

scene

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Jennifer Koh

Violinist adventurer brings
“Shared Madness”
to St. Anthony’s Chapel

Violinist Continues Pursuing her Fine, Venturesome Madness

AFTER DAZZLING LOCAL AUDIENCES WITH HER 'BEYOND BACH' AND 'BRIDGE TO BEETHOVEN' PROJECTS, FAMED VIOLINIST ADVENTURER JENNIFER KOH RETURNS TO SANTA BARBARA WITH 'SHARED MADNESS,' AND A LOCALLY-SPAWNED AGENDA.

By **Josef Woodard**,
News-Press Correspondent



Jennifer Koh, violin 'Shared Madness'

When: 7 p.m. tonight
Where: St. Anthony's Chapel, 2300 Garden St.
Cost: \$35, \$10 students
Information: 893-3535, artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu

Widely-heralded and inherently venturesome violinist Jennifer Koh has thankfully shared some of her artistic and methodical madness with the 805 audience stretching back over several years now. She challenged assumptions and impressed with her core musicality, with her old-meeting-new repertoire projects, "Beyond Bach" and "Bridge to Beethoven," and most recently in the area, was the dynamic spotlighted soloist in Vijay Iyer's new Violin Concerto at the Ojai Music Festival last summer.

Enter the new creature in Ms. Koh's world: "Shared Madness," an inventive, practical and highly fruitful response to her need for patronage after she sought a certain new, and expensive, violin. A patron, who she met at a past concert in Santa Barbara, incidentally, offered to subsidize the instrument if she could convince composers to write short pieces for her, gratis. The result is a "shared madness" of the hyper-creative kind.

Now, there are 30 of these short pieces, by some of the important young composers on the scene (including Mr. Iyer, John Harbison, Julia Wolfe and Gabriel Kahane), and the violinist will be giving the West Coast premiere of a select smorgasbord of these works from the "Shared Madness" cookbook. The piece was premiered in 2016, as part of the National Sawdust program element of the New York

Philharmonic's Biennial.

Lending added attraction to tonight's special edition of the concert, she will perform in the enlightened ambience and acoustic of the King's Chapel of the former St. Anthony's Seminary. The mock-old-worldly chapel is a magical, if under-used, music space which has been a home to the acapella group Quire of Voyces and a former recording site for the Isla Vista-based and Waterlily Acoustics record label.

While Ms. Koh was already an up-and-comer and an established name in the musical world when she started to play in the area, her career has zoomed upward and outward since then. She was named Musician of the Year by Musical American in 2016 and has performed with many of the world's great orchestras as well as sporting such left-of-center roles as playing Einstein in Philip Glass' "Einstein on the Beach," from 2012-14.

On her slate of ambitious new projects, she is doing the "Limitless" recital series in New York, and a multi-media project called "The 38th Parallel," which "explores the impact of displacement and immigration, individual and familial transformation." The personal connection there relates to her life as the child of two Korean immigrants, her mother a refugee from North Korea and her father from Seoul.

We checked in with the unique, ever-forward-moving and periodically temporary Santa Barbara virtuoso recently for an interview and update. The itinerant musician was in Australia last week, performing Unsuk Chin's Violin Concerto in Melbourne. Earlier in April, she was performing concertos of Sibelius and a living Finn, Esa-Pekka Salonen, in Columbus, Ohio, and Tampere, Finland, respectively.

News-Press: You have become an integral part of Santa Barbara's musical life over the past decade. Do you view this area, by now, as



COURTESY: JUERGEN FRANK

Jennifer Koh, winner of Musical America's "Musician of the Year" in 2016.

a kind of alternate home, or ripe soil for new ideas and projects?

Jennifer Koh: I am so happy and grateful to have found a home and audience in Santa Barbara. I love partnering with UCSB and I love their audiences!

NP: I understand this intriguing new project, "Shared Madness," has a central link to Santa Barbara in terms of patronage and concept. Can you explain that background?

JK: I met the commissioner of "Shared Madness" in Santa Barbara after my first recital.

NP: "Shared Madness," I assume, is a title with multiple meanings, referring to an enlightened "mad" concept, but also the sharing aspect of these composers contributing to both the sum program and a means of acquiring your special violin. Is that about right, and are there aspects I've missed?

JK: I wanted to choose a title that encapsulated the shared creative space and collaboration that happens between composers

and performers. But I think the title also refers to the crazy financial positions we musicians live under, just to make music.

NP: I was just listening to your album "Signs, Games and Messages," speaking of programs well-stocked with miniatures — 20 tracks, in that case, and with several by the miniature-loving Kurtag. Is there something special about performing a mosaic-like list of short pieces, such as the "Shared Madness" project, which can be both expansive and poetically detailed?

JK: I love "Shared Madness" because the form creates a very intense and distilled portrait and personality of each composer and it's a great journey and ride to be a part of and share with audiences.

NP: Your musical life has sometimes entailed the process of finding logical connections and cross-stitching points between old and new music, in your "Beyond Bach" and

"Bridge to Beethoven" projects, both witnessed here in Santa Barbara. Does that continue to be a passionate objective in your musical thinking, in terms of uniting and finding commonalities between musical styles or eras sometimes considered disparate from one another? And does that reflect a broad musical taste which goes back to your early years as a musician and music-lover?

JK: As a musician and a performer, I'm most interested in the connections between all of us. I often think about connections over time because classical music has such a long and rich history, but most of it is just about connectivity between human beings. In that sense, I don't even think about genre. I think of music as great music and bad music and I just want to bring great music to life and I love working with great musicians because it becomes a great process of learning and evolving and thinking in new ways.

