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Albums

Sphinx Virtuosi: Songs for Our Times album review – joyous and uplifting

String ensemble delivers an engaging programme featuring young composers of colour



String ensemble Sphinx Virtuosi © Scott Jackson

Richard Fairman 8 HOURS AGO

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Although diversity in music has become an issue of the moment, some organisations have been in the field a lot longer. From its beginnings in 1998, the Sphinx Organization in the US has grown to be a flag-bearer for black and Latinx musicians, embracing its own orchestra, youth development programmes, academies and award schemes.

One of its performing groups is Sphinx Virtuosi, a self-conducted, 18-strong string ensemble, which makes its UK debut at Snape Maltings this weekend. This is its first recording on DG, and the programme reflects the Sphinx Organization's commitment to supporting young composers of colour.

Songs of Our Times includes two of Sphinx Virtuosi's commissions. Composer Jessie Montgomery describes *Divided* as a response to "the sense of helplessness that people seem to feel amidst a world that seems to be in constant crisis", featuring an elegiac solo cello pitted against the gritty tensions of a fast-paced world — an engaging musical journey.



Valerie Coleman's two-movement *Tracing Visions* is less personal in its musical language, but the energy of its rhythms gives Sphinx Virtuosi an uplifting showpiece.

Among the other works, Aldemaro Romero's *Fuga con Pajarillo* is joyous in a lightly woven, buoyant part-writing. Carlos Simon's finely written *Between Worlds* for solo violin gets a deeply pensive performance from Amaryn Olmeda and an arrangement of the lovely *Andante cantabile* from Florence Price's String Quartet No 2 looks back to the best of an earlier generation of African-American composers.

★★★★☆

'Songs for Our Times' is released by DG

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