Bean, give a tangible feeling of original-instrument creators putting together music for the first time, aided by an excellent recording made at Tri State Public Radio in Macomb. Laurence Vittes

**Tower**

Chamber Dance. Stroke. Violin Concerto¹

¹Cho-Liang Lin with Nashville Symphony

Orchestra / Giancarlo Guerrero

Naxos American Classics © 8 559775 (58 • DDD)

Joan Tower has written music in many genres, and she’s particularly potent when exploring the expressive and colouristic possibilities of the symphony orchestra. The three Tower works on this new recording by the Nashville Symphony under Music Director Giancarlo Guerrero reveal the composer’s ability to travel a spectrum of emotions and atmospheres, from poetic delicacy to thunderous drama.

The most poignant piece is the most recent, Tower wrote Stroke in 2010 as a tribute to her younger brother, whose experiences of being stricken and working his way through recovery are depicted in a series of vivid sonic episodes. The music alternates between violent spasms and moments of touching lyricism, with the full resources of the orchestra used to prismatic and penetrating effect.

Tower’s Violin Concerto (1991) also abounds in contrasting moods. The soloist is called upon to perform daring feats against orchestral chatter and exult in poetic material. It’s a lush and powerful score, as well as a portrayal of a lonely figure engaging in philosophical conflicts in the cadenzas. Another piece from the past decade, Chamber Dance (2006), often belies the implications of its title by summoning enormous cascades of sound and whirlwind rhythmic ideas. And then Tower switches gear to focus on individual instruments and interactions.

Guerrero shapes fervent and vital performances. In the concerto, he and the orchestra join forces with Cho-Liang Lin, who has remarkable command of Tower’s intricate writing even as he exults in the moments of luminous serenity.

Donald Rosenberg

‘Sugarloaf Mountain’

‘An Appalachian Gathering’

Apollo’s Fire / Jeanette Sorrell

Avie © AV2329 (69 • DDD • T)

On her ninth CD for Avie, Jeanette Sorrell and a hand-picked band of eight musicians from her Apollo’s Fire Baroque orchestra – playing on penny whistle, gourd banjo and other ‘period instruments’, and featuring soprano Amanda Powell and tenor Ross Hauck – tap into America’s hard-scrabble Southern roots with grace and power.

The poignantly lean sound profile they bring to their thematically grouped selection complements Anonymous 4’s recent ‘1865’ disc (Harmonia Mundi, 4/15) with music that asks questions about life and death, and bores into the American national psyche at similarly visceral emotional levels, most poignantly addressed in two spirituals – Hauck at his most beautiful and eloquent in ‘Just before the battle, mother’, and Powell searing in ‘Go march along’. While the prevailing mood is of sadness and hard times, Sorrell and friends definitely know how to have fun, bringing distinctive, infectious energy to up-beat numbers such as ‘The fox went out on a chilly night’ and ‘Oh Susanna!’. A large part of the musical success lies in the varied instrumentation by which every song signifies a personal response: using cello, fiddle and drum to back Hauck in ‘Black is the color of my true love’s hair’ reveals its most deeply felt thoughts; Sorrell’s magical, rapt harpsichord riff on ‘I wonder as I wander’ reveals how profoundly spontaneous this folk music is at its core.

Recorded at St Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, the sound loves voices and instruments equally and takes volume remarkably well; check out Tina Bergman’s shimmering hammer dulcimer in ‘Pretty Betty Martin’. Laurence Vittes