do not use period instruments (or replicas), Music of the Baroque has always emphasised a textural transparency and tonal restraint that's attuned to early-music sensibilities.

A few seasons ago, when the ensemble performed Mozart's Requiem, I noted in my *Chicago Tribune* review that 'for those who prefer to hear historic repertoire dispatched on period instruments and with consideration for early-music performance practice, Music of the Baroque at least provided a comparatively chaste rendition that emphasised clarity and leanness of sound over romantic excess and effusion'.

The template for this 'best of both worlds' approach was set by ensemble founder Thomas Wikman, who led the group for its first 30 years (he died in 2023 at age 81). Dame Jane Glover took the helm in 2002 and this season celebrates her 22nd anniversary as music director (Nicholas Kraemer also marks his 22nd anniversary this season as Music of the Baroque's principal guest conductor). This degree of continuity – two music directors spanning more than half a century – helps explain the ensemble's aesthetic consistency and audience appeal.

As baritone Jan Jarvis once noted of his work in Music of the Baroque, Wikman 'brought out a specific sound and rhythmic innovations in our ensemble that no one else was doing. He had a deep knowledge and appreciation for early music. He was quite revolutionary in his approach and instilled great drama and excitement in his performances.'



Glover maintained those musical values while heightening the ensemble's technical acuity, as she demonstrated a few seasons ago in a collaboration with pianist Angela Hewitt in the last of Mozart's 27 piano concertos. The delicacy of Glover's orchestral accompaniment not only suited the lustre of Hewitt's keyboard tone but evoked a temperate, scaled-down sound more redolent of the 18th century than of ours.

For Music of the Baroque's next season, the ensemble will revisit some of its greatest successes, with Glover conducting Haydn's *The Creation* in September and Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* in November; Andrew Megill will lead the 'Holiday Brass & Choral Concerts' in December. The latter, especially, represents 'a great tradition, begun by my predecessor, Tom Wikman', Glover once told me. 'It's sort of Christmas concerts with a difference.'

But there will be fresh approaches, too. French conductor Marc Minkowski will make his ensemble debut in music by Handel, Rameau and Mozart in January, and Kraemer will celebrate his 80th birthday with Handel's *Theodora* in March. Laurence Cummings, music director of the Academy of Ancient Music, will be guest conductor in a programme titled 'The Elements', which will contemplate earth, air, fire and water via scores by Vivaldi, Rameau, Telemann and Jean-Féry Rebel in October.

Baroque music has never had a greater champion in Chicago. **Howard Reich**