

Celestial beings

Three artists' views of a dazzling planetary event

COMPOSER **Courtney Bryan**

WORK ***Szyzgy***

ARTIST **Jennifer Koh (violin)** Chicago Sinfonietta/Mei-Ann Chen

DATE **7 March**

PLACE **Wentz Concert Hall, Chicago, IL, US** bit.ly/2rY2JDd



Courtney Bryan



Jennifer Koh

‘There is space in our world for all of us and for all of our stories,’ writes US violinist Jennifer Koh in the introduction to her project *The New American Concerto*. She founded the initiative in 2016 to celebrate composers from minority backgrounds, whose work often goes overlooked. ‘How can the field of classical music draw upon the cultural richness contained within our diverse country?’ she asks. The latest answer is a concerto by US pianist and composer Courtney Bryan that takes its inspiration from works of visual art by three women of colour – architect Maya Lin and painters Alma Thomas and Frida Kahlo.

Like Koh’s determination to broaden the relevance of her work by using it to promote the diversity of composers working today, Bryan uses her music to confront the harsh realities of life, both today and in the past. ‘My first musical memories are of our Episcopal church at home

in New Orleans,’ she says. ‘I often work with sacred or spiritual ideas, but my music engages with society, too, usually from an African–American perspective.’

The title of Bryan’s work, *Szyzgy*, is a term borrowed from astronomy that describes an alignment of bodies in the night sky. ‘I saw Alma Thomas’s colourful painting *Eclipse* before I knew how I wanted to approach the concerto,’ Bryan explains. ‘I decided to make the duality of its subject matter the theme of my piece and started looking around for other imagery that played with the same ideas of light and dark. Frida Kahlo uses the symbolism of the sun and moon in lots of her paintings, and Maya Lin’s *Eclipsed Time* is an installation that blocks out an area of light in New York’s Penn Station every midnight. Each of my concerto’s three movements approaches the idea of an eclipse in a different way, pitching pairs of themes, motifs and tonalities against each other until one obscures the other.’