NP: Elsewhere in this general neck of the woods, you made a bold impact last summer as soloist on Vijay Iyer's Violin Concerto. It seemed like one of those challenging contemporary works which also invites the listener into its folds. Was that a gratifying experience, to go through the process of inspiring and then delivering Vijay's work?

JK: I really enjoy bringing music to life, and I like being involved in discussions about the work from its inception to the premiere. I loved that Vijay dedicated a movement to Vincent Chin whose death affected me a great deal when I was a child.

NP: You also perform music of Kaija Saariaho, who has a fascination with texture and the artful blending of acoustic and electronic-digital vocabularies. (And who was a star of the 2016 Ojai Festival). Are there composers, such as Iyer and

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Savoring the alt-J Reboot Party

By Josef Woodard,
News-Press Correspondent



Coachella has been very good to us once again casting its seeds of pop musical goodness our way and making April a more fertile concert calendar stop in town. That familiar process, timed with the opening of the Santa Barbara Bowl season, happened again last week, when Coachella acts swung through SB during their downtime week between the festival's two-weekend stand.

We were happy to be of tour mapping service, hosting the sort-of resurrection of art-metalheads, A Perfect Circle, at the Arlington Theatre. More significantly in the new rock arena, we also caught an encore with alt-J, everybody's favorite new geek rocking sensation outta' England, who engineered a strong and cerebral party zoning night at the Bowl.

Déjà vu was in the house, echoing alt-J's smashing local debut three years ago, also linked to their Coachella touchdown. But there was fresh news abuzz, too. The band has re-emerged with the deceptively-titled "Relaxer," a powerful new, third album in a no-stinker discography which includes the 2012 debut, "An Awesome Wave" and 2014's "This is All Yours."

Live, too, this brainy trio — which started making music together in college bedrooms and on laptops, a creative outlet for somewhat anti-socialites — has stepped up and out, to a degree. A sense of formality blended with the visceral energy of the music, with each musician functioning on a separate riser, like go-go dancers, each to



JOSEF WOODARD / NEWS-PRESS

alt-J returned to the Bowl, with brainy, rocking glory.

his own cage. An impressively dynamic lighting scheme beautifully integrated with the music, adding to the tautly-planned sensory intensity of the set.

Lead singer/guitarist Joe Newman exerts his just-right vocal powers but remains mute in the between-song banter department. He leaves the friendly stage gab to bassist-keyboardist Gus Unger-Hamilton, who gushed, with seeming sincerity, about the Bowl being their favorite venue and a treasure on a global scale, and our town the perfect spot to relax amidst Coachella madness. Holding it down confidently, and yet graced with inventive touches as he goes, drummer Thom Green remains a critical third of the ensemble chemistry, especially in terms of the magic that happens onstage.

While a good alt-J concert, such as their latest Bowl conquest, succeeds on purely musical terms, deeper thinkers and listeners know to peek beneath the surface of their well-crafted songcraft. Thematically, alt-J's songs cover a broad swath

of ideas and terrain beyond pop music norms.

Love songs are part of the songwriting package but often take left turns, as we might expect. The concert's fervent opening tune, "Deadcrush," a fetching single from a game the bandmates play, speculating which posthumous woman they would have a "dead crush" on. The Bowl crowd may or may not have realized they were bouncing to a song about love for the late model-turned fashion photographer/war correspondent Lee Miller and 16th Queen of England Anne Boleyn.

Sometimes, their songs dip into an acknowledged obsession with cinema, as with "The Gospel of John Hurt" and "In Cold Blood."

Restlessly creative types that they are, alt-J is built on some confounding premises and category-smashing tactics (although they do it with British politesse, not recklessly). Yes,

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Saariaho, who you have a fondness for, and curiosity about how their stories are unfolding?

JK: I love Kaija as a musician and a human being. I remember the first time I heard her music and then studied it and I felt immediately that I found a kindred spirit. I am very fortunate to have the opportunity to release nearly all her works written for violin this fall.

In general, I am very grateful to work with people I admire and love.

NP: Do you see your musical life as a mix of tending to standard repertoire — and standard practices in a violin soloist's life — and, from the more personally inventive side of you, the conjuring up of new concepts and packages? And are you finding the happy balance between business as usual and exploratory impulses?

JK: I see my musical life as one that I can choose the music I play and advocate for the composers I believe in. Those composers do range from Bach and Beethoven to Kaija Saariaho, Missy Mazzoli, Vijay

Iyer, and Tyshawn Sorey. I find happiness in music and that is contentment in performing Sibelius concerto and then the Salonen the next week.

NP: What projects do you have coming up that excite you?

JK: I just premiered "Limitless" parts 1 and 2 last week and just stopped through Paris to work on "The 38th Parallel."

NP: One last, possibly moot, question: Is Bach still a regular part of your musical life?

JK: Yes. And Bob Wilson and Bach will soon be a joint integral part of my life.



Ashleigh Mower, Moth on Red Tile

SBCC

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artistic tradition, while Sydney Kae Pace represents the grand old print-making tradition well, with the subtle color balancing act and harmony of form, found in her color plate

etching and chine colle work "Full Moon." Which, by the way, is a celestial subject easily visible from the view-endowed vantage points of both the Atkinson's outdoor patio and the hidden jewel of an overlook below.



Nancy Bingham, Nocturnal Rhythm



Alberto Lule, Infectious Monster



Sarah Anne Riley, Grandma's House