



Crown Thy Good

Vijay Iyer, Min Kwon

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Conceived during the pandemic and released in the year of the 250th anniversary of America's founding, the album celebrates the United States as a cultural melting pot, bringing together as many voices as possible. It aims to encourage better listening to and understanding of others' voices, posing the question: What is America? Is it beautiful? Was it ever? Will it ever be? The individual pieces vary in tone, texture, and mood, yet ultimately form a united whole, much like the United States.

The project is inspired by Beethoven's 'Diabelli Variations', and like the original waltz by Anton Diabelli that inspired Beethoven's 33 variations, 'America the Beautiful' features a simple melody and harmony rich in possibilities, making it perfectly suited to variation.



Min Kwon commissioned 76 American composers, born between 1928 and 2000, to contribute a variation to the project. Like the country itself, these composers represent an enormous diversity of musical aesthetics and genres, backgrounds, ethnicities, and genders, and include celebrated contemporary composers such as Nico Muhly, Timo Andres, Stewart Copeland, Terry Riley, Vijay Iyer, and Augusta Read Thomas.

"The challenge for these very highly sophisticated musicians who studied Beethoven and Mahler was to look at this very simple melody and do something new," says Kwon.

The result is a 5-hour suite of miniatures of extraordinary range (both artistic and pianistic), invention, imagination, and expression, exploring themes of mourning, reflection, and patriotism. With so many pieces, I have selected a handful to illustrate the breadth and variety of this album:

Leila Adu-Gilmore's *United Underdog*, a fiercely dissonant anthem of crashing chords and forearm clusters.

Timo Andres' hymnlike, somewhat poignant *American Coda*.

Jed Distler's dramatic *Ameritango*, the main theme embellished with sweeping Lisztian gestures and tango rhythms.

Fred Hersch's baroque-esque *Four Windows into America*

Vijya Iyer's haunting *Crown Thy Good*

Nico Muhly's sparkling, uplifting *Refine*

It's a great credit to Min Kwon's musical sensitivity and technical and artistic assuredness that she is able to switch seamlessly between the myriad styles and moods of these short works, bringing each piece to life with colour, nuance, freshness and clarity.

"I wanted to leave something lasting for other pianists, a body of work that they could continue to share for years to come, representing what 'American' music can be." – Min Kwon

This album certainly achieves that, combining an important new collection of contemporary piano music with a celebration of the diversity and creative spirit of the USA, home to Min Kwon since the age of 14.

'America/Beautiful' is available on CD on the Delos label and on streaming.

